



Volunteering at Ashalayam

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You have taken the decision to do voluntary work in one of the homes of Ashalayam. So here is some information, which we hope, will help you organise your departure, have a happy landing in Calcutta and guide you through an extraordinary experience in the fascinating India.

This document explains various guidelines, to simply help you make a wise and balanced decision. A stay in Calcutta could be difficult, it is therefore wiser to be conscious of certain facts before leaving.

1. Organizing your departure

Before joining our homes, it is essential to contact and meet one of the members of [ASA](#) nearest to your region. You will hence have an opportunity to familiarise yourself with our association and receive a folder informing you of our project. Also, our internet site www.ashalayam.org can be consulted.

The second step consists in forwarding a written request in English, addressed to the director of the homes of Ashalayam :

Father Mathew George Kariapuram SDB
Don Bosco Ashalayam
158 / 18 Belilious Road,
Howrah - 711 101 (W.B.), India
Tel: (0091 33) 2643 5037 or (0091 33) 2643 9341
Fax: (0091 33) 2643 9296
E-mail: dbasha@vsnl.com

Write well in advance before your departure, because "delay" is a common factor in the Indian postal system.

Please note it is imperative to understand and speak English. Once there, you certainly will have several occasions to learn some basic words of Bengali or Hindi – the children would be happy to help you. Besides this, no specific qualification or knowledge is needed to help us. However, if you do have any particular talents

(music, dance, theatre, sport, art..., etc.), please share them with Father Mathew George.

For your experience to be worthwhile, so much for yourself as for the children, a minimum stay of at least 3 months should be planned (5 months is ideal), because a certain lapse of time is needed to adapt to the new conditions of life and work.

If you have a specific project in mind, be prepared to face unexpected situations, caused by the difference in mentality and conception of work : you might need to adapt yourself and your project to all sorts of situations.

Donations are welcome, but please do not bring individual presents – how would the children who don't receive any feel ? To make them happy, choose things that they may share : racket games, a football, a board game, etc. Anything to do with entertaining the children is also very helpful : books full of pictures, felt pens and colour pencils, little games, and articles we can use as prizes during competitions (key chains, toy watches, little samples of perfume bottles / soap, etc.). Medically, we need multi-vitamins, de-worming products, aspirin, anti-diarrhoea or stomach ache treatments, bandages, Band-Aids and disinfectants. Old clothes, in good condition of course, are practical too – sizes for young children to teenagers.

Contact one of the ASA "antennas" before your departure – if you are not too overweight where your luggage is concerned, there may be some little things or letters to be taken and handed over to Ashalayam.

For your expenses, take travellers cheques in US dollars – you can change them at a rate slightly higher than cash or any other currency. Cash can be changed in the Sudder Street area and on Park Street you'll find the automatic money distributors (with a bank card). Close to Ashalayam, there is also an HSBC cash distributor which accepts all major credit cards.

At last, leave with high spirits and good health (contact the department of tropical diseases in your hospital and verify your vaccinations), because life and conditions in Calcutta are not always easy. Having a travel insurance policy would be safe as well, because coming to work for Ashalayam, is being there totally under your own responsibility.

Under no circumstances do Ashalayam, the Indian Association or ASA, the Association de Soutien à Ashalayam, take any responsibility in case of sickness, accident, theft or loss of money or travel documents. Consequences of any of the above would be at your own risk and expense.

For any other queries or doubts, there exists an excellent pocket guide, the *Lonely Planet*, and we highly recommend it. You will find answers to all your questions, which we may not have had the time to respond to.

2. A happy landing

India is a country with a culture completely different to ours. Some important points are to be remembered for not to shock the local population. Dressing and clothing habits are very different from the European ways, therefore please be careful not to wear shorts, women must at all times keep their shoulders and knees covered, avoid body fitting and tight T-shirts.

When applying for your visa or other official documents, indicate that you are visiting Calcutta as a tourist and mention the name of the hotel you will stay in, as volunteers are not accommodated in any of the homes of Ashalayam.

Transfer in Calcutta

- From the airport:

Take a "pre-paid" taxi for Sudder Street, the counter is immediately on your left after the baggage claim. You will pay your taxi fare in advance and be sure of not being cheated. Only a few people can drive at Ashalayam, reason why we cannot come to pick you up.

- From Howrah train station:

Take a "pre-paid" taxi for Sudder Street. The taxi stand is outside the train station, just opposite the main exit.

- In Sudder Street:

All the tourists generally stay on this street. Be attentive to the beggars, dealers, etc. who try to take advantage of the tourists. The nicer hotels are Modern Lodge, Maria or Paragon. For smaller budgets, there are dormitories at the Salvation Army. No reservations are needed to be done in advance. For more information please read Lonely Planet.

To help you to approximately establish your budget, know that a meal would cost you around 30 rupees (0.65 US\$), and a room would cost you anything between 70 and 300 rupees (1.60 - 6.7 US\$) per night.

