

## A Divided World

In September 2012, I jetted off into the unknown to teach in the Middle East, uncertain of the cultural differences, without knowing anyone there and unaware of what lay before me. I had applied for a career break and secured a job as a class teacher in Emirates International School. On arrival, I was collected by a driver from the school and was informed that the apartment I was due to live in was not quite ready. Soaring skyscrapers rising from the desert sands and lining the fourteen-lane Sheikh Zayad Road, futuristic flyovers, glitzy designer shopping malls, ornate mosques and a suffocating heat and stifling humidity greeted me. As my apartment was not yet ready, I was driven to luxurious five star Grand Habtoor Hotel in the Marina area of Dubai where my room in the tower overlooked the gulf sea, sandy beach and pool resort. The cost per night was 300 euro, I was thankful I wasn't picking up the tab!

The next day, I met the class I would be teaching that year. They were a Grade One class; equivalent of our Senior Infants. They were mainly Pan Arabic children from Jordan, Syria, Egypt and also children from Asia. The school had almost two thousand students enrolled from three years of age to eighteen years. The school was located in Emirates Hills which was their answer to the Hollywood's Beverly Hills, only plusher! Trying to pronounce some of the children's names correctly proved an initial challenge as I tried to get my tongue around Abdulraheman, Faisal, Atiksh, Abubaker Al Badri, Zyed Sultanali, Hussein Al Bahaar, Zyed Shivdev, the list went on. Islamic and Arabic as daily timetabled subjects was another adjustment as the children went off to their various lessons. The children attended these specialist lessons as is Muslim school's requirements. Hearing Arabic being spoken as the first language of many of the children and teachers was a nice change '*Sabah al-khaya*', they greeted me. '*Sabah al-nuur*', I learned to respond. If a child fell or complained of a sore tummy during the school day, instead of the teacher dealing with the situation, the child was immediately sent to the on-site school doctor or nurse for inspection.

Another thing that was strange was teaching on a Sunday! In Muslim countries, the working week is Sunday to Thursday; Friday being their holy day. As we lived within a short distance from a mosque, we would hear the call to prayer five times a day, although it proved irritating being awoken by this call in the middle of the night; *Allāhu akbar* or Allah is the greatest. I had to ensure that I wore clothes that were light enough for the intense heat of the day during yard duty yet covered me from elbow to ankle. I also was religious at slathering factor fifty on my face in the morning and had my sun hat with me.

The fees for the school ranged between ten to fifteen thousand euro per year. School was big business and teaching was intense. Grade planning meetings and departmental meetings were held daily. Teachers lived in fear of the inspections from the KHDA, which is similar to the feared OFSTED inspectorate in Britain that teachers live and die by. Management was under immense pressure to raise standards as this meant the schools could charge higher school fees the following year. Teachers were to jump through all the hoops and pull outstanding lessons out of the bag, as well as producing a mountain of paperwork that would have equated to the size of a small forest, to appease the team of inspectors that would land in your classroom unannounced.

The children wanted for nothing. One five year old little girl in school insisted that she would not wear her 'Croc' shoes to school and demanded her Gucci shoes. Their personal nannies fetched and carried for them as their drivers whisked them off to their various after school play dates. *Fares*, a boy of five in Emirates International School had a love of all things Ferrari. He adorned the Ferrari schoolbag, pencil case, hat and lunchbox. He went to Ferrari World in Abu Dhabi every weekend. He was even driven by his own driver to school each day in his own personal Ferrari! His sister came to school with her driver in a purple hummer adorned with pink flowers. It really was a parallel universe in some ways!

For UAE National Day celebrations, the royal family in our sister school campus brought in their pet lions and tigers! Of course, they extracted their teeth and claws first, you have to be considerate! These animals can be seen with their heads out windows of the families range rovers as they speed down Sheikh Zayad Road. In one lesson, I remember teaching the difference between public and private places. I used the example of swimming pools being public but this idea was turned on its head as they children told me of their salubrious villas with personal outdoor and indoor swimming pools.

Although the wealth here was mesmerising, I was all too aware of the seedy undercurrent of modern day slavery that has built Dubai. Uncomfortably, you watched the emaciated and exhausted Indian labourers being bussed out to their out-of-view-of-the-tourists labour camps after a gruelling twelve hour shift in the blazing heat of the day for the equivalent of a few euro. Their living conditions were horrendous. Likewise, the shiny and happy class assistants we worked with were predominantly Filipino woman, who left their young children to come and work for a tenth of our wages. My own assistant has two children at home she hadn't seen in four years as she saved every penny of her meagre salary to give her children a better life. Heartbreaking.

