

Volunteering at Food For Life Vrindavan (FFLV)

FFLV runs many projects under its umbrella, however our main focus is the Sandipani Muni School (SMS), which educates the underprivileged children of Vrindavan.

We have compiled some information for you, which we hope will answer many of your questions.

ATTENTION: Food for Life Vrindavan requires police clearance for each and every prospective volunteer. Please make arrangements with the police in your country to obtain an official letter or certificate stating your police record or lack thereof. This is standard procedure for anyone participating in youth-oriented programs.

SMS is a government-registered school, where we have local teacher to do the bulk of teaching. However, we require enthusiastic and proactive people to come and teach English. You do not need to know Hindi to teach; just a little imagination and enthusiasm will do the trick.

At SMS we have a nursery, primary and secondary school. The children are as young as 4 year old all the way up to 20 ! So you can work with the age group with which you feel most comfortable.

SMS serves a small breakfast and a huge, hot lunch to all volunteers, kids, and staff every day. The school is open Monday-Saturday, from 8:30am – 3:00pm (timings can differ by season).

Please see below what we require from volunteers:

Nursery/KG – 4-5 yrs

Assist the teachers in the children's daily activities, such as serving, feeding and playing.

Organizing and initiating educational games.

Teaching children that may be less able.

Primary/ Secondary school – 6- 18 yrs

Substitute teacher for English classes

Assist the English teacher

Substitute teacher for other subjects (Hindi speaking required)

After lunch we run elective classes for the children, which include dancing, music, martial arts, embroidery and the Learn To Read program with which you are welcome to assist.

However, if you have other skills you wish to share, please get in touch with us and we can guide you further. We are always looking for dynamic, self-motivated people who have something to add to the cause of the poor.

Important information for male volunteers:

Food for Life's school, (called Sandipani Muni School) is an all girls school, so most of the openings for teachers and volunteers in the school are for women only, but if you are a man, don't let that stop you from coming to Vrindavan to work with FFLV! Some examples of what you can do are given below, but use your imagination and the sky's the limit!

Administration and support services:

For those who prefer office work and have some computer skill, volunteers are needed in the offices of Food for Life and Sandipani Muni School. Opportunities are available to help out with writing articles for FFLV publications, graphic work, updating our website, preparing worksheets, games and teaching materials for Sandipani Muni School. Many of these services can also be done from other places in the world, so you can even continue volunteering when you return.

People from all over the world donate clothes for FFLV to distribute, so we need volunteers to sort them out and store them to be ready for distribution. Another service that you might get involved in is taking photos of FFLV activities.

Cow Shelter

During the school term, volunteers can take the school bus out to our village school where there is a cow shelter (*goshala*) that takes care of over 100 cows and bulls. Volunteers can help with feeding and cleaning the cows and bulls.

Hospital

Volunteers who have medical experience can help out in our village medical center. For qualified practitioners, a translator can be arranged as most of the clients speak Hindi only.

Bakery

If you are interested in baking, the FFLV bakery is the place for you! Among other things, the bakery makes biscuits for the Sandipani Muni School children's morning snack. You can spend your morning cooking then enjoy the fruits of your labour!

Remote Volunteering

You can join our team of volunteers who work from all over the world to support FFLV. Most office work such as promoting FFLV's website; grant writing; preparing teaching materials and writing articles, can be done from anywhere in the world. Translating is a much-needed service! We would love to have our website, newsletter etc. available to as many people from around as possible.

If you would like to promote FFLV with a fundraiser we can help with ideas and send information by Internet.

General Information

Vrindavan is small pilgrimage town. Unless you are a devotee of Krishna there is very little for entertainment! If you are coming to India for the first time, Vrindavan can be a little overwhelming. And, volunteering at the school is always a little overwhelming at first.

Here's what you need to know.

Drink bottled water only! Filtered water is available at the school; simply save some bottles and fill them up daily.