To get to Ashalayam

- By taxi:

Explain well and clear that Ashalayam is situated in the district of Howrah and not in Calcutta. The simplest way is to take the New Bridge, then go direction Kadamtala. There, indicate the name of the cinema hall "Pushpashree" which is situated just 50 meters from Ashalayam. Cost : appx. 140 rupees

- With the bus 57, 63, 74 or 75:

Either of these buses to be taken at "Esplanade" (to get to Esplanade from Sudder Street : cross Chowringhee, take a right and go through the park). Get down at Kadamtala Market (a journey of appx. 1 to 1 ½ hrs.). From there Ashalayam is a 5 mins. walk. Cost : 4.00 rupees

- With the bus T8:

The bus-stop of the T8 (CTC buses) is situated on the crossing of Park Street and Chowringhee, near the Standard & Chartered Bank. Get down at the terminal called "Tikiyepara", (a ride of appx. 30 mins.). From there Ashalayam is a 15 mins. walk.
Cost : 7.50 rupees

3. Your days at Ashalayam

You will work in an independent manner : be comprehensive if no one explains you in detail what you have to do, so please do not hesitate to ask questions. **It is up to you to take the initiative** and propose new ideas.

In the beginning of your stay, we recommend to visit as many of our centres (Calcutta, Bhattanagar, Kalyani, *booth* in the train station...) to get a clearer and global view of our actions and what we do. Do not hesitate to ask any of the Fathers to send one of the children with you to show you the ways.

With Father Mathew George's OK and depending on the immediate needs, you can then decide to :

- Work in one of the handicraft studios (cards, candles, binding.....)
- Teach basic English and Maths to the younger children of Ashalayam, eventually give computer courses to the older ones
- Do various secretarial and administrative tasks for the association
- Work in the nursing home of Ashalayam (medical background / knowledge needed)
- Assist one of the collaborators of Ashalayam with the street schools

If you come in a group, we cannot promise you the same activity for everyone; be prepared to be separated and work individually.

When you start in a home and find yourself with no one there to guide you, be enterprising : ask any one responsible what your working hours are supposed to be, ask any of the Fathers for whatever material you may need (pens, paint, fabric, etc).

Those of you who start working in one of the handicraft sections, may in the beginning get the impression of not being useful. This is normal, as the children know their work better than any of us; not to forget also the communication problem with ones who don't speak English. In fact, it is your presence that is important: showing interest in the children, spending time with them, sharing their food, their games, etc. You must be an example for the children, help them become adults, guide them with principles which they did not have on the street, notably those of discipline, precision and cleanliness.

Also, efforts should be made to avoid tempting them by leaving money or valuable objects lying around or by smoking in front of them (do you know the street children start smoking at the age of 5 – 6 and make sincere efforts to stop ?).

Ashalayam now exists since 20 years and works on the basis of established rules and a methodology to follow. All sorts of suggestions are welcome but one should not come in wanting to change the entire system. Due to a lack of experience in this atmosphere and because of a difference in culture, there are some things that may be difficult for you to understand and may surprise you (ex: punishing a child...). In situations like this, do not hesitate to express your questions to one of the Fathers.

Keep in mind that the most important thing is COMMUNICATION with the team of Ashalayam: you can exchange your ideas about the way of working with the educators, share your views about each child and, why not, prepare a report for Father Mathew George at the end of your stay.

4. A few suggestions

If you commit yourself to work for a certain period and take on certain responsibilities, we must be able to count on you to respect your engagement. If during the course of your stay you feel the need to change your activity, please do not hesitate to speak to Father Mathew George.

It is important to work in harmony and collaboration with the people in charge of the center in which you are. Please respect your working hours (usually 8.00 am/8.30am to 4.30 pm) and inform the person responsible of your center of any periods you wish to be absent. We encourage the volunteers to take vacations during their stay (if you have come for more than a month) in order to discover the other aspects and regions of India : simply do not forget to inform Father Mathew George.

The children around you are psychologically very fragile. The best way to handle this factor, is not to have any favouritism, not to give more individual attention to one child out of the many others, nor give personal presents. If you have photographs that you want to share, try not to give them only to some children, the risk is to make the others unhappy. Instead why not pin them up on a board for everyone to see ?

Make the children happy by taking them to the botanical garden, to the zoo, to an amusement park or on a picnic - all this, of course, with the OK of Father Mathew George. You could also occasionally add variety to their meals and treat them to meat, chicken and fruits, because the children, not very often, eat these foods.

5. Health tips

Always drink filtered water or water from bottles that are sealed. You could also use Micropur, a product which makes water drinkable (but doesn't kill the amoeba). It is very important to drink a lot during the heat waves.

Tired ? : drink "Glucon D" (sold all over India) and have your vitamins. Also eat a lot of fruits, but not in front of the children.

Indigestion ? : drink a lot of coconut water and also water mixed with "Electrolite" (a powder substitute for mineral salts).

6. Your return

Before leaving, may we ask you to check with Ashalayam or ASA if you could help by taking back in your luggage any handicrafts to sell, (to be given upon your arrival to a member of ASA), or any mail.

You enjoyed your experience in Calcutta and want to continue to help Ashalayam from where you are ? You would like to make a gesture for the children with whom you have shared so much ? **By contacting the nearest [ASA "antenna"](#), you can participate in various promotional activities to raise funds for Ashalayam.**