Compassion, culture and citizenship: a different international experience

Some international trips are for romance, for relaxation or for adventure. Others are for business, for family or for nostalgia. One international trip to India is for compassion, for culture and, most importantly for its travellers, for global citizenship.

Life Global Australia launched its first philanthropic trip to India in 2023. The itinerary included visiting the beneficiaries of the charity's three programmes, in education, health and women's independence, but also involved learning more about the culture and history of the state of Gujarat. The effect on the volunteer board members and donors who participated was so strong the trip was reprised in 2024.

"It was an emotionally profound experience," said LifeGA's Director Rachel Thompson. *"The trip was filled with unforgettable moments."*

Chair of the LifeGA Advisory Board, Geoff Anson, went in 2023 to see with his own eyes the people and their needs.

"I went back in 2024 because we successfully raised funds and I wanted to meet the people we were actually helping."

The donors and volunteer directors who have participated in LifeGA's tours in Gujarat have all wanted to understand more about the effect their contributions are having. The 2023 trip began with a visit to Mulchand Village school and a labourers' school near Rajkot. Dr McGowan's father donated the money to build the Mulchand Village school in memory of his wife. The schools were important destinations as one of the first realisations Founding Director Dr Dipti McGowan had was that education is the key to independence. If students can stay at school, both students and the community can develop.

"My mother was born in a remote rural village and lived a very simple life with her family. She was a girl in a remote area of the world where gender equity was, and continues to be, unheard of. She

had to stop her education at primary level to help in the home. My mother ensured my education was uninterrupted. This has empowered me to lead a successful, confident and independent life."

For donors Mary and Lee Thompson, the visit to Mulchand Village school was a highlight. 2023 was the fifth anniversary of its opening, and the first year of graduation.

"The whole village came out to welcome us with music and dancing and great joy. The smiles on the children's faces were unforgettable."

In both 2023 and 2024, the Life Blood Centre in Rajkot provided another opportunity to see the outcome of LifeGA's funding. The centre, established in 1981 by LifeGA's partner charity, Project Life, is internationally recognised for its world class equipment and commitment to providing scientifically validated processes. By 2024, LifeGA donors had enabled 100 units of blood to go free of cost to needy recipients, and funded 500 screening tests for Thalassemia, a crippling hereditary blood disorder. Dr McGowan found meeting the Thalassemia patients very moving, while Geoff Anson was impressed by their resilience.

"Their struggle, their humility, their thankfulness, were all impactful."

The impact of meeting those for whom the charity was founded clearly resonated with all trip participants. For Rachel Thompson, the visit to remote schools showcased the dedication of teachers and the eagerness of children to learn, despite challenges, while hearing the beneficiaries' stories of resilience and hope, despite facing significant challenges, was the most important part of the trip.

"They reminded me of why we do what we do here at LifeGA. It reinforced the importance of our collective efforts and the real change that can be achieved through compassion and support."

Dr McGowan was struck by the courage of trainees in the Women's Empowerment Programme.

Participants in this programme are usually from impoverished remote areas, or are widows struggling to support their families. They receive vocational training as well as studying budgeting, banking, finance, gender equality and self defence.

"Many of the women were travelling further than they had ever gone before and into a city which they had never seen before," Dr McGowan said. *"That would have taken great courage."*

"These women's lives were transformed by having the opportunity to learn a skill that could support them and their families," Mary Thompson said. *"They were so happy and grateful, but also overcome with emotion as they told their stories. It was very humbling for us and so incredible to see how such a small thing on our part could make such a huge difference to their lives."*

One of Dr McGowan's aims for the annual trip is a very pragmatic one. As LifeGA's Director and Chairperson, she is committed to ensuring every donation to the charity is used as intended. Dr McGowan meets with the executive of in-country partner, Project Life, viewing their records and meeting the beneficiaries.

"LifeGA's aim is to make meaningful change by donating money where the money is not eaten up by administration fees," Dr McGowan said. Donations to LifeGA in Australia are passed on with no administration costs to the partner charity, which in turn has been vetted to have lower than 5% administration costs. *"Each trip we also see where the need is for future donations."*

LifeGA's trips, however, are more ambitious than simple tours of programmes and sites. The aim is to provide an enriching, holistic experience in which the culture of the region shines.

Warm welcomes, local festivals and traditional foods are all integral.

"The food was amazing! The people were delightful! The sights were magical!" Dr McGowan said.

"*It was wonderful to travel with people who could speak the language,"* Lee Thompson said. "*There was a real connection with the people there. We were able to weave in some sightseeing and learn more about the history of the province and of India."*

In 2023 and 2024, the diverse itineraries included the Hindu pilgrimage sites of Somnath temple and the ancient city of Dwarka, Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace of Porbandar, a Gandhi ashram, the wildlife sanctuary of Gir National Park, Rann Utsav the internationally renowned tent city in the White Desert, and the vibrant city of Ahmedabad, home to the world's largest cricket stadium. It is no wonder Geoff Anson found his journeys exciting and memorable.

"The energy of Indian cities is just incredible. The order within chaos is only seen in a few places on earth."

Each of the participants in LifeGA's tours is acutely aware of their global citizenship. Underpinning their trips to India is dedication to making a lasting impact. Donors and volunteers alike are driven by the conviction that positive change is not just possible, but essential.

"I was particularly motivated by the needs of remote India as it is far away and often forgotten. In remote areas like that, if funds do not arrive, people die. It's as simple as that," Geoff Anson said. *"I like giving back to important causes where the need is great."*

Rachel Thompson believes in the power of meaningful impact. *"Contributing resources and time is a way for me to make a lasting difference."*

For many, a journey from Australia to India would be a once-only experience. But for those profoundly affected by the stories of beneficiaries – the change from poverty to independence, from despair to hope – the chance to return again and again is alluring.

"I am already looking forward to our next trip to India, knowing that each journey brings new perspectives, experiences, and opportunities to make a positive impact," Rachel Thompson said.

"The journey makes what we do real," Dr McGowan said. *"It has inspired and motivated me to keep donating my money, time and effort to LifeGA's vision and mission."*

(www.lifeglobal.org.au)

If you would like to keep up-to-date with Life Global Australia, enter your details here.

Our Vision

To support, sustain and enrich people's lives.

Our Mission

To work to prevent and relieve poverty through education, training and health for public benefit. We partner with well-established charities that share our vision.

Our Partner

Project 'Life' is dedicated to creating long-term impact by empowering lives through diverse programs.