

## **Willeke in Tomato Village – December / January ‘06/’07**

For me Tomato Village was the ultimate experience. Beginning of December I left Holland to travel for a year. My main goals were Australia and New Zealand, but I also wanted to do something useful. Volunteer work seemed to be the best thing for me to do. Through an acquaintance here in Holland I got in contact with Child’s Dream and they assigned me to Tomato Village to teach English.

I was really excited when I left home, it was my first travelling ever and I knew my world was going to be turned upside down. I travelled through Asia for 2 weeks and then flew to Mae Hong Son. Benjamin picked me up from the airport. I was surprised by his appearance, because it wasn’t what I expected. He looked so... Thai I guess, so different from what I’ve ever seen in Europe. Quickly I discovered that he is a very cheerful and easygoing man. First he gave me something to eat and made sure with the people from “the truck” (sort of taxi to get from the village to Mae Hong Son) that my bag would be delivered at his house. Then we jumped on his scooter and drove off to make the 2½ hour tour to his village. I loved the ride, Benjamin showed me a great waterfall and it gave me a fantastic view of the landscape.

I felt most welcome in Benjamin’s home. His wife is the loveliest woman I’ve ever met. She works real hard without complaining and with such patience. And she is a great cook! Benjamin was always showing off that he taught her that... Benjamin is a man of great knowledge, he just knows a lot about everything. He is very kind and has a heart as big as the world. His motivation is to give the children a chance to create possibilities for themselves, their families and later on for the village.

I didn’t have any prior experience with teaching whatsoever. Therefore I was pretty nervous how things would go. Matt, the volunteer before me, luckily gave me his teaching materials and Christina had stayed with Benjamin for a long time already so she helped me out as well! The children just love talking to you, the volunteer teacher. They actually are really already excited about the fact that you’re just there. I think if you would just sit down in the classroom doing nothing, even then they would be happy to come to school every day. They are very keen to learn English as well as things about you, your country and everything else you can teach them. The children go to school from early in the morning until the end of the afternoon, have a quick dinner at home and then rush to Benjamin’s school. Sometimes there is some lack of concentration, but who can blame them! The thing to do is to make the lessons a bit challenging and fun.

I have to be honest, I wasn’t always as happy as it seems so far. The first 2 weeks I had a hard time to adjust. I knew it was great being there but as I said it was my first travel experience and I was going through a major culture shock at the start. And then at Benjamin’s place: no running (or warm) water, squat toilets, a lot of dirt everywhere... pffft. Pretty tough for a spoiled girl from the Netherlands. But once I sort of started to “give in” it became better and better.

I loved being around the children, they seem to be so happy with so little, they work hard, they’ll do everything for you to give you a good time. I loved going to Mae Hong Son with “the yellow truck” and being squashed between the locals for 2 hours. I loved making fires at night to warm up and then go to bed with 4 blankets and 3 layers of clothing to stay warm. I loved the short breaks in between the lessons and all the kids buy some candy from Benjamin’s wife and watch TV in their living room. They just stole my heart and I was crying when I left, you can ask the lady from the truck... Thanks for this great experience!

Willeke Dohmen