Tanzania
Dar es Salaam, Selous & Zanzibar

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When you announce to your family and friends that you want to go and spend six weeks on your own in Africa over the summer, the general response is: ‘Whoa? Really? Are you sure this is a good idea? That’s a really long time!’ and if you’re my friend Jack, a helpful extra comment of; ‘You know you’ll probably be captured by pirates right? And knowing you, you will cry,’ before he proceeded to email me the very useful ‘How to survive a pirate attack’ guide. My parents on the other hand, simply rolled their eyes in quite an exasperated manner and proceeded to evaluate whether I had actually thought this bright idea through, by conjuring up every worst case scenario possible and checking I was prepared for it, as well as able to actually finance the whole trip. I think it was safe to say, that for most people, this announcement didn’t come as a surprise. In fact, my Dad looked quite expectant when I told him back in April.

I think it’s safe to say, that no one trip is ever the same as any other. Having been to Ghana (West Africa) and Kenya (East Africa) the year before, I figured that there really wasn’t a huge amount that Tanzania could throw at me that I wouldn’t be able to cope with. As far as I was concerned, when I concocted my plan to venture into Tanzania’s economic capital Dar es Salaam for 5 weeks and work in an orphanage, before taking a final week in Zanzibar to recover (as phrase that would be taken all too literally come the actual final week of my trip), I knew exactly what I was getting myself into. After all, I’d already experienced the dusty, pot holed roads of sub Saharan Africa, which generally came with a side of chaos capable to rivalling the London Underground in rush hour on Christmas Eve… And I’d loved every second of it before. So this shouldn’t be any different right?

That’s not to say that getting on the plane at Heathrow wasn’t absolutely terrifying. After all, it was still a venture into the unknown and this time, there was no promise of a nice set of similarly aged volunteers at the end of it. For all I knew, I was entirely on my own.

By unknown, I don’t mean that my friends and I shared the same vision of where I was going, I was fully aware that I was going to a capital city and what that would be like, having been to Accra and Mombasa, whilst my friends, (cue yet another helpful comment from my friend Jack) believed I was venturing into the African bush, to look after a collection of 50 orphans, who all lived in a tiny one bedroom mud hut, whilst I stood guard to protect them from lions and the like. I was fully aware that this wasn’t the case; however after a 15 hour journey, to arrive in Dar es Salaam, and be informed that all of the staff were in hospital, I did have a moment of ‘what on earth have I just signed up for…’

In answer to that, I worked in Malaika Kids Children’s Home, in the Kinondoni district of Dar es Salaam, which was home to 10 boys aged between 3 and 11 years old. I’m fairly certain that for the first few days, these young boys (minus the three year olds who simply wanted to be carried around and to provide an immediate hugs when you felt homesick or they were crying) I was somewhat of a disappointment. They were only interested in playing football, wrestling and boxing. My suggestion of some colouring in was not well received. Even through the language barrier I grasped that. I was quickly demoted to goal keeper after they established that my football knowledge extended to the names of the well known...
premiership teams. This meant that I spent the majority of my first week trying to avoid being smacked in the face with a football aimed by some vicious little players. I managed to redeem myself by teaching them ‘How to dance like Chris Brown’ (through their broken English) and piggy in the middle; both of which turned out to be a whole lot safer for my face.

My biggest dose of culture shock came from trying to navigate the city bus system. By my second week I had convinced myself that I knew enough to get myself home after my boss Sameer said he was going to be late picking me up that day. What I forgot to take into account entirely was that Dar isn’t London. Just because a bus says on the front of it that it goes somewhere, doesn’t actually mean that it does go there. You have to listen out for what the conductor is yelling as the bus momentarily pulls into the stop. Whilst making sure you aren’t in its path at all. As well as this, Tanzania is country were native tribes are still alive and active, although they are becoming more and more adapted to modern, urban life. I was getting used to seeing Masai men walking around in their traditional dress and spears. But when they get on your bus and you have to stand next to them and their spear, and suffer some questionable Tanzanian driving and roads... well, I was prone to fearing for my life every time we turned a corner. All this and the fact that everyone only speaks Kiswahili. I did eventually get home. Just 2 hours later than expected...

The lowest point of my trip came during my 4th weekend in Dar es Salaam, as I was on my way home from the orphanage on Friday evening. Once again, I found myself crammed into the back corner of a bus which was suitable for maybe 10 standing people at a push; and more than likely a Masai spear or two. Naturally, I was once of at least 20 standing people. Having had dinner in one of the daily power cuts, when I came over feeling nauseous, I believed it was food poisoning or one too many pot holes taking their toll, and tried to survive the journey home without being sick. This failed in case you’re wondering. I spent most of that Friday evening vomiting at hourly intervals, as well as trying to work out what to do with my Mum on the phone. By 1am, I concluded that dragging Sameer home from wherever he was was my only option. He walked in and apparently worked out what was wrong with me immediately. So by Saturday I was being sent to hospital, where the doctor decided that it would be easier all round to have this conversation largely in Kiswahili, which wasn’t quite what I was hoping for. By the time I was actually diagnosed, I had had various needles thrown into my arms for blood tests and was feeling weaker than ever. For the doctor to happily announce that it was suffering malaria and then proceeded to tell me that I was lucky because he had seen... cue ten minutes of malaria horror stories.

