

LONG SERVICE LEAVE SUGGESTION:

A Tad of Teaching and a Couple of Conferences

By *Margie Sainsbury*, teacher and home tutor co-ordinator AMEP, CIT

When I looked at my long service leave I was excited to find I could stretch it to almost 3 months. I had always been attracted by the idea of teaching overseas, but could never seem to see my way clear to leaving home for 1 – 2 years. I had 3 months and itchy feet, but neither a budget nor the inclination to just be a tourist floating around on the surface of things. I wanted that sense of ‘belonging’, to get to know the local cafes, markets, butcher, baker etc.

I couldn’t go anywhere expensive and I wanted any volunteer teaching I did to be perhaps helpful in some small way. Yet, not being a hugely intrepid type I needed some creature comforts, and a climate that was not too hot and not too cold.

Eastern Europe fascinated me because of our brush with so many refugees from the Yugoslav war in the nineties, and I was intrigued to know how they were doing 10 years after the Dayton Peace Accords finally ended the horror. I contacted former students I had stayed friendly with who had come from Mostar in Bosnia. It fitted the criteria: not too big, about 90,000 people, scenically beautiful, great history, including a complex and tragic part in the war, temperate climate, and a fascinating blend of East and West. It seemed a place where I could learn a lot!

A key to the success of the experiment was the ex-student, who was delighted that I wanted to go to his hometown, and who had a number of contacts for me re teaching. He had a cousin and family to look after me and he arranged an apartment for me. So I’d settled on a destination. I then began to read some of the history. Another Bosnian friend loaned me “A Short History of Bosnia”, which was in fact rather long – but so informative, and I drew many times on the things I learned from it. Then an attempt to learn some words and phrases in Bosnian/Croatian...an embarrassingly pathetic outcome I have to confess. In addition I looked up on the net to see whether there were any interesting conferences in the vicinity. I liked the sound of one called “Neglected Areas of ELT” to be held in Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, and, on my way home, “Best Practice in ELT” in Cairo.



Next was to purchase Lonely Planet Eastern Europe and start to plan excursions out from Mostar – Dubrovnik, Split, Budapest, Madjugoria, Sarajevo, Thessaloniki, Belgrade. I had a great start to my travels in Belgrade, staying with fellow teacher and consummate host Libby Oliver. Here I learned more of the background to political and social issues facing the region in the aftermath of war.

The contacts from my ex-student were invaluable – it would have been more difficult without them. My arrival was expected, and before long 3 evening classes were set up. The concept of volunteering was not fully understood as I discovered when I tried to set something up outside my ex-student’s patronage. I tried a direct approach to a mosque, offering volunteer teaching in the madrasa there. Although two young tour guides I spoke to were very keen, when I met with the mullah I was treated with considerable suspicion, and he declined the offer.

On the Croatian side of this divided town I taught a wonderful group of former professionals who had taken a drop in status since the war, and worked with them on Monday and Wednesday nights – usually followed by ‘English Conversation’ in the Irish Pub! On Tuesday night I worked in various classes at a Cultural Centre in the Muslim sector. This gave me free time in the day to plan lessons, explore the town, meet new friends in lovely cafes overlooking the river, sit in the sun, read books and plan my 4-day weekends in this beautiful part of the world. At other times I was spirited out of town to take a class with some engineers at a hydroelectric plant, and was treated to a magnificent lunch of spit-roasted lamb by way of payment. I took another class in a school in a village out of Sarajevo where I spent some days with a Bosnian friend from Australia who happened to be visiting her family when I was over there. That class became a little noisy - they weren’t used to having fun with English, and the principal came to see what was causing the disturbance! Teaching with fewer materials and aids – back to chalk and blackboard in the Cultural Centre – forced me to re-think some teaching strategies and prompted me to be more resourceful and creative.

The conferences were stimulating and informative. This particularly applied to the Thessaloniki conference. I gave a paper there entitled “Introducing Voice Techniques for Actors to the Pronunciation



Classroom”. Although somewhat nerve-wracking, giving a paper provided a broader entrée into the conference as a whole and this made it well worth the effort and nervousness. It was so interesting to see a European perspective on English teaching. There was much talk of International English with enthusiastic support from UK guest speakers who seemed keen to offer up English to other nations to



do with what they will – I wondered if it was a sort of expiation of past Imperial arrogance. It was left to the ‘non-native’ teachers to mount some defence of standardized English! In another session the presenter from Cambridge exams outlined a convincing case for increased emphasis on Speaking skills to appear in their new exam format. At all sessions spirited discussion flowed through question time and on into the breaks – the Greeks and Turks, being particularly lively. Also dinner at a Greek Taverna with everyone up dancing proved a highlight of the not-so-highbrow variety.

In conclusion, I can’t convey adequately how rich and rewarding this whole experience was for me. I gained a great deal - both personally and professionally - from this blend of work and travel. For those who may consider this option, my Professional Development money from CIT helped with my fare and I will claim tax deductions for local travel to conferences and conference costs. This experience has provided a store of unique memories, wonderful travel, a great learning curve and a cast of remarkable characters.

Highly recommended!

We thank Margie for sharing her experiences and enthusiasm with members at our AGM this year.