

Ptich blog

During the summer of 2018 I was presented with an opportunity to volunteer with the Chernobyl Children's Project, helping to organise activities at a holiday camp for children and young adults with a range of physical and learning difficulties. The winding road of life had presented me with a number of challenges in the previous months and I was looking to do something different, but I just didn't know what. I am an academic in the field of urban and regional planning by profession and have a history in cat rescue, but working with people with special needs was way out of my comfort zone! Having travelled extensively in Eastern Europe for both work and pleasure, and having visited Belarus previously, I was not overly concerned about any surprises or challenges Belarus would present. I had already fallen in love with Belarus on my first visit on holiday in 2015 and was eager to see more of this stunning but little-known country.

Being an academic, my first instinct is to read all that I can find about a place I am going to visit, so I can learn as much as possible about the broader context. After raiding Amazon for all the books on Belarus I could find and studying the various English language media outlets available on the web, I was starting to become familiar with some of the complexities of Belarus' past, present and future. Being a planner, my next instinct is to find the place on a map and on Google Earth, which revealed that the camp is situated in the middle of a forest and literally in the middle of nowhere! However, reading and studying maps and photographs can only ever provide glimpses of the reality of a place, the only way to gain a fuller understanding is to travel and experience a place.

The thought of working with people with physical and mental challenges, especially with my inability to speak Russian, frightened the life out of me! I only applied a few weeks before the departure date after seeing that CCP was short of volunteers. I got a phone call and arranged to meet a couple of people from CCP for a quick chat. Once I realised that these people were hugely committed (and slightly nutty) and they had put my mind at ease about language issues we decided to go for it, and amazingly got all of the necessary documentation organised in record time. So, there I was on the morning of 28th July 2018 about to embark on an adventure without realising the scale of the positive impact that this experience would have on me. The volunteers all met at Manchester Airport, lots of introductions to people whose names I immediately forgot (it's an age thing!) and lots of huge bags full of material that CCP had collected over the previous year. The volunteers were a mixture of ages, although nearly all younger than me obviously. I was pleased that some of the volunteers had been before, which reassured me that at least somebody with our group knew what they were doing!

The volunteers split into 2 groups on arrival at Minsk Airport, one group going to an orphanage in Zhuravichi and the group I was with going to a sanatorium at Ptich, close to the village of Kapatkievicy in the Gomel Region, located a four hour drive south of Minsk and 140KM north-west of the scene of the Chernobyl disaster. The journey from the Airport to Ptich provided a good opportunity to start to get to know the other volunteers, with whom I would be spending the next two weeks and upon whom I was anticipating being totally reliant for help facing the challenges ahead! Realising that one fellow volunteer had been before, albeit seven years previously, provided some comfort after discovering that the other two were fellow first-timers and were as petrified as me. But I had a good feeling about the two Yorkshire Cockney sisters, Christina and Alina, and some lad called Will, even though he was wearing a Manchester United shirt!

The journey provided tantalising initial glimpses and impressions of Belarus as we hurtled along modern but mostly deserted motorways southwards in the direction of Gomel in the south-east of

the country. Travelling through vast agricultural landscapes interspersed with extensive forests reminded me of rural areas I have visited in the Baltic states and Eastern Poland. Small roads and tracks left the main road to the right and left before disappearing into the distance or deep into the forest leaving me curious as to where they actually went. The numerous people selling fruit and wild mushrooms at the side of the road served as a reminder of a time gone by in Western Europe and left me wanting to stop every few minutes to take advantage of the goods they were selling and to hear their life stories. Life started to become even more interesting when we turned off the main road and the roads started to get smaller and smaller and the pot holes on the by now unsurfaced roads started to get bigger and bigger!

We eventually arrived at Ptich in the late evening meaning that it was too dark to get any real impressions of the place and surroundings. The staff were waiting to welcome us and after a slightly confusing conversation in various languages, none of which the other understood, and a lot of sign language we were finally presented with a loaf of bread, some cheese and an extremely large and slightly dubious looking sausage. After a quick snack we retired to our rooms with a sense of excitement combined with outright terror about what tomorrow would bring. We needn't have worried, salvation arrived in the early hours of the morning in the form of the last member of our volunteering team, Marcin from Poland, who had been a number of times previously! Marcin proved to be an absolute legend!

The following day we had time until lunchtime when our group arrived, giving us the chance to explore the site and surroundings and to get to know each other a bit better and trying to work out what four British people and a Polish guy from the worlds of public relations, investment banking and academia were doing in the middle of nowhere in Belarus! The site is located in the middle of a forest with landscaped and well maintained grounds with different types of fairly basic and slightly dated play infrastructure dotted about. The imposing accommodation and administration blocks are also dotted throughout the grounds, each with a maze of identical looking corridors with rows of identical looking brown doors on either side, providing a rather Soviet feel. The Soviet theme was also reflected by the other school parties on the site, whose teachers had the children out every morning at 8.00 AM doing a range of pretty strenuous physical exercises before breakfast! UK policy makers would do well to try to understand why kids in Belarus appear to be a lot thinner and healthier than kids in the so called advanced countries.



Stunning setting in the forest



Here we go, our party arrive

The apprehensiveness increased as we saw our group arriving, but was immediately swept away in a whirlwind of smiles and hugs from the children, who greeted us like long lost friends. The children were accompanied by their carers from various institutions, who were initially more wary of us, although this changed during the trip. We had decided not to organise any structured activities on the first afternoon, letting everyone settle in and generally run wild. The ages ranged varied from 5 up to 35, the vast majority being between 5 up to middle teens. My concerns about the language barrier evaporated and communication with the children was rarely an issue during our two-week stay. I knew a few basic words such as please and thank you and learned a few more essential words and phrases during the trip such as “ball”, “throw”, “share” and the most important one on the odd occasion that one of the kids would play up “I will tell the carers”! For more complex matters and dealings with the management and carers we had Marcin who spoke some Russian and our Belarussian volunteer Lilya. My dealings with the management were luckily limited, allowing me to watch with amusement as Marcin, Christina and Lilya fought their way through a bewildering labyrinth of bureaucracy to achieve the most simple of tasks.

