

Student Article

My African Adventure: The experience as a whole

Charlotte Veale

Bath Spa University

During the summer of 2017, I spent one month volunteering at The Child of Mercy Orphanage (COMOC) in Mombasa, Kenya. I can honestly say that taking up the opportunity was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I had had no expectations of the trip, yet I became immersed in the wonderful, lively, beautiful and busy Kenyan culture and came back with very strong links to a new group of inspiring people on the other side of the world. Not only did this experience highlight how easy it is to take for granted the free education we have access to in the UK, or the endless supply of clean water, but it made me aware how much knowledge there is to learn, and all this happened simply by spending as little as one month in a foreign country.

My journey started on 27th June at a small local train station in Cornwall; four hours later I arrived at London Heathrow; the next stop was a busy port of Mombasa, where I arrived within approximately 20 hours, with a short change at Nairobi. I will never forget the wave of heat as I stepped off the plane looking for someone waiting to pick me up from the airport. Trying to find the lady I had arranged to meet, but had never seen before, was one of the most daunting parts of the trip. I was soon comforted when I sighted in a distance a handwritten piece of paper with my name on it “Charlotte”. I was welcomed with a friendly handshake and a beautiful smile by a lady called Jessy, who is the founder of the orphanage.

My first impressions of Mombasa were pure excitement, amazement and friendliness. After a short taxi ride we arrived at a port; there, along with 30 other cars and around 400 people, we boarded a ferry which took us across the water to a village called Likoni, which, as I was to discover soon, is a truly amazing place. The orphanage was located in the heart of this town, only a five-minute walk from a beach and surrounded by hundreds of market stalls which would open at the crack of dawn and close when the sun started setting. The lovely smiling faces of the children as I entered the orphanage immediately made me feel so welcome. I was introduced straight away to everyone and the staff, including the helpers who the children would call Aunties and Uncles. Jessy showed me to my room and the volunteers’ area where other volunteers were already staying. Seeing I had missed a whole night due to the time difference, I was offered the afternoon to sleep, but I was more interested in exploring the culture straight away!

So, instead of having a rest and only within a few hours of arriving in Mombasa, I was already travelling into the heart of the town on the back of mopeds, which cost three pence a trip, and Tuk Tuks, which fill the streets with colour and noise. Jessy and the manager, James, gave me a tour of the busy city and took me to a local Western supermarket where I was able to stock up on bottled water and home comforts.

I soon settled in to the Kenyan life and built really close relationships with the children and staff. I loved waking up at five o’clock every morning listening to the prayers at the local Mosque being played through a speaker and hearing the children sing together before starting their day at school at six o’clock. I soon established a routine and my day would always start

with a cold salt-water shower and fresh Mandazi, which is fried triangles of bread. Once the children had left for school, I would help the Aunties to hand wash all the children's bedding and clothes in big buckets of collected rain water using green soap and a brush. By the time this and any other jobs were done, I would be collected in a Tuk Tuk and taken to the local primary school called Timbwani Baptist Primary School. I volunteered as a teaching assistant in a reception class where the ages of the children ranged from 1 to 6. I would arrive at the school every day with one of the Uncles and hand out porridge (when there were enough funds) to the children at break time. Soon after, the next class would begin and I would supervise the children, by marking their books, playing games, creating activities and singing. After that I would be collected, sometimes in a Tuk Tuk and other times on a moped.

I was very lucky to be given two days off a week to explore Mombasa and I feel extremely fortunate to have spent so much time with Jessy. She would take me to so many different places, thanks to which I was able to get completely immersed in the Kenyan culture. I was shown beautiful places, like Diani Beach, the Fort Jesus Museum, Jessy's family's homes, numerous markets, historical places, lots of beaches and so much more. Around half way through my stay in Kenya, more volunteers arrived, and I was lucky enough to spend time with them and to take part in a safari weekend. We got to spend three days in two different national parks: Tsavo East and Amobseli, where we stayed in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. This weekend was a completely different experience to the everyday life at the orphanage. We had the most incredible time and saw so much wildlife! We soon returned from the short trip away and settled back into the Mombasa life.

