

The Volunteer Projects

I always wanted to go volunteering in Africa so decided last summer was the time to go. I did lots of research and eventually found a fantastic charity called The Volunteer Projects (TVP) who organise volunteering in Tanzania in east Africa. The volunteer house was located in a town called Moshi which is at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro and close to the Serengeti. Volunteers stayed in a volunteer house where breakfast and dinner were provided each day. The house had basic facilities compared to Ireland but was fantastic by local standards. The town regularly had black outs, we had 5 days of no electricity in three weeks. The volunteers were mainly Irish and we had a volunteer coordinator in the house who brought us to all our placements for the first two days until we were comfortable finding our own way there, he also helped if anyone was sick or needed anything. We had hot showers (when we had electricity), western toilets (a luxury in Moshi) and washed our clothes by hand in buckets of cold water, I am now a hand washing expert!

They had lots of options for types of volunteering within the town, including teaching in a nursery, primary or secondary school, working in a detention centre for young offenders, working in an orphanage, teaching football to local children, construction and others. I was unsure which to pick so eventually decided on teaching in a nursery school in the morning and volunteering in an orphanage in the afternoon. Both positions were very fulfilling and varied, and the people of Tanzania were so kind and welcoming. Education is highly valued in Tanzania and parents sacrifice a lot for their children to go to school.

A nursery school is a junior primary school for 3 to 6 year olds. I was teaching the oldest class who were six year olds. The children sit three to a bench in a tiny classroom which had no electricity, door or glass in the windows. The rooms consisted of desks, benches, a blackboard, one chair and dirt floors. The teachers had no resources apart from one red pen and one piece of chalk, and the children had one copy and one pencil each. They were all delighted with my contribution of pens, chalk, pencils, erasers, rulers, sharpeners and copies. There were three classes in my school which had only opened five months earlier. The rooms were about the size of an ensuite bathroom, with 20 children in each class. There were two drop toilets in the school and if child wanted to go to the toilet or come up to the board, two or three other children would have to stand up to let them out of their seat. The small class size was due to size restrictions of the classrooms, as lots of other schools in the area had 50 to 60 children in a class. The teachers were all newly qualified and were working for free to gain experience and hopefully get a paid teaching job in a year or two. All teaching is done by rote learning, and the children study four subjects, English, maths, Swahili (which is their first language), and science.

The school day was 8am to 12pm with a 40 minute break in the middle where the children play outside. After the break the children all get a small cup of watery porridge, one woman worked all morning making this porridge over an open fire getting water from an outdoor tap. I was told that for most of them this was one of their two meals a day. Unfortunately some days the school didn't have money to buy porridge so the children didn't get any and were sent home 20 minutes early. The parents must pay for their children to go to school and sometimes did not have enough money. I taught two lessons a day, an hour each, trying to introduce some fun ways of teaching, educational games and songs, and differentiation. This was hard to do in a tiny classroom but I did the best I could! I brought lots of English and maths books which I bought at home and gave to the teachers, they really appreciated these as they had no books at all. These were useful for ideas for teaching and also for differentiation. I read some stories to the children, most of them had never seen a book before.

With the basic facilities available, the children had a good standard of maths. Tanzanian schools are taught through English even though their first language is Swahili. The teachers were not fluent in English and the children could understand English but not speak it yet as they were young. I learnt so much from the teachers while I was there, mainly how to teach with basic resources and facilities. At home, I complain when my whiteboard is out of sync while in Africa I was learning to deal with the heat, dust, and chalk covered clothes. The volunteers were covered in dust and dirt all the time, as the roads are made of a reddish brown dust, while the children and local teachers arrived in sparkling white shirts and socks with sandals daily, I still don't know how they did it!

At 12pm, school finished and the volunteers walked through the dust to the town centre for some much earned lunch. As we walked through town, we would see local women washing clothes in the river, women and girls carrying water in big containers in their heads, usually with a small baby tied onto their backs. In Tanzania, women work very hard each day, while men are often seen standing around in groups and chatting.

After lunch, I went to my second placement which was an orphanage on the outskirts of the town. I had to get a dala dala, which is a local type of bus converted from a van, this cost about 12cent for one trip and was an experience in itself. They never left until they were full, and it could never be too full. If space ran out, you could be handed a baby, small child or bag of groceries to hold. The orphanage had children aged from 1.5 to 17 years. The children slept three to a single mattress with 18 children in each small room. They had basic facilities of two squat toilets for over 50 children and no fridge but did have some luxuries including a washing machine and two cold showers. While these conditions sound unimaginable to Irish people, they had a good standard of accommodation, food and life in the orphanage, and the children were very happy and well looked after.

I was not teaching in the orphanage, I was helping out with daily tasks. My duties there included helping serve the meals to the children, they had no tables or chairs so sat on the ground to eat their meals. For dinner they often had rice and beans with a slice of orange for dessert. I also washed dishes, hung up washing, cleaned the kitchen, washed the floors, helped to prepare meals by chopping vegetables or helping to make a local dish called ugali, which looks like mashed potatoes but is made from maize. I tidied bedrooms and played games. The younger children loved to be held so I usually had one of them in my arms during the afternoon. I bought lots of games and things in Ireland which I brought over, some favourites were spinning tops, finger puppets, stickers, face paints, nail varnish (for the girls!), colouring books and crayons, balloons and story books. Each day I tried to do one fun activity with the children. They were mainly orphans or had family who could not look after them, and while they all went to school they loved to have some games and activities for the afternoon. I became very fond of all the children, in particular the youngest ones who were adorable. The teenage children could all speak English so it was nice to chat to them about their lives and school also.

The orphanage hired a teacher to come in and teach the younger children, up to about age 6, and then they went out to school after that. The teacher was free to help out in the afternoon so we got to know each other. I gave her lots of books, stickers, pencils, copybooks and story books to teach the children with which she was very grateful for. The children in the orphanage had such basic facilities but were so happy and friendly.

Malaria was a huge issue in the area, most volunteers took malaria tablets daily, used mosquito repellent and had mosquito nets around our beds. Most days we would hear of a new local person who was working in a school or orphanage who caught malaria, treatment for malaria cost about ten euro which was unaffordable to some people.

The whole experience was absolutely fantastic and I learnt so much about teaching while I was there. Tanzanian people made my time there unforgettable.

Article submitted by Louise Kirwan