What the doctor failed to mention and left for me to find out for myself is:

- Malaria will destroy your appetite and you will lose a fair amount of weight in a short amount of time.
- The drugs are so strong that you must eat anyway. Not eating will make you feel worse.
- However Cheryl Cole managed to get on a plane is beyond me. I couldn’t get from my bedroom to the living room.
- That having 10 kids sit around and give you hugs will actually make you feel a hundred times better. Until they mistakenly start pulling your hair instead of stroking it.
- Taking anti malarial tablets doesn’t mean you are exempt from catching malaria. It just weakens it ever so slightly. But case in point. I took them and I still got it.

My parents, by the time I worked up the courage to tell them, were terrified, as was I after the press courage of Cheryl Cole and what I knew about malaria. My Mum even contemplated flying out to get me after I said I wouldn’t be able to fly home, because I was too weak. Being stubborn and desperate to finish my trip, I refused. The way I saw it, was that these doctors dealt with malaria...
on the a later stumbling eyeing most track, hope Zanzibar, western Stone other parks start a breathtaking way ering but of 6 Town up first My to discover feet with tiny across for you to as describe elephants well of the game buffalo the (six of the reserve is a six hour journey out of Dar, 70% of which is on pot-holed dirt track, but you can amuse yourself playing spot the baboon which is a lot of fun, particularly when the start to cross the road and decide to stop and stare your car down. On our first day, we were fortunate enough to take a river boat safari where we managed to come across a hippo that apparently was not a tourist fan as he attempted to capsize our boat...

On our game drive the next day, we all set out with high hopes of seeing the big 5. My main hope was for elephants and lions. As it happened, the elephants were nowhere to be found. But we stumbled across (six feet away from us) a hunting lioness eyeing up two buffalo just over the hill. And ten minutes later we discovered a pride of 16 lions which again let us within 6 feet of them. Needless to say, it was one of the most breathtaking moments of my life.

My final week was spent on the nearby island of Zanzibar, with my splitting my time between the old town Stone Town and the small village of Jambiani on the western side of the island. Zanzibar is tiny. There is no other way to describe it. To cross from the east to the west of the island took no more than an hour and a half. It’s absolutely beautiful, with stunning blue skies and white sand beaches. Stone Town is a maze of tiny alleyways and ornately carved Arabic and Indian inspired buildings.

Previously one of the biggest slave trading islands, as a history student I was in my element wandering around these tiny streets, the Old Portuguese fortress and the previously colonial buildings, as well as the Sultans castle and the endless spice and textile shops. The markets were a whole new maze of their own although the famous Street Food Market at the centre of the town by the port, Forodhani Gardens was amazing with dinner costing barely £2 most night but by far some of the best meals I had.

Jambiani is a tiny fishing village quite literally in the middle of nowhere. Whilst Zanzibar is a known tourist destination in Tanzania, the large all inclusive hotels are based in the north of the island. Jambiani is in the west and gets few visitors, but mainly backpackers. The hotel I stayed in was run by a group of Rasta’s who spent most of my days desperately trying to give me marijuana, making me the most amazing smoothies; which as the youngest resident and the only girl on her own, I often got given for free, and asking me questions about my time in Tanzania and the difference with London, generally at about 1am sat around a camp fire on the beach. It’s hard to sit on a deserted beach, on completely white sand at 1am, surrounded by stars, chatting with 3 or 4 Rastafarians and actually believe that Africa has this
terrifying, bush like reputation that a lot of people still stereotype it with.

The trip had its ups and downs without a doubt, but the people were lovely, the kids were adorable and I’d do it all again in a heartbeat. Although maybe without the malaria. And I’d probably attempt to brush up on my football skills. And coming home to an actual hot shower that didn’t involve a bucket was definitely a bonus.

There was a major language barrier between me and the kids, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t get to know them. It just took me longer as I had to work out their personalities. But I did, and I now can’t hear Rhianna without thinking of the little special needs boy singing ‘Oh Na Na, Wassaminame’. I’m still in contact with the English teacher who worked at the orphanage too, so that means that I still get to speak to the children through a mixture of their broken English and my broken Kiswahili.

I also got to learn a lot more about what the country itself; its culture, its politics, its history. I found that people are always determined to know exactly why you’re there and why Europe still seems to have quite a patronising view of this continent. My answer? I truly don’t know. Yes Dar is a million times more chaotic than London, but the chaos still occurs with a smile, rather than a glare. Generally, their outlook on life is ten times more optimistic than ours, and we have everything we could ever want and they have the absolute bear minimum, such as unscheduled but daily power cuts, water and power rationing and one roomed houses for whole families. Yet, the majority of the time, they are still incredibly happy.

I also learnt a lot more about myself. I have a better idea of what I want to do when I finish university now. And I have a better understanding of how capable I am of dealing with situations, such as getting lost on foreign buses, learning a foreign language I have no background in and apparently now identifying malaria.

If I could go back tomorrow to pick the little ones up from school and wander through the streets on Kinondoni with them clinging to my arms and babbling on about cars and football, you wouldn’t be able to stop me.