

Two years ago I was lying in bed, scrolling through my facebook feeling pretty happy with my life and where it was going. I have a boyfriend, we own a house, we both have good jobs and enjoy our active social life, mine often taken up planning events and activities for my Brownie unit in Holgate, York. I was scrolling facebook and something caught my eye. An advert from Girlguiding for applications for GOLD. I had never heard of GOLD before so clicked on the link to see what it was all about. An international programme for adults aged 18-30 with opportunities to travel as a small team of 6 adults to other Member Organisations around the world and work with them on a project to improve their Guiding offering for 3 weeks. To apply, you just had to complete a form and wait to see if your name was picked in the ballot. I completed the application and then didn't think any more about it.

A few months later I received an email saying unfortunately I hadn't been successful this time but my name was placed on a waiting list for this year and I was more than welcome to apply next year, or look at the other international offerings available for Girlguiding members. Then 3 weeks later, I received an email to say there was a space available for me to attend Go for GOLD in September. They couldn't tell me what was going to happen, just that I had a space, and needed camping stuff and to join a facebook group to communicate with other applicants to arrange tents for the weekend in Brighouse, Yorkshire. What happens on Go for GOLD is a closely guarded secret, and I'm not going to share it with you today!

In November I received the email I had been hoping for, an offer to join team Maldives for the 2019 GOLD trip! This was to be the fourth year of the trip (GOLD trips run for an initial 3 years and can be extended to a maximum of 5 years in total), and the aims of the project this year were:

- To improve the external image of Maldives Girl Guides Association
- To assist in the retention of current leaders
- To develop the Young Leader section
- To develop confidence, leadership and decision making in girls

The team met at our first briefing weekend in February 2019, it was amazing how well we all got on with each other. We started to learn about how a GOLD project works, how to run training sessions, got to know each other better and of course, got involved with the obligatory GOLD fancy dress activities and competitions!

We met a further two times for second briefing weekend and then our remote 3rd briefing weekend at my Grandad's house in Birmingham. Choosing our individual roles, preparing our session plans, resources and having lots of Guiding fun!

Finally, after months of fundraising and preparations, it was time to head to the Maldives. We met at Pax Lodge on Friday 28th June ready to head to the airport and catch our flight on Saturday 29th June! The heatwave and cancelled and delayed trains were not going to stop us making our flight, although there were times when we thought they might!

We arrived in the Maldives to an amazing welcome from the Young Leaders of the Malé branch of the MGGGA (Maldives Girl Guide Association). Showered in gifts of food and flowers, we were whisked off to our apartment to settle in. We spent a week in Malé working with

units in Malé and Hulhumalé. We played confidence growing games with the Stars (aged 5-7), confidence and decision making activities with the Little Maids (aged 8-11), leadership and decision making activities with the Guides (aged 12-16), retention and leadership with the Young Leaders (aged 17-25) and retention and leadership activities with the Leaders. We were taken on trips to local islands, treated to homemade food from the leaders and even got to meet the Minister of Education(Dr. Aishath Ali)to discuss our experiences within Girlguiding UK, the GOLD trip and how it is benefiting the Maldives and bringing our two nations closer together. We were up early, out all day and back late at night every day, it was really tiring but so rewarding and fun!

At the end of the first week we were invited to attend and lead sessions at the annual Young Leaders Camp in Naifaru in the Lhaviyani Atoll where Young Leaders from four different islands met. After an early start and a very bumpy, 2 hour launch (speed boat) journey on a very tightly packed boat, we were welcomed with cakes and gifts from the Young Leaders on the island. We had a quick breakfast and then delved straight into our first session on recruitment and retention, at 10am we had to stop and walk to the other side of the small island where we were all treated to a talk at the turtle rehabilitation sanctuary where we learnt about the great work the volunteers were doing and got to meet the turtles in their care, many of whom had missing flippers having been caught in fishing nets or plastic pollution. We continued with sessions on commitment and volunteerism, then we all piled onto boats and were whisked off to an uninhabited island where we did some beach Olympic games! We couldn't help notice the amount of rubbish that had washed up on the island and were very saddened, especially after seeing the turtles affected by this earlier in the day. The evening ended with a BBQ on the beach and campfire songs with our new friends. Day 2 had our communication and delegation session, our fundraising session, and a session lead by one of the Young Leaders on 'Keep the Scene Clean' about the increase in use of single use plastics and alternative approaches such as the moon cup, metal straws, bamboo toothbrushes etc. Our weekend ended with a closing ceremony before another very bumpy launch journey back to Malé to rest and recover! We were exhausted but really enjoyed our weekend with the Young Leaders and felt like we had really delved deep into the topics we covered.

In the second week we moved south to Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll and spent a few days with the Stars, Little Maids, Guides and Leaders on Thinadhoo, then a few surreal days on Gadhdoo (there's too much to describe here but do see my blog post about our 2 days on this magical island on the Maldives 2019 blog!) and back to Thinadhoo for a night before heading back to Malé for our first rest day of the trip. We spent most of the day catching up on sleep, catching up on our evaluations and adapting our training plans ready for week three.

For our third week we travelled North to the Baa. Atoll spending time with the Stars, Little Maids, Guides and Leaders on Edyhafushi who were preparing for a visit from the president, including a trip to the 5* tourist island Soneva Fushi, the first eco-friendly tourist island in the Maldives. Having been saddened at the amount of rubbish washing up on the beaches of the Maldives, it was refreshing to see what the Maldivians are doing to reduce this. More than 90% of the waste produced by this tourist island is recycled in a number of ways, including melting down tins and cans to make beautiful door handles. We then spent our final few days of project on the island of Thulhaadhoo. Thulhaadhoo has only recently starting Guiding, we were honoured to work with a unit of Little Maids who had only met a handful of times

previously. This was one of my favourite sessions which was outside, where the girls and their parents were really excited and happy to see us. After this session, the heavens opened and a storm came. Our return boat was cancelled due to the choppy seas and we were concerned we wouldn't be able to make it back to Male to catch our return flight to the UK, whilst there are worse places to be stranded we were ready for our final rest day where we were treated to a night on a beautiful tourist island.

We had a day to relax and reflect on our experience in the Maldives on Summer Island. We had made friends for life in each other, met some amazing Maldivian girls and leaders, immersed myself in the Maldivian culture trying their food (think fresh and really spicy, tuna, fish, curry, rice and bread), learning their dances, wearing their traditional clothes, singing their songs, swimming in their amazing coral reefs, meeting their animals! We struggled with the long days, lack of sleep, really hot and humid temperatures, lack of wifi and communication with home, and the constant changing programme and challenges that came our way. But the main take away for us all was the amazing work that the MGGA do in the Maldives, the confidence and support these girls receive within their Guiding family, and knowing that we have played a small part in developing their offering is something I will be proud of for the rest of my life.

9 months later, reflecting on my experience, I have learnt how to cope in pressurised situations, how to adapt to unforeseen changes, I've improved my leadership skills, become even more independent and I am now more aware of Guirlguiding outside of my County.

Applications for GOLD 2021 will be open soon. If you want to really make a difference and have the time to commit to planning, doing and then sharing your GOLD experience with others, then fill out that form! My only regret is not joining the huge GOLD family sooner.