Further evidence of the enduring Soviet legacy was provided by the number and range of “specialists” and in the absence of the correct specialist even the most simple of tasks could not be undertaken. When the water dispenser in the dining room was empty one day, we requested water but were informed that unfortunately the water dispenser specialist was absent that day, so we had no water! Meal times were an experience, think school dinners in the 1970’s. Now I really like Russian and Belarussian cuisine, lots of hearty dishes based on potatoes and root vegetables, but Ptich is clearly not the best place to make an informed decision about this type of cuisine! We spent most mealtimes trying to work out what had been put in front of us, and even more perplexing, how to eat it as the availability of cutlery was completely random, and all cutlery had to be considered multi-functional. All of the volunteers are now expert at eating soup with a tea spoon and using forks to eat yoghurt and spread butter.

These idiosyncrasies will come as no surprise to anybody who has travelled extensively in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space, but the lack of logic and the bureaucracy can be a bit of a culture shock to the uninitiated. The only advice I can offer volunteers visiting this part of the world for the first time is that random is normal and there is no point asking the question “why”, you just have to accept things as they are rather than search for a logical explanation, because there usually isn’t one and you will end up frustrated.

We soon settled into a routine with each day following a similar structure. First the joys of breakfast, the porridge mixed with meatballs being a particular highlight! We would finalise the plan of action for the day and decide who was doing what. We tried to provide a range of activities spread over the morning session and after lunch there was quiet time when the children rested until about 4 o’clock. The children emerged full of energy after quiet time when activities resumed until dinner time, after which we had the delights of the legendary Ptich disco, which was worth the trip on its own! The disco finished about 9.30 in the evening, at which point the volunteers usually collapsed onto chairs outside to relax and reflect on the days events.



The Ptich Disco



Luckily these characters managed to find me and my “friends” in the forest

We tried to organise a diverse range of formal and informal activities that the kids would enjoy. But in Belarus that is easier said than done. Any activity we proposed that was even slightly different to the norm was questioned by some of the carers on the basis that they didn’t think the kids could do it. We proposed a forest walk, the site is in the middle of a forest after all! Initially we received a negative response to this idea, with claims that the kids couldn’t deal with walking outside the site. Luckily, we quickly worked out which carer to ask and found one who was happy with our ideas. As a result, I ended up sitting in a ditch in the forest crying my eyes out about losing my “friends” and the kids had to find me. Luckily, they did. And then they helped me to find all of my “friends”, otherwise known as cuddly toys that we had hidden in trees around the forest path. The kids loved it. We had an arts and crafts room, or at least we did when the key specialist was available to open it for us! We took over tons of pens, paper, colouring books, models, jigsaws, balloons and a mass of other material that CCP had collected throughout the year and it was simply magical. The variety of outdoor and indoor activities ensured that life was never boring. Outside there were various sports activities including football and volleyball, a monumental water fight, the forest walk and lots of informal play. Indoor activities included the swimming, arts and crafts, balloon animals, an epic karaoke and various DVD’s.



Arts and crafts were a big success



General chaos during informal play activities

So, what can I say about my experience of volunteering for CCP? You do have to be prepared for the fact that Belarus is very different to the UK, particularly in relation to the attitudes of Belarussian society to disability, whereby people with physical and mental challenges tend to be institutionalised and excluded from society. Attitudes are changing slowly and that is one of the main aims of CCP. Having said that, I was struck by the mutual affection between the carers and the children who clearly had a great relationship. The time I spent at Ptich is one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, it was truly life changing and I am already planning my next visit. The smiles and happiness of the kids was simply beyond anything I can put into words. The pleasure the children took in simple things such as the surprise pizza and apple pie parties that we organised was extremely humbling and will stay with me forever. Learning to work as a team with the other volunteers and deal with whatever Belarussian bureaucracy could throw at us was an amazing experience. Challenging myself by doing something completely out of my comfort zone, and surviving, was incredibly rewarding. Learning more about Belarussian history, culture, people and the country itself was fascinating and satisfied my interest in the history of the Great Patriotic War, during which Belarus and her people suffered so much. We had a trip with some of the older children and young adults to the town of Pietrykaw to visit the local Museum, various war memorials and a stunning orthodox church and we also had the opportunity to visit the town of Mazyr on our day off. In addition, the “quiet” time in the afternoons provided ample opportunity for exploring the local area.



A group effort at the karaoke



An emotional farewell to some of the young adults on their departure

I would like to finish with two observations. First, Belarus is an amazingly stunning country with a very complex history, and if it is not yet on your list of places to visit, then you should add it immediately. Second, volunteering with CCP is one of the most rewarding and life changing experiences I have ever had and I hope to return for many more summers of fun in the sun! No experience of working with children and young adults? Worried about the language and visiting a country with a very different culture? Worried about the food? There are numerous reasons we can all find for not doing something way out of our comfort zone, but if you are enthusiastic, flexible, a good team player and have an empathetic nature my advice would be, just do it! It could turn out to be the most rewarding experience of your life, it certainly was for me!



The author with 2 of many new friends made during the trip



Nursery rhymes led by one of the Belarussian carers

Neil Adams with support from the rest of our volunteer team, the Yorkshire Cockney sisters Alina and Christina, the lad Will and the legend that is Marcin

Wigan, UK

8th January 2019