

From Dana Lester; 2015 Conversational English Teacher – Boga/Vrithe

Hi Steve!

First off, thank you so much for this opportunity to go to Albania, a country I barely knew of before your class. I had wanted to travel and do an abroad trip for a long time-- since making connections and friendships with exchange students in high school. This trip really turned out to be the perfect experience to interact and become immersed into a very different culture.

As you probably know my experience in Vrithe was almost picture perfect. The kids really connected with Adina and me, their knowledge of English was good enough to go beyond just teaching English and into my health lessons. Violeta and Rob were welcoming and loving like I've never seen hospitality. I had some of my favorite memories of this year there in Vrithe. I was blown away by the enthusiasm the kids had when we taught them how to make bracelets, when we talked about fruits and vegetables! When we brought them dental supplies. They were so thankful and excited! Some even came back the next day and asked for more dental supplies for their younger brother or sister. It was very rewarding and touching.

Best,

Dana Lester

From: Charlotte Roehmer; 2011 Conversational English Teacher, Boga

Boga, Albania, nestled in a valley between mountains that cut through the clouds, preserves a way of life, simple and traditional, where petty first world problems dissipate in the mountain air. It's a place where people take the cows for walks, leave the dogs tied up, and greet you with unmatched hospitality.

During my time there I felt like more than a welcome guest. The people I stayed with treated me as family, and I truly felt as though I were a part of it, and still do.

The children in Boga loved being in school, and working with them was so much fun. They have good attitudes, limitless enthusiasm and curiosity for learning. Some were trickier to keep focused, but they all meant well and were the sweetest kids. By the end of two weeks it felt as though they had made significant progress in their English skills.

Steve is a wonderful travel companion and educator, and the individuals involved in the Albanian Alps Institute really care about education and improving the quality of life for the children and their families. For a small but tenacious organization to be making such integral changes is inspiring, and being able to contribute is a great opportunity for students.

To live in the United States, blessed as it may be, is to live with blinders on. Having the chance to see the United States and the world from the perspective of a developing country is a great gift. Teaching English with AAI is an opportunity to develop global awareness as a young person and maybe be shaken awake from our circumstances, if only for a moment, to see a bigger picture. Organizations like AAI create more world-wide connections, however small, that strengthen a global network, decrease human distance, and help developing nations transition actively into a changing future.

Albania was a life changing adventure, learning experience, and a brief immersion into a culture one would normally never see. The connections made with the people I met traveling alone and through AAI transcend all differences, national borders, and language barriers to connect on a human level. For that I am forever grateful.

From: Eric Saylor; 2011 Conversational English Teacher, Vrithe

This past summer, I spent the month of July with Steve and the Albanian Alps Institute (AAI) in the villages of Albania teaching conversational English to young children. After taking Steve's sustainability class in the winter, I decided that traveling to Albania would be exciting and abnormal for any college student. The decision to stray from the norm of my peers was an excellent decision I will never forget. I boarded the plane with the expectations that I will be immersed in a completely foreign society hoping I'll board the return flight with understanding of another culture. What I failed to realize at that time was how much I'd learn about my own society and myself. Sitting in a village teaching eager children my own language felt easy and thrilling at first, but then I came to realize I literally was making a difference for some of these far less fortunate children. In America, we lose sight of some of the simpler goals such as basic education. To be able to provide several classes of children with some simple foundations of English brought a new light and understanding to how fortunate I really am here in my insulated and furnished home with steady electricity.

AAI & Steve bring hope and a reason to learn to all of the people within the village community. I was able to meet a lot of important people within the community, from school directors to the head of their educational district. From all of those people, I could see such a great appreciation for what Steve is doing and even for me being there volunteering my time. Never have I met a collective society that harbors such great hospitality and friendliness to foreign people. I showed up knowing no one but left knowing I won't forget some of the people I met.

Whether you're reading this letter to go to Albania to have the same experience I did or donate money toward a fantastic cause, I recommend you do. I passed up summer internship opportunities and will never regret the decision I made. You'll never experience such explicit differences of life nor see such a great appreciation for what seems so simple. As I would assume you would also, I left with a greater appreciation for American life and a greater understanding of world cultures. AAI has sparked my interest in global traveling and given my insight into others lives I could have never had in any other way. I recommend Steve. I recommend AAI. I recommend experiencing the Albanian culture and daily life to truly understand how fortunate we are.

From: Jake Elliot; 2011 Conversational English Teacher, Vrithe

This last summer I took a trip to Albania through AAI. I was looking to do something with my summer that had a greater purpose than just working some seasonal job. Through Albanian Alps Institute I was given an opportunity to do just that. For three weeks I lived in a small village in northern Albania by the name of Vrithe. While there I lived with a family and formed relationships that I hold close to me. My main purpose for going to Albania was to be a teacher. While in the village I taught English classes six days a week for about four hours a day. This was a very rewarding experience. Not only is teaching the young village kids super fun but meeting everyone in the village and soaking up a new culture is a great way to widen your spectrum of the world. I was nervous to start this adventure but with the assistance of Steve Cook it was a very smooth process. Steve met with me on multiple occasions to make sure I was comfortable with everything, and he helps you as much or as little as you want to ensure a positive and successful trip. If you are interested in a fun and rewarding new experience I highly recommend seeking out information about AAI. This is a life experience that I will never forget and will always be thankful for my opportunity to do such an amazing thing for kids who are less fortunate than many. What amazed me most about my three week stint in Vrithe was not how much I brought to the village but what I took away from it.

