

Wintertime at Hopeland

Category: Our travel blog in English
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One day earlier as planned we arrived to Hopeland. Already hundred meters from the gate dogs started to greet us. From small to big, gold to red, dotted or striped, it was like a circus. In total 115 dogs call this villa their home, and we got to know them all. Some dogs stay there for two weeks, some two years and some their whole life. The beginning was not easy for us – our room had mold, the whole house smelled like a wet dog, there was dog poop laying on the floor and at the first sight everything seemed so unhygienic. The first three days were the toughest, we were sure that we will stay maximum one month and that's it. There were so many rules to follow and different pack of dogs who should not be let together! The dogs who live in the house are divided into six rooms, then there are 12 kennels outside, an extra house with two more rooms and some dogs live outside in the garden the whole time. Twice a day we had to clean all the rooms, kennels and the garden and feed all the dogs. Feeding was as challenging as the cleaning. Many dogs get different type of food and different portion. Since most of the dogs who arrive to Hopeland are very sick, they also get various medication. This means you have to know the names of all the dogs. In total it took us three weeks to learn all the names and thereby master the feeding process. After few days we didn't notice the dog smell anymore, I removed the mold from our room and we felt comfortable.

In addition to feeding and cleaning I helped to fix everything that needed fixing. We worked five days a week from 8:00 in the morning until 22:00 in the evening. The best reward was to see how almost all the dogs started to trust us and approached us to have cuddles. Let me now describe you a typical working day at Hopeland.

Since we had to be ready at 8:00 we usually went to the kitchen at 7:30 to enjoy our coffee before everyone would wake up. In the big living room there are more than 20 dogs who sleep there during the night. They all greeted us and were so happy to see us like they haven't seen us for ages. I will not describe you how the room looked like after when 20+ dogs spent there 10 hours without getting out. At 8:00 we let the first dogs and kennels out and started to gather the dog poop/vomit, etc. so that they have more or less decent environment for feeding at

9:00. At 8:30 we bring the dogs who went out at 8:00 back in and let other dogs out so that everyone can go out before the feeding. The kennel change and room change were two different schedules that we had to pay in mind the whole day, from 8:00 to 21:30. These schedules and rules are all there to protect the dogs, if the wrong dogs get together it is the question of life and death. During our time there we had to separate many dog fights, clean their wounds and even bury dogs that left us due to the sickness or a human mistake.

Short before the feeding we had to separate the dogs even more, when it came to food, even the dogs who were otherwise best friends became enemies. We used the kitchen, bathrooms and corridors to separate the dogs. Here I have to mention that the dogs are incredibly smart and they have the daily schedule already written in them. Mostly we just had to open the bathroom door and even without saying the name the right dog went inside. This was also with room changing during the day, short before the change, dogs start to gather themselves in front of the door to go inside or outside. At 9:00 sharp, the feeding began. Every room was fed one after another and the sequence was very important.

First after the feeding we had a breakfast and a second coffee. Of course we were not the only volunteers there. During our stay we met many cool people who love the dogs as much as we. There were times when it was 9 of us and times when it was just 4 of us. After the breakfast we divided the tasks for the morning cleaning. Every room in the house where dogs lived, also the balcony and the extra house had to be swept, washed with bleach, then let to be dried and then washed again with a good smelling liquid. The kennels and garden had to be cleaned from poop and fresh water had to be filled in all the bowls and buckets. All the 115 dog food bowls had to be washed (without dishwasher), all the blankets and sheets on the sofas and towels on the floor had to be washed. The giant washing machine ran the whole day, every day. After the first cleaning session of the day, we had a time for ourselves, mostly we stayed outside with the dogs or took some of them for a walk with a leash. During this time of the day, we also had to bring the trash away which was approximately 30 kg per day. The nicest time of the day was afternoon when the young dogs and puppies were allowed to go out play. They dug holes, chewed tree branches and plastic toys, ran like crazy and rehearsed "serious" fighting with each other. At 17:00 o'clock the second feeding began, followed again with cleaning. Every evening some of us cooked the dinner and we always ate together and had long talks and a lot of laughter. The fridge was always full. Every week we made a list with all the volunteers what we would like to have and the owner of Hopeland, Natasha, went and bought it for us. She took very good care of us. Also the cooking was always like a masterpiece, we never ate just plain pasta for dinner. Ted, one of the volunteers, was an amazing chef, he always did various dishes for vegetarians and non-vegetarians.

At 21:30 we brought in the last dogs and thereby was our day finished. Afterwards we still sat at the table for a while and talked, had a wine or beer, always laughed a lot and shared with each other what had happened during the day, because with 115 dogs – everyday is different. But around 23:00 o'clock we all went to bed as we were all tired of the long day and the next day we had to be ready again at 8:00.

Since there are thousands of street dogs in Greece and most of them are in a good shape the dogs who end up in Hopeland are those in very bad shape and those who would die if left on the street or are abandoned puppies. This of course makes it very expensive for Hopeland, the vet bills are enormous every month and in addition to helping them back to life, they also need to be sterilized. Not to mention the

food for all the dogs and volunteers, plus the water, electricity and heating on the winter. This is all done with the help of donations since the Greece government does not support any dog shelters.

For our joy we also said goodbye to many dogs who got adopted. Through a bigger network most of the dogs are going to Netherlands, Finland and Germany for adoption. Puppies are usually the ones who will not stay long in Hopeland.

In total we stayed there from until , twice as long as planned. During our stay we fell in love with all the dogs and only thinking of leaving brought tears in our eyes (you can imagine how hard the day was when we left). We learned so much about dogs, their behavior and hierarchy – about alpha dog and his role in the pack, about the symptoms of different illnesses, about the body language of dogs and how they communicate, how to approach dogs, how to calm them down, how to separate dog fights, etc.

If you are interested about Hopeland and would like to adopt a dog or support them with money or dog food, you can find more information from their LinkedIn (hopelandshelter) and Facebook (Hopeland Dog shelter) page. If you or you know someone who would like to go there and volunteer, contact Natasha or us with a comment down below. Please check out their social media for support.

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