

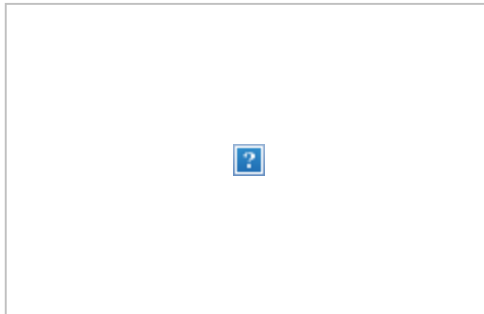
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**LARGE PRINT** / Standard Print.Article: *Not the average school trip*

## Not the average school trip



*Laura Hemmati, on the left, and a friend*

TRYING HARD not to slip, I ran up the narrow, steel staircase and out onto the deck of the ferry from Mull to Iona. The turquoise water was so clear and the sun so warm and bright we could have been in the Mediterranean. This was very unusual, as late September is the start of the gale season. My classmates and I gazed in awe at the majestic Abbey, as we docked and disembarked, to be met by an enthusiastic and rosy-cheeked Canadian minister called Nancy.

We watched in silence as our luggage was hauled onto a trailer and driven off ahead of us. Nancy gave us a welcoming smile and beckoned us to gather round. “Welcome to Iona,” she said, inviting us to look out at the breathtaking scenery behind her, “I hope you all have a fabulous time here and learn much about living in a strong Christian community for your assignments. I’m going to lead you all to the MacCleod Centre where you shall all be staying. Perhaps your Religious and Philosophy teacher has already mentioned that you’ve come at a very special time of year. We are currently hosting a Buddhist-Christian conference and you will all be given a chance to speak to the two nuns who are holding it, Sister Isabel and Ani Lhammo, later on in the week.”

The delightful Nancy continued to brief us on the coming week as she began to lead us away from the jetty and along one of Iona’s few roads, passing houses, fields and the ruined nunnery, which is now a beautiful garden. Seeing the Abbey up close is truly amazing. It is an ancient and beautiful building and we were happy to discover the MacCleod Centre on a slope directly above it. Our class of thirteen girls and one boy filed through the large entrance of the “Mac”, past our neatly laid out luggage in the hallway and into the common room, where we were greeted by friendly staff and freshly baked flapjacks.

The staff mainly consisted of young volunteers on a Christian year of service; they were a congregation of very polite and energetic youth, from many different Christian backgrounds and traditions. The diversity of people on Iona is something very refreshing. The community works to raise awareness of the world’s problems, whether it be drawing up petitions to stop the destruction of rainforests, or selling fair trade chocolate in the community shop. Whatever the issue at hand, they work hard together in such a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, the like of which I have only seen before in Bahá’í communities.

The days that passed were truly remarkable. Good things just kept on happening. For the whole week the weather was glorious – warm enough even, to swim in the Atlantic. For the first time in my life I saw wild dolphins, seals, sharks and whales. I prayed together with

my classmates sharing Bahá’í writings with them and discovering talents, views and qualities in them I had never observed before. I was given the chance to learn about Christian and Buddhist culture by attending services and talks, and for the first time in my life I found myself answering questions about my Faith, giving clear and satisfying answers in a way that I had never managed to do before.

Little did I know: I was still yet to have one of the most powerful and spiritual experiences of my life.

To my class's great surprise, by Wednesday morning, it became apparent that we were expected to hold that evening's service. I couldn't help the wide grin that spread over my face as I remembered my actions on the previous Friday afternoon before we began our journey. I had spent that whole afternoon preparing a selection of Bahá'í writings under every topic I could think of: Unity, Love, Justice, Spiritual Growth and many others, in case I found a chance to use them. Given that we had so little time to prepare, I gladly offered my services at every available opportunity – adding writings from many other religions on our decided theme – Unity.

The day that lay ahead of us was hectic, but enjoyable and we arranged to come together in the afternoon to see how our service would take shape. As I watched a friend's red pen sweep across the whiteboard and the evening's programme take shape, I became more and more aware of how often my name, Laura, appeared in capital letters. I tried not to think of it too much, but instead busied myself in preparation. The hours raced past, and in what seemed like the blink of an eye I was standing upon the great grey flagstones of the Abbey in front of a microphone, rehearsing what everyone had worked so hard to prepare.

We ran through the whole service and then retreated to a small room holding each other closely in a nervous circle upon the cold floor. I watched as some of my classmates cried quietly. They were so nervous! Christians come on pilgrimage from all over the world to Iona for its famous services – and there we were – a normal group of teenagers, feeling the burden of great responsibility. We wanted so much to give a service no one would forget.

I thought and thought about what I could do to comfort my friends. I'm comfortable standing up to read, pray and speak with large numbers of Bahá'ís, but many of the others had no such experience. We could hear people beginning to fill the pews. Then I began to think of all the Bahá'í dance workshops I'd watched and taken part in and what I have seen so many of my friends do to prepare for a performance. I quickly ran through the words and our whole group began to sing "God is sufficient unto me..."

The words sounded so strange coming from school friends but it was wonderful to see the tears dry and our faces all filled with a little bit of confidence and calm.

Soon the service began. The Abbey steadily filled to the sound of the live African drumming, which slowly died down as I walked out into the centre of the building and looked upon the great sea of eyes watching expectantly. Hundred of things were going through my mind, one of which was the realisation of the T-Shirt I was wearing. It was a Bahá'í T-shirt, bought earlier that year at summer school. There and then, two hundred people were watching me and reading the green letters, "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens – Bahá'í Faith".

That evening, two hundred people saw my T-shirt, they heard readings and prayers from the Bahá'í Writings and the Báb, and saw a dance I had taught the others from Bahá'í dance workshops. Then everyone came together to make a human circle and wish each other peace. I felt so humble, that I had been given the privilege to share my beliefs with so many in the most extraordinary circumstances. I could not possibly explain the emotion that surged through me on that night and still does now whenever I think about it. As I offered wishes of peace to those around me, a small Australian woman took my hand and I felt it tremble at the touch of her smooth skin and the sound of her soft voice. "I am so moved," she said, "by the face of Jesus I see in you. Your religion is surely something pure and special." I could no longer stop myself from crying. The felt that I was channelling some great energy that poured out of me. Something that was truly wonderful and beyond my control. I don't know what to call it, I kept thinking "Why me?" Never before have I felt the power of Bahá'u'lláh's love for mankind so strongly, or felt the satisfaction of teaching so completely in my life.

My relationships with school friends and our attitudes towards each other have changed dramatically since returning home. My classmates and I found each other in a new and unexpected situation – from the normal social pressures and tensions of a normal school life.

unusual situation where the normal social pressures and barriers of everyday school life were stripped away. We've become closer than we would have ever dared and learnt more about each other than we would have thought possible. One girl, who had for a long time been a convinced atheist, told us her experiences of Iona were proof enough of God. In the past I have felt that Bahá'ís are very alone in their concern for the wellbeing of humanity and the earth, but by being given the time to speak with such fascinating people as the Buddhists and Christians whom I met that week, I was happily proved wrong.

A simple school field trip to Iona turned out to be a lifechanging event for me and I am now very aware of the potential in everyone.

Laura Hemmati



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