Try to avoid eating the street food, and too many fried foods. Foreigners have been known to have stomach issues because of these!

India is not the safest place for a woman to travel alone. Please let us know if you are female and need a travel companion.

The school and accommodations are all fitted with Western toilets. However, guests are asked to limit the amount of paper they put down the toilet.

There are huge numbers of cycle rickshaws around Vrindavan. They ALWAYS charge foreigners inflated prices so negotiate the price before getting on the rickshaw.

Before coming to India, it might be useful to learn a few basic words in Hindi – E.g. numbers, “how much?”

Many volunteers who come to India for the first time are overwhelmed by two things: the poverty, and the pollution

- The poverty is simply a fact of life here. But, this is a special place – many of the people who we consider to be poor are happier than you might think!
- Please be prepared to deal with large amounts of dust. Speak to your doctor about any medications you might require to help you cope. Most people end up with pesky coughs, but great medicines are very readily available.
- The pollution is a little astonishing if you have never been to India before. There are corners of the town covered with litter and open sewage. The good news is, Food for Life Vrindavan, among many other things, has a very successful waste pickup program!

Monkeys - we, humans, have cut down all their fruit trees, hence monkeys are also adapting in order to survive. Be careful of your:

- Glasses ○
- Cameras ○
- Hand bags
- Plastic bags especially!

The Volunteer Room at the school has Internet access. If you will need access at home as well, an Internet stick can be purchased close by. Please bear in mind – this is India – you will not always have a reliable connection. Internet cafes though, are extremely affordable, reliable, and plentiful!

LOCALS LIKE TO STARE! You might find the locals looking at you for an immense period of time. Don't be afraid, it's a cultural thing. Westerners are quite foreign to them and they are as interested in you as you are in them. They can be quite abrasive, often pushing. Girls, watch out for the men in the local area. They can be quite overzealous, and smiling or even looking in their direction can be a sign of flirting. Be smart!

Did some of those things scare you? Not to worry – coming to Vrindavan might be a culture shock, but it will be an extremely rewarding experience. Most volunteers walk away saying they got much more than they gave. It is an extremely special town. And, the whole team at FFLV is always there for you!

Other Notes

Volunteers are advised that Vrindavan is a place of pilgrimage and is considered a holy place by Hindus and ancient Holy Scriptures. As such, behavior such as meat eating, drinking alcohol, using intoxicants, public affection for partners, unmarried couples sharing the same room and wearing revealing clothing are considered offensive. Volunteers are therefore asked to refrain from these behaviors while in Vrindavan.

Each and every one of our children is a special child with some kind of special need or situation. Some of them live in tents, too many of them are being abused by their parents, and almost all of them are in danger of being pulled out of school because their parents do not understand the value of education. **Please do not expect to come to India and see a school like the one you grew up in at home.** Age-appropriate learning is a huge challenge, as the vast majority of our children **do not know their date of birth.** Volunteering at SMS will expose you to the challenges we face every day and let you share in a portion of the excellent rewards of our hard work.

Getting here:

Vrindavan is around 3.5 hours from Delhi. You can get there by train, by bus, or by car.

By Bus:

From New Delhi's Sarai Kale Khan bus depot, take the Agra bus and get down at Chhatikara. From Chhatikara, auto rickshaws are available to Vrindavan.

By Train:

Trains to Mathura, the nearest major railway junction to Vrindavan, are available from both New Delhi Station and Nizamuddin Station. New Delhi Station is preferable, located in a safer, more centrally located neighborhood. From Mathura, you can hire a private auto rickshaw, or squeeze into a Vrindavan-bound tempo. (The cheapest way to travel – tempos are large auto-rickshaws with passengers packed in a sardine-esque manner).

By Taxi:

There are two routes to reach Vrindavan:

First- National Highway-2, it takes 3-4 hours.

Second- Taj Express Way, it takes 2-3 hours and has to pay little extra.

