

Helping yourself while helping others

These first six months of volunteering have been a real roller-coaster ride of emotions. I had very little idea what to expect when I got here, so I was anything but relaxed. I mean, the training sessions were fine, but you know things will never turn out exactly as planned. My initial nerves soon wore off, though, mostly because there was so much to do that I didn't have time to worry! And the rest of the team have been just amazing. The project leaders explained everything I had to do and gave me lots of tips. They truly are quite remarkable people - completely committed, enthusiastic and patient.

I'd never actually set foot in a home for the elderly before, but the place is very nice, with communal rooms, a shared kitchen and a lovely garden, and there is a really warm atmosphere. There are so many things I never realised about getting old. Apart from the more obvious health issues, fragility and mobility are the main problems. Some residents need help simply opening a jar or tin or using a remote, while others need someone to take them to the shops or do the fetching and carrying. They get frustrated from time to time, but only with themselves. They do appreciate anything you do for them – they love it if we can take them to a café or for a walk in the park – and they are just full of stories and experiences. Somehow they bring to life all those things you've read about or seen on the telly in black and white. The fifties and sixties always seemed so far away, but now I think I've a far better idea of what actually went on back then.

Of course, doing it all in German was difficult at first. Some of the residents only speak dialect, and that takes some getting used to! But I've picked up so much on the language front too, so that's been very rewarding. I reckon I could pass for one of the locals now. And everyone's so complimentary about my German, it's definitely given me confidence.

But all good things come to an end. I feel a bit sad to be leaving everyone here. I'll tell you one thing: everyone who said that I should go travelling in Asia in my gap year is crazy! I've learned more about people and life doing this than I ever could traipsing around backpacking. The project finishes at the end of the European Year of Volunteering, but I've been asked to come back and, if all goes according to plan, I'll come over in my summer holidays next year. Who knows, when I finish university, I might even become a professional care worker!