What have I learnt?

I have learnt so much from this experience in Kenya and there isn't one day that goes by when I don't reflect on the time spent there. I have learnt to appreciate family, education, the right to travel freely throughout the world, to be independent, to learn how to adapt to a new routine in an unknown culture, but most importantly to appreciate the privileged life I am lucky enough to live in the UK.

Education is valued so highly in Kenya and seeing how much pride the children take in the right to an education is so uplifting to experience. Every child that I was lucky enough to meet, looked forward to school, tried so hard, both with their studies at school and when doing homework, and this is because it is such a privilege for them to be able to attend classes.

I learnt a lot from one particular girl named Susan, who would arrange to arrive at school at five o'clock in the morning and would then return home at nine o'clock at night. I have never met anyone with so much determination to gain a valuable education in the way she did. One of her many goals is to be accepted to the University of Bristol in England and I hope that one day she is able to achieve this.

What did I love?

I loved having the opportunity to immerse myself in a completely different culture surrounded by so many friendly people and I returned with a passion and love for Kenya. It's often said that first-time visitors to Africa either love it or hate it. Although the concept of Africa is so broad, I feel that, in general, it will be a place that I will return to many times throughout my life and forever love.

Having previously visited South Africa, I can already see the differences between the two places and I believe that this is one of the many traits of Africa; there are so many disparities and differences between the countries, with each one bursting with culture and so much to offer.

I also loved being able to make new friends from different countries. During my time in Kenya, there were three other volunteers, one from Sweden and two from Germany. Just within one month, I made such lovely friends and I now have many memories with these people to cherish.

What were the challenges and what would I do differently?

The thought of spending one month away in a foreign country can be very intimidating, but the best advice that I would give to someone going to take part in an international exchange, volunteering or studying abroad would be to make the most of every single day. My time in Mombasa flew by so quickly and before I knew it, I had to make transport arrangements to get to the airport to fly back home and make plans for my last few days.

There were moments of the day when I would not have any jobs to do, but every time this happened (although it was not often), I would explore the area and the local beaches, or speak to the people around me about their lives. It was when speaking to these people that I found out so much information, or got to see more of the area, making memories, but most importantly, learning!

With regards to being away from home for such an amount of time, I did not find this a huge challenge, but of course there were moments when I reflected and thought of home. Throughout these times, I would make sure that I was not alone and that I was joining any possible activities, such as helping the children with their homework or helping the Uncles prepare the evening meal for the children and staff.

There really is very little that I would do differently if I were to have this opportunity again. The only minor thing that I would perhaps change is to research the area that you are going to more. I did research, and read the Lonely Planet guide on Mombasa before I went, as it is always handy to know as much information as possible about the area, such as previous tourists' experiences but that didn't seem sufficient.

What advice would I give?

The most important advice that I would give to someone taking part in an experience like this would be not to overthink but to take every opportunity that you get offered. Most of the time, the best memories that you will make are from the unexpected and unplanned moments. Each day that I spent there was jam-packed and full of amazing activities, which meant that I had little time to sit quietly alone. Because each day was so busy, the time went by so quickly and I remember telling myself often that 'I have ages left' or 'I can do that another day' but so much changes when you are staying in a foreign country that you cannot predict what experience you will have each day, and for that reason, when learning to live in another country, be spontaneous!

The second piece of advice that I would give is to write a day-to-day journal whilst you are there. I wrote down as much as I possibly could each day, for example, what I did, what I ate and how I was feeling. It has been amazing to re-read this journal since returning and share my thoughts with family and friends, as it's so easy to forget the details.

My time in Mombasa was truly incredible, and I hope to return at the end of my degree to see the progress that COMOC will have made and what the children will have achieved. I had the best time of my life and brought back hundreds of memories with me. I would truly recommend this experience to everyone and would like to thank everybody at the orphanage for all the hard work that they do every day!

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

charlotte.veale16@bathspa.ac.uk