

# Kivukoni School, 2nd January - 8th April 2019

When planning my 'Gap Year' it was never a question of whether I would be volunteering, as it seemed to me like the a no-brainer, as it is an amazing way to explore the world and different cultures. My questions instead lay in the specifics: where, how long, and who with? Luckily for me, the solution came quite quickly when I found out about Kivukoni school in Kilifi, Kenya. The rest of the process was surprisingly easy, as the school was more than happy to take on one volunteer for a term, meaning that my other questions were answered for me!

There is so much that I would like to convey and I think that the best way of giving the most accurate account of my trip is to recount a few very different days I have had:

## **Day One:**

My first day at Kivukoni went pretty smoothly, especially considering that the Year One teaching assistant never turned up for the term and so this immediately became my main role. Having never taught before this seemed like I was being thrown in the deep end. However, I soon discovered that the hard bit about teaching isn't being patient, nor learning all the children's names, but rather trying to earn and keep some form of respect from the kids. If you are too nasty then they dislike you, but if you are too nice then they don't take you seriously. Unfortunately I fell into the latter category, which promptly led to me being called Miss Carrot for the rest of the term. Despite this nickname, I actually grew to love these kids despite the fact that within two hours of being in the classroom I was vomited on. Anyway, after my first day with this vivacious group of children, in which I had tried and failed to explain to them the concept of adding 5s and 10s, I took myself down for a swim in the creek by the school. This creek was a godsend for me, as it provided a beautiful escape from the busy day, as well as allowing me to become a far more confident swimmer. Being in such a beautiful part of the world where nature provides all the entertainment has proven to be incredibly peaceful and is something I will greatly miss on my return to England.

## **Day Eight:**

The reason I am writing about this day is because this was the day that I was given "the store project". The school has no library as such, rather just a small, dusty room filled with toys, baskets, books and gecko poo. Anyway, it became my job to organise all of the books in the store, and to create a system to log them online. I think it is safe to say now, having logged around 2000 books, that I have developed a new found appreciation for a well organised library!! This job was probably the most mundane part of my trip,

however, if I look on the bright side it gave me lots of hours of listening to audio books and thinking to myself. This day is also significant because it was the day of my first kick boxing lesson. As there were not many people my age around it was very important for me to keep busy, and my weekly kick boxing lessons certainly did this! I have never had a more effective workout, as well as really just feeling quite cool as you learn to kick and punch.

### **Day Nineteen:**

Although this was a Sunday, and so I wasn't at school, it is a day that I feel is worth talking about as it is one that I consider to be an eye opener. The morning started very casually, and in fact I had the most delicious little Dutch Pancakes, poffertjes, for breakfast cooked for me by my neighbour! Anyway, putting thoughts of pancakes aside, after breakfast I went to the beach to see the Flipflop boat, a boat made entirely out of recycled materials. It was very cool, the boat had sailed down from Lamu to Kilifi marking a huge contrast against the natural coastal landscape as the boat's exterior is covered in the hundreds of different patterns and colours of washed up flip flops. The Flipflop crew ran a plastic workshop, teaching us different ways that we personally can reuse plastic and cut down on its general use. After this we went onto the boat for a sunset cruise which was really amazing. The sun went down to the sound of a group of strangers singing on this surprisingly buoyant boat.

### **Day Forty Nine:**

Another of my roles while at Kivukoni was coaching hockey to all age groups. This was interesting, as the majority had never played before, and a vast amount didn't have kit. However, we persevered and the end result was hugely rewarding. Kivukoni attended the local hockey tournament, and actually did quite well, even winning in some age groups! Although we were in the intensely hot sun all day, with hardly any food or water, it was a great trip. It was amazing to see these kids participating in the tournament and really enjoying it, coming to me for advice and sharing their success with me! I think this was one of the most fulfilling experiences whilst at the school.

### **Day Fifty Two:**

I went on another trip, this time with the year 7s and 8s, to the local cashew nut factory - Cashewland! The factory's bright name shares no similarities with its reality. Cashewland is a hot and sweaty warehouse in which around a hundred women work tirelessly, firing, breaking, sorting, peeling and packaging cashew nuts which then get shipped out around Africa. The best paid women in this factory were the ones who stripped the cashews, as this job is high risk, they are paid 9 Kenyan shillings for every kilogram they get through. This equates to a total of around £3 a day! Although this is just about enough to feed themselves, it is not enough to feed a family, especially considering this meagre reward is for a job that has no personal fulfilment or

even comfort, it is manual labour. However, when looking at the poverty in Kilifi and wider Kenya one must consider that this job is better than no job and in the mornings you even see women queuing outside the factory, hoping to be able to get work that day. This trip certainly struck me and I think things like this should get everyone thinking about the bigger picture.

### **Day Seventy Seven:**

The climax of the Easter term at Kivukoni is the school talent show. Unlike any talent shows that I have attended at schools in England, in which students are practically begged, bribed or even dragged on stage to perform, we had the complete opposite problem. In the first week of sign up we had 49 acts, clearly too many. The rest of the term was then spent working out how to cut the less 'stage ready' acts, and how to deter any other acts we could. This was vaguely successful, and by the day of the show we were left with 35 acts, and felt confident about the majority of these. The day was spent manically putting up cut out stars and letters and, if I may say so myself, the stage looked pretty good at the end. The night was a huge success, with all of the kids excelling under the spotlight. But, in typical Kenyan style, it was not over until all the mums had got on stage and showed us who the most talented were amongst them. The Kenyan culture for dancing is so much fun and their confidence on the dance floor made me feel like a bit of an English prune, although seemingly my moves were highly amusing to watch!!

### **Top tips when planning a year out with volunteering:**

- Make sure that you are genuinely interested and excited about the volunteering you are doing - don't do it for a tan, the instagrams or the stories - not being paid for your hard work can be draining and seem unrewarding if you look at it from the wrong perspective.
- Make sure that the place you are going to has other things to do - whether it be other people to hang out with or other activities, for me there was a lot of sport.
- Choose some skills at the beginning that you want to develop, and do it. You may have time on your hands and there is nothing more exciting than getting better at something you genuinely enjoy.
- Take every opportunity. Even if you're tired, just do it, you never know where each chance might take you, and 99% of the time you will only regret that which you don't do (obviously unless it is silly and dangerous).

- Keep a diary, and not just a photo diary! I have been making a diary/drawing/scrap book as this trip has gone along, and every time I look back on it I laugh to myself about little things that happened, and the random thoughts that I had.
- If you can, take snacks, I am particularly partial to chocolate digestives and salt and vinegar crisps, and these became far, far more enjoyable when I had them in such short supply.

I think that when reflecting back on my time at Kivukoni school, ‘where children love to learn’ I admit that I have had some challenging times. Most of these have not involved humans; eg. during my first night, en-route to the loo I had a face-off with the largest crab I have ever seen; or the time I walked into the kitchen to realise that the pet snake had escaped, and the numerous times when I have had to personally remove a variety of large insects from my hut - a challenge I have yet to overcome back home in England. Yet despite these kinds of moments, in which I have been pushed way out of my comfort zone, the experience as a whole has been incredible and I am already trying to work out how I can get back out there to do it again as soon as possible!