Accommodations & Taxi:

FFLV has limited accommodation available by donation.

http://fflvrindavan.org/en/?page_id=41

The service requirements to stay at Neem Bhawan are 6 hours a day, and 6 days a week. Daily there is an hour break where a delicious free lunch is served. The requested donation is \$4 per night, \$20 per week, or \$50 per month. A \$25 deposit is required to hold the room and will be refunded upon your departure when you return your room key.

<http://www.fflvrindavan.org/en/donate.html>

For those requiring more opulent accommodations, apartments are sometimes available in the Food for Life Guest House. Please contact Rupanuga at booking@fflvrindavan.org or call (+91) (789-500-2949) for current rates and availability.

October-November and February-March are particularly busy times, so please book well in advance.

FFLV can arrange a taxi for you. Please contact Rupanuga for the same to inquire about current prices and to arrange a taxi. Please let us know at least one week in advance if you require a taxi.

PLEASE NOTE: Meat, fish, and eggs are not allowed in FFLV buildings, nor is drinking or smoking permitted.

When to come

The school is open all year round, however we accept volunteers only from July until March. We also advise that you **avoid the summer months** as most people find it very difficult to work in 50+ (122) degree temperatures and everything slows down in the summer months.

What to bring

If possible, bring first/second hand children's clothing, children's books and educational games/toys for the kids
Bed sheets and towels
A flashlight (really handy when the electricity goes out!)
Insect repellent
If coming in the winter months (Dec-Feb), do not underestimate the cold of a Vrindavan winter! Bring extremely warm clothing!

What to wear

Women especially should dress modestly to avoid attracting unwanted attention and to respect the culture. We suggest wearing:

Long skirts
Loose pants

Tops that are not tightly fitted or sleeveless. Scarves should be a must to cover the upper parts!

The clothes in India are cheap, beautifully designed and brightly colored, so you can

pick up some nice items such as scarves, for both elegance and modesty.

Medical issues

Vaccinations are not required to enter in India but are recommended for certain diseases like malaria and typhoid.

To avoid malaria, avoid getting bitten by using a good insect repellent, and only drink from bottled/filtered water to avoid the risk of typhoid. If you are taking malaria pills – think twice – they have been known to give people horrible dreams – talk to your doctor, and talk to others who have taken them before.

Very important rules!

Many volunteers are shocked by the level of poverty and want to do something to help but sometimes, having a big heart can lead to bad experiences. Often, impoverished people feel that there is no other way to survive other than by cheating, consequently they become expert at it.

Do not buy anything for the children, even if they ask, without consulting us first!

Handing out sweets, or buying ice cream for some children on the streets, can/will cause a crowd of children to overwhelm you! NOT A GOOD IDEA....

Do not visit any of the children or local staff's home, without consulting us first. Ideally we would send one of our team with you for your own safety.

Do not invite children to your room due to child protection laws!

Girls don't walk around after 9pm on your own! It can be dangerous.

Reaching us once here:

If you have booked a taxi with us (contact Rupanuga for that), you can be picked up from the airport/train station/bus station and dropped to Neem Bhawan or our other accommodation (flats/rooms).

You can hire your own taxi too, and can contact us for directions or any assistance.

At the accommodations you will meet the maintenance in charge who will provide you the keys to your room, some basic instructions, and also will guide you on how to get to school. Volunteers, staying at FFLV Accommodations, in-case plan to leave the accommodation for a few days, are required to inform the Accommodations In-charge about their absence. This is in accordance with the "C-Form" regulation.

Once you reach FFLV!

There are two school locations.

1. One in Vrindavan, Chaitanya Vihar (generally where you will start off, this houses the nursery, school, convenience shop, medical room, sewing center and administrative offices.)
2. Second school Kikinagla, catering from 1st grade-8th grade. This also houses

the hospital, an organic farm, paper recycling plant and a goshala (cow shelter).

