

Uganda

This summer, I had my eyes and heart opened by a small community in Eastern Uganda, where, I discovered what I love about life, who I really am and exactly what I'm going to do until I die. A year earlier I'd been put forward by Mrs.P, the Guider I run Brownies with, for International Selection; a scheme run by GirlGuiding UK that selects a number of 16-25 year old members each year to represent the UK abroad. I'm certain that if it hadn't been for the huge faith Mrs.P seemed to have in me and the slight fear of her instilled as a child I'd never have done it. But then eleven months, countless observed tasks, an interview, a weekend in London, an exciting letter, fundraising ideas, auction of promises, hours of hard work (when I should have been revising!), a summer fete, 13 letters to charities for support, a long meeting in Cambridge, countless jabs, even more tablets and a suitcase full of dictionaries, toothpaste and bubbles, I was to take on the world. While I was gone I kept a log of absolutely everything going on which ended up an inch thick, so here are the best and worst bits, a taster of the impact it had on me and the beautiful community I worked with.

'Found myself at the airport today with what to be completely honest was a group of strangers. There are 10 of us in total, four leaders; Jacqui, Millie, Teresa and Chris; and seven girls, Iona, Zoe,

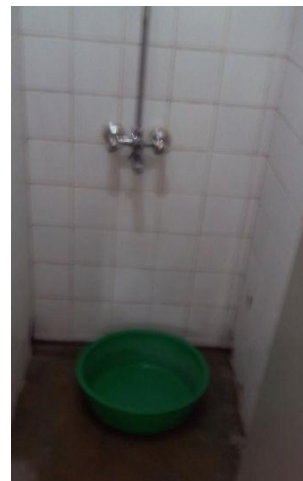


Lori, Sarah, Emily, Bethany and myself. We knew virtually nothing about each other but 12 hours of airport tea, turbulence and glacier fruits and we're perfectly happy together. We drove past Lake Victoria to get to our Hostel in Kampala and it's absolutely massive! I'd tried not to have expectations before I left, but obviously failed because the landscape was a shock! So green and hilly- not stereotypical Africa at all.

'Had an amazing breakfast when we got in from the airport; Ugandan tea, cornflakes, bread and hard boiled eggs – almost British? Then went to the centre of Kampala; complete chaos! Overloaded bodabodas (moped taxis), bicycles and mini vans everywhere. No road signs (bar one of a car plummeting down a hill!), no road markings and no traffic lights. Instead random members of the public wave their arms and blow whistles in the middle of the biggest 'junctions' I've ever seen. Even worse as a pedestrian as the only way to cross a road is to step straight into the traffic and look like you're on a mission. . .but the boys (local friends of Rachel, we promised to feed them if they'd guide us) weren't impressed, "*PLEASE! You are consuming our time. . .Fast!*" which left us in fits of giggles risking our lives in front of the bodas.

'We ate Pizza at Nandos which is apparently the only chain restaurant in Uganda – definitely the place for my first Nandos! Then exhausted we went back for showers (cold tap and washing up bowl) then card games and bed. . . all with paraffin lamps and candles as there's been no electricity for 4 days now.

'Today we went through a rougher part of Kampala and managed to get stopped by the police. Terrifying as the policemen carry guns and most are allowed to kill without need for explanation. They



claimed that bus had broken the law through 'careless and inconsiderate driving' last year and that there were outstanding fines that had to be paid. But for a policeman to have remembered the number plate of a single costa (minibus) from over a year ago in a crowded city where everyone is careless and inconsiderate is impossible. They took our driver to the station and we were forced to pay the bribe for his safety – definitely not a good morning! More positively though, I discovered the beauty of chewing sugar cane, which feels like a cross between celery and old rope. You can't swallow any of the fibres and I had to watch how much I got through, but it tastes heavenly! Pure unrefined sugar!



'Stopped not far from Busembatia (the village we'll be working in) to deliver a buggy to a little boy called Dennis. He's lame, can't speak and is most probably deaf, but he kept trying to stand when we held him. Then we put him in the chair and taught his family to push it because they don't understand the wheelchair concept here. We got the most amazing 'Thank you' though because Dennis lifted his arms and laