

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

CHRIS RAYNER, COLCHESTER PREP & HIGH SCHOOL



Year 7 bushcraft residential at Cuffley.

Each issue, we'll be chatting with an Educational Visits Coordinator to find out what they've been up to, what their current priorities and pressures are, and to get their top tips on how to ace it as an EVC.

This term we caught up with Chris Rayner, EVC and Head of Outdoor Learning and Global Enrichment.



What are the highlights of your ed visits year so far?

My favourite has to be our bushcraft residential at Cuffley. It's an immersive experience for our year 7 students, where they can connect with nature and learn outdoor skills. We run it at the beginning of term – about 2 weeks in – to help build relationships early on. It's a really memorable experience for everyone and a great foundation for future educational visits.

Why do you think it works so well?

The ancient woodland environment and the back-to-nature ethos of a Bushcraft Co residential are a powerful combination. We jump straight into fire skills training – they need to learn quickly, as cooking lunch depends on being able to start a fire. Once the students realise that they have to depend on themselves (and each other) they throw themselves into the experience. They learn about sustainable forestry skills and use the resources around them to build shelters to sleep in overnight.

About two thirds of our year 7s choose to sleep under the stars and some want to stay forever – that's the power of connecting with nature!

What are your objectives for the residential?

I want the students to come away from this with a sense of achievement and inner resilience. 99 per cent of the group have never experienced anything like this before so we're asking a lot of them, but supporting them too. It's amazing the difference you see in young people – the environment really brings them out of themselves.

As an EVC I want to build the foundations for future residential and adventurous activities.

I'm responsible for our DofE scheme too and I think we'll see more students taking on the challenge now they've got a taste for the wild. In one case, a year 7 student was so inspired by their experience that they threw themselves into DofE – they're in year 11 now and already completing their Gold Award.

This issue we're thinking about the environment. Is this a priority for you when organising educational visits?

It's a balance with budgets and other priorities but we do what we can. In some areas we're doing more on the school site, like English or language productions, which means less travel by coach.

Our curriculum visits have become much more localised and we run trips to sustainability projects like wind farms. On our Bushcraft residential we're really focused on leaving no trace and there is a strict reusable policy too – it teaches the students to think about their impact on the environment and how to minimise it. We've also got an Eco Club at school that looks at ways we can reduce our impact across all school activities.

What do you think are the biggest pressures on schools running educational visits at the moment?

I think sustainability will rise up the list but for now, it's got to be school and family budgets.

Seven years ago, the cost of a residential trip was around £100 a day and now it's £150. That's £250 more for a 5-day trip adding to the financial pressure on families. Like many other schools we're having to find ways to avoid cost increases while still giving our students the right kind of experiences. We can look to the UK for coastal experiences where students can sail or surf, but it does have to be a balance.

Part of my role is global enrichment; we have an exchange with schools in Chile – I want our students to be able to see the world and experience cultures first-hand, not just on screen.

After more than seven years in post, you must be an expert in all things ed visits now, surely?

I've definitely put in the hours and I'm pretty confident in applying the guidance to make sure we're compliant on all types of visit, but I'm not complacent. If I have questions or need advice, I always reach out to our educational visits adviser at EVOLVE Advice. I appreciate their expertise and collaborative approach. In fact, often just by talking through a problem, I realise that I already knew the solution – I just needed to be able to walk it through with someone.

I share EVOLVE Advice's philosophy that there is too much bureaucracy in educational visits and that we need to focus on how to give young people enriching experiences within acceptable levels of risk. I see my role as an EVC as enabling educational visits and an important part of that is balancing the risks with the benefits.

What have you got coming up next?

Our visits programme continues right up to the end of term. Still to come is a combined Woods and Whitewater residential in Lee Valley and Cuffley, followed by a trip to Beam House in Devon where we'll be back on the water for a surfing trip with our year 5 and 6s. As a PE teacher, I'm in my element on these types of trips!

Finally, what has been your all-time favourite visit?

It's hard to beat three days canoeing the Ardeche through a limestone gorge before jumping on a yacht and sailing off into the Mediterranean Sea...



Year 9 battlefields visit.