My first experience of Delhi was stepping out of the airport into a blanket of heat and then waiting in the middle of a parking lot while our guide tried to find our bus.

With the help of a Radford Collegians’ grant, my friend Kaisha and I spent four and a half months living in the town of Kullu in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was an amazing, somewhat difficult and often frustrating experience that taught me things I could have never learnt in school.

I learnt that seatbelts are often used purely as decoration and that the aim of driving is to overtake as many people as possible. I learnt that there exist in the English language such things as a past perfect continuous tense and an adjective clause. I learnt that there are places with even more steps than Radford. And I learnt that improvising is one of the most useful skills you can ever learn.

Our journey started with the news that there was civil unrest in the area of our volunteer placement, and that we couldn’t go. Instead our volunteering organisation, Latitude, spent a frantic 24 hours organising 8 new placements for us and our fellow volunteers. Ours was in La Montessori School Kullu (of no relation to the La Montessori system - they just liked the name), on the opposite side of the country from our original destination.

One ten and a half hour bus-ride later, and we had arrived at our new home. LMS is one of the biggest schools in Kullu valley and has 3 campuses. The principle of the school is a woman called Lalita, who I learnt to refer to as ‘The Ma’am’. We had no sooner entered the school than she ushered us into our first class. Of 50 kids! Who spoke limited English! With no preparation!

It is worth mentioning here that there is a network of highly talented individuals in India striving for the common good. These teaching assistants are known as Uncles and Auntyes. Without them the schools would not run and we would never have survived our classes. Using a combination of coercion, blackmail and bargaining, they could always get the volume down to a non-deafening level. One in particular, who was not quite an uncle and not quite a teacher but seemed to exist in a level all to himself, need only open the door to have silence fall. We suspected magic.

Our life soon settled into a routine. During the morning we helped with the M2 and M3 classes (roughly equivalent to preschool and kindergarten). There we marked books, attempted to explain the difference between ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘under’, and nodded understandingly whenever the kids spoke to us in Hindi.

After M2 and M3 we would take games classes for the older students. At first we tried playing Hangman and Pictionary to improve their English. Then we decided that their English wasn’t worth going deaf for and took them outside.

Finding games that will work with a particular age group and which can be explained across the language barrier is amazingly difficult. Particularly given that the students in question are almost all compulsive cheaters. Even picking
volunteers was a nightmare. They all wanted to volunteer for everything, and while they put up their hands, they did so while saying “Ma’am, Ma’am!” at the top of their voices. The combined result of 50 kids yelling “ma’am!” never failed to remind us of the seagulls from the movie Finding Nemo.

In the end we discovered that a maths version of the game Fruit Salad worked wonders. It swept the school from M2 up to Year 8. The kids loved it. Classes became manageable. And we had to frantically think of new games before everyone got bored.

After school we helped the 20 or so live-in hostel kids with their homework. And they did a lot of homework. Or, more accurately, they spent a lot of time with their heads bent over their books but mysteriously always on the same page.

It took us a while, but we eventually managed to settle into the routine of school life. “The Ma’am” gave us two English classes to teach, where we spent hours wondering what madman came up with the rules for reported speech in English. We started successfully improvising lessons. And then, all too soon, it was time for us to leave.

While I was in India I pined for my washing machine and hot shower. I spent hours fantasising about toasted sandwiches and roast potatoes and stir fries and to be honest, anything at all so long as it wasn’t dahl. But now I am back in Australia I realise just how much I miss the chaos. I miss the cows wandering wild, the total lack of road rules, the evenings spent lounging on our roof and the spectacular vista of the Himalayan foothills. More than anything else I miss the teachers who kept me alive and the kids who always knew how to cheer me up and keep me busy.

While I doubted it at times, I not only survived India but learnt so much from it. So if you’re sick of studying and what to try something new, give teaching overseas a try. I guarantee that it’ll make studying look a lot easier.

Genevieve Aisbett
Class of 2012