Once you've had a tour of the school, we will put you in the nursery, simply because it's the best part of the school which will allow you to get a feel of the school!

The school summer timings are 8.30am – 3pm, Monday to Saturday and winter timings are 9.00am – 3pm, Monday to Saturday.

8.30 am- Assembly (this is mandatory for the volunteers to attend.

The children enjoy you taking part and dancing with them!:-))

9 – 12.15 pm – Academic classes' start- these are sectioned into 45min classes.

12.15-1.00 – Lunch

1.00-3.00 – Elective classes and extra activities Please note timings often fluctuate.

Other projects

Cleaning the streets! – Often there is cleaning going on in the town which you can help with. We will help you co-ordinate with the right person.

Kitchri Distribution – You can help to distribute food every day to the poor children at 5/5.30pm at the school.

Eating

MVT (M-Su, closed from 3:30-6:30pm) The restaurant, located two floors up in the MVT compound (just behind the ISKCON temple), is very popular and on the expensive side. It features a full menu of pure vegetarian, lightly spiced foods (Prasad) both Indian and continental, including fresh pizza and lasagna from the pizza oven. Expect to spend 150-300 rupees per person for a full, satisfying meal. Closed in the summer.

Govinda's Pure vegetarian cuisine (Prasad), located in the Krishna-Balaram temple compound. Closed in the afternoons, open in summer.

Dhanuka Ashram The hotel's excellent in-house restaurant offers an authentic all-you-can-eat, pure vegetarian *thali* or local variety plate for only 75 rupees per person.

Khushboo A brand new establishment, the menu is huge, though the photos along the top do not depict the actual menu items. Make sure and ask before ordering anything that might be spicy. Depending on the time of day you go, the staff might be excellent.

Apart from those mentioned above, many other restaurants have mushroomed recently all over Vrindavan. You can choose according to your taste and likeness.

Weather

Summer- temperatures are between 22°C (71°F) and 52°C (126°F).

The winter has a low of 4°C (40°F) and a high of 25°C (77°F). It will be very cold in the winter, from the end of November to mid-February so you will need warm clothing.

The rainy season is from the end of June to September.

Shopping

Vrindavan is better known for its temples than its shopping! But if you are looking for clothes to buy, which are traditional for the local area, Loi Bazar is the place to go. Get a rickshaw from outside the ISKCON temple and it should cost no more than 20-30 rupees per person. It might cost slightly more if you are returning later at night (the market is open until 9pm). There is also a wholesome store attached to our FFL guesthouse, which is about a 15 minute walk from Neem Bhavan, and 5 minutes from the ISKCON Temple. At Wholesome, you can pick up toiletries, organic vegetables (grown at the FFLV farm), and other convenient knick knacks.

Local Attractions

Vrindavan is a holy town, so there are many people here throughout the year on pilgrimage. There are over 5000 temples in the town. If you do want to visit the local temples, we can help you plan trips around the town and out of Vrindavan also.

Here is a list of a few other things which might make life a little easier whilst you are here:

SIM CARD – This can be purchased at Welcome Centre in ISKCON as well as in some shops opposite the ISKCON temple.

You will need your passport in order to purchase a SIM card.

INTERNET – There are several internet cafes in the area. Welcome Centre at ISKCON also provides internet services. There are some across the street from the ISKCON temple, where you can get internet services as well as buy internet stick. He can also sell you a router for your laptop if you need internet at home

BANK – there 2-3 ATMs located around ISKCON temple.

POST OFFICE – There is a post office located in the ISKCON compound.

Useful numbers

Paridhi: +91 7895002926

Sri Radhika: +91 7895002907

Partha Sarthi: +91 7895002917

Chitra: +91 7895002955

*Disclaimer: This information is a general guide only. It is not meant as a substitute for more thorough research on preparations for coming to India. Volunteers are advised to contact FFLV well in advance of their planned travel to check availability of accommodation.