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Fresh graves and tents lining the beaches

Fiona O'Connor

Tsunami Diary: Fiona O'Connor, a 24-year-old Dubliner working in the IT department of an insurance company, made a new year's resolution this year - "to make a difference".

Then, like everyone else, she watched the unfolding horror of the Asian tsunami. As a result of her resolution, last weekend Fiona travelled to Sri Lanka as one of a group of volunteers from the UK and the US on a tsunami reconstruction project as part of the Global Crossroads Charity organisation.

She has never done voluntary work before. She will be there for two weeks. She is keeping a diary for The Irish Times.

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Well . . . here I am in Galle, day one of the Global Crossroads reconstruction project in a lovely little hotel called Tiny House - thankfully not the primitive accommodation that we were warned about on the GC website, but no hot water. En route from Colombo we did stop at a small hotel to use their facilities and were amazed at what we saw - rooms with no electricity, no doors, dirty bed linen, black toilet water and a smell like you wouldn't believe!

On arrival here, however, we were greeted by the family's children, Kushani and Keshani aged seven and 14. They handed us each a bottle of Coca-Cola and then asked us our names . . . The eldest was able to rattle off all 12 volunteer names from memory immediately. I don't even know everyone's name yet!

After waiting in the lobby, myself and four other girls that I have been travelling with were led to a bright room with a double bed. We were told that two more mattresses would be placed in the room for us to share. We consequently found out that our room is actually the family's room.

I can't get over the generosity that we are being greeted with. Even in Colombo, when people hear that we are here to help with the tsunami relief work, the gratitude is amazing.

A Sri Lankan man that we met walking down the street in Colombo yesterday took us to a Buddha house where tourists are not normally allowed to enter. He explained all of the history around the statues and the religious festivals, and the monk blessed a threaded bracelet for each of us to wear while working under the construction

project.

We travelled using the main form of transport called tuk-tuk. They are like tiny motorbikes with a wagon on the back. Not the safest mode of transport in the world but then there does seem to be a method to the madness on the roads as I haven't seen any accidents yet, despite all of the weaving of vehicles and pedestrians alike.

The experience at the moment is kind of like the TV programme Survivor. People ranging in age from 15 to 59 and such a mixture of nationalities - Irish (myself), Canadian, English, American, Australian, to name but a few.

Although we travelled after sunset, we could still see the colossal devastation along the coast and can only imagine what we are going to see in the morning.

There are fresh graves on the beaches all the way from Colombo to Galle. Tents lined every road on the way, set up beside foundations of the houses that used to occupy that space.

Smiling children ran alongside the van waving at us, fascinated.

Well, it's time to get some rest before our 7am breakfast. I'll need all the sleep I can get.

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