In June, I travelled to Tanzania in Africa to volunteer for the summer in the Living Water Childrens' centre outside Arusha. Again, something of a pattern forming in my life, I was unaware of what lay ahead of me or what to expect as we touched down first in Kenya and then in Kilimanjaro Airport. The spectacular bird's-eye view the plane offered us of Mount Kilimanjaro was simply breath taking as we witnessed in close proximity the glaciers and snow-capped summit of the highest free standing mountain in the world! The freshness of the air after stifling desert heat was a welcome relief as we left the airport, as was the pace of life as young men and woman relaxed together under the shade of the beautiful greenery of the acacia trees that lined the country roadsides. It seemed a world away from the fast paced, materialistic life in Dubai. It was back to basics here.

We were transported to Living Water Children's Orphanage, in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro (after changing cars twice due to breakdowns). Living Water Children's Orphanage is a centre working to meet the needs of orphaned and abandoned children. Around half of the population of Tanzania live on less than one euro a day. Tanzania is one of the poorest nations in the world. Half of the population here lives at or below the poverty line without access to clean water and living in areas suffering from chronic shortages of food. In Tanzania, nearly one in ten children do not survive. HIV/AIDS, malaria, diarrhoea, pneumonia and malnutrition are all contribute to the high rate of child mortality.

The teachers at Living Water Centre welcomed us into their home and their hearts. 'Karibu' which was Swahili for 'Welcome' was used to greet us. We went with Mama, the head of the Orphanage, to the town of Arusha where we used donations to purchase food supplies for the orphanage, mainly rice and maize. As you entered the classroom the children stood up and chanted, "Education is the key of life. Good morning Teacher Tracy and how are you today?" The warmth and friendliness we were greeted with was humbling. It was a truly enriching and an honour to work with these people. They were welcoming, patient, kind, complimentary and became our friends. These teachers work for the equivalent of a couple of hundred dollars a month - and they are considered well off! They worked in small, under-resourced and unventilated classroom without electricity. The special bond and the interactions they had with the children were so special, choosing to play with them during school breaks. Mama and Hilda, who stayed with the children in the evening and night, were incredible woman, providing the fifty children with care, love and nurturing.



As we walked to school through the towering banana plantations and maize fields, providing us with natural air-conditioning, I thought back to the previous week in which I had sped to school on the fourteen wide lane motorway on Sheikh Zayad Road and the indoor chill and hum from the ever-present air conditioning machines. It was a world of difference. Our food went back to a cleaner diet as we ate fresh fruit from the local mango and papaya trees, home-grown chickens, cassava, maize and chapattis. The locals did double takes as we walked through the local village. Using the Swahili words we had learned, we bought fresh fruit for the children. We were charged us the tourist prices instead of the local prices of course. We would hear the word 'mzungo' which is the Swahili word for white person being exchanged between locals as they stared and pointed to our alabaster skin! They were also fascinated by our straight hair. One local man on the dala dala, which is the local transport (or a converted transit van emblazoned with a slogans such as Jesus the Saviour and blasting Bob Marley to the streets), took to rubbing our skin as he was so startled by our appearance.

As part of our work, we worked alongside the teachers and taught lessons to the classes. We played with the children after school. We distributed resources we had brought. We helped out with mealtimes and dished out the traditional food to the children. Meals were prepared on one ring over an open fire and children ate from broken bowls and chipped cups. I remember when Howha, a little girl of ten years, was asked what her favourite food was, she proclaimed, '*Chicken burger and chips*'. When she was asked where she had eaten that she laughed, '*Teacher, I have not eaten it silly, I saw a picture of it and thought I would love to eat this some day.*' How unfair, they had never eaten chicken, a food we consider so basic. They all agreed that the one thing they would love to taste was ice cream, the heat and lack of cooling facilities made this an impossibility on this trip although I still think I will get round to doing this on my next trip.

