

The fresh mountain air you breathe in; the continuous sound of the river flowing through the valley; the smell of fresh chapatis being cooked on a wood-fire griddle; the full display of the colour green in all its shades everywhere around you; the kind welcoming smiles of the local workers, and the sincere interests of the students; these are just some of the mesmerising experiences you encounter while volunteering at Sholai School in the southern Palani Hills of India.

Volunteering here is so much more than partaking in some work, for food and accommodation in return. If you are open to it, you can really enjoy a different, less artificial and rural lifestyle. You can become part of a family-like community. The teachers and students are kind and welcoming, and make you feel at home right away. There is a variety of options in terms of your contribution to this community.

As a volunteer you can help in several departments: helping in the kitchen, work on the organic farm, putting your muscles to work with the builders or assisting the carpenters in the wood workshop. The diversity is pleasant, being able to increase your knowledge and become more skilful in various fields.

Some of the work can be quite physical, especially on the farm or with the builders, but they take good care of you with re-energising tea-breaks and delightful South-Indian meals.

The local workers try to guide you in your work the best that they can, even with the obvious language barrier, they are most helpful.

Working in the kitchen is also great fun. The hard-working "Akkas" lay on three delicious meals for about 80 people daily. Obviously they can use all the help they can get. Mostly you will be cleaning and cutting up vegetables for one of the amazing curries they make, or rolling stuffed chapatis for dinner.

Working for around 5 hours is very manageable, and it leaves you with plenty of free time to trek in the area, play football with the students or take a revitalising dive in the swimming pool made by the builders many years ago. You can take in the breath-taking views while the sun sets, before heading off to the dining-hall to share some stories and laughter with the teachers and students over the last meal of the day. Walking back to your cottage in the moonlight brings you another enchanting moment; the twinkling fireflies, surrounding you on the path.