We used our own money to buy treats for the children although the cost of purchasing such western confectionary was significantly higher due to the low value of the Tanzanian shilling. I couldn't believe the smallest bar of chocolate or treat would cost over a dollar and how cheap and readily available they are in the western world. Of course, we had to buy fifty identical items so that each child received the same. They waited patiently in the line to receive the coveted treat. The appreciation and gratitude for this I will never forget. Even the teachers at the school were full of appreciation. It made a change from the usual chorus of '*I don't like that*' that we all too often hear when we present children from privileged backgrounds with the same. Watching the children savour the treats was such a humbling experience. First they would put it in their pocket and feel it between their fingers before returning it to its safe place. Then they might take it out and smell it a few times. After a while they would take one lick of the chocolate. Every morsel was savoured and enjoyed. I could not believe a simple sweet like a Rolo would take an hour or more to eat.

The highlight of my experience in Tanzania was taking the children to swimming to a pool in local hotel that catered for safari tourists. This was to be a truly magical day I will never forget and I know the other volunteers would agree with me! I have been to Disneyland and had not witnessed a fraction of the joy, rapture and glee there that we experienced that day in the small swimming pool. It was a special moment that moved us all and although it was a joyous for the children, it was bittersweet for us as I thought of the differences in our divided world and how unjust it was. People speak of the difficulty of making a difference and that idea of a one percent difference. Hearing the children squeal with joy and delight as they got used to the strange sensation of being immersed in water made the trip worthwhile.

We had to get used to the mantra '*This is Africa*' as the western concept of time became irrelevant. There was no hurry here, people always had time. '*Hakuna Matata*', was heard everywhere. 'No worries', here stress and time pressures ceased to exist! A ten am appointment could take place at four pm or even the next day. No one wore a watch or asked what time it was. If you commented on this, you were greeted with 'TIA', meaning 'This is Africa', there was no point getting stressed about it, you had to take life as it came. It reminded me of 'Thai time' whilst travelling in South East Asia. They seem to think westerners were slaves to their timepieces.

I also had the opportunity to visit a Masai village on the edge of the Serengeti that rested on land surrounded by nothing but sky and green savannahs. Some of the children at the orphanage were from a Masai tribe, you could tell as their faces would be branded by circular marks made from hot irons. Each Masai village is home to a single family; this particular village was home to over 90 people who lived in ten mud huts. I visited their mud hut 'classroom' and sang some songs and rhymes with them. I felt guilty teaching them my own language. They speak so many different languages, and teaching them mine made me feel like it was a superior language when everyday tribal languages in Africa die. There's nothing built up here, and there's so much landscape, it's not touched by humans at all. Everywhere you went, you wanted to help the people and at times your helplessness to do this would become overwhelming. A wise volunteer told us, 'You can do your bit, but you can't save Africa as long as the corruption exists'.

I didn't expect to fall in love with the kids, but they were the most inspiring and resilient humans I have come across. I had no expectations at all. I didn't think it would change my life but it did. The children and people here appreciated everything and lived in harmony, taking care of each other and taking on a family dynamic. There was not one incident of disharmony nor did I hear even one complaint from the children in my weeks here. The children cared for each other and minded each other as if they were blood related. It was truly humbling! Although there was a sense of vulnerability with the children, there was a happiness and harmony here that is not present in our modern day western world.

Nelson Mandela quoted *"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world"*. This quote was etched into the wall of the school as it was into the minds and hearts of the children. They hungered for knowledge and thus a chance to break the cycle of hardship and poverty they had endured. Education was their escape route, motivation was their vehicle. Their work-ethic and independence was inspiring.

On my last day, I emptied my luggage bag of the few personal possessions I had brought. I handed out my worn canvas shoes, flip-flops, socks, shorts, t-shirts, earrings, my torch, towel and other odds and ends. Shampoos and wash products were accepted gratefully. Everything had a use here, nothing was thrown away as it was passed on time and time again to a new owner. I felt a huge stab of guilt as I thought of the 150 euro worn runners I had thrown down the garbage chute of my apartment block the previous week. I thought sadly of the welcome home they would have received here.

My year teaching abroad takes me back to a time when a teacher told us to look at how big the world is on the map and that you can cover Ireland on the world map using with your one fingertip! We are a sheltered small island nation. Get out there and enjoy the world, it really is a global classroom! I wish to acknowledge my support for all the people who donated sponsorship money for this trip. Mile buiochas d'achan duine a thug tacaiocht dom.



Masai school



Masai classroom



Inside the classroom



Breaktime at LWC



Beautiful children at LWC



Waiting patiently for a Mi-wadi!





Flying the flag!



A special trip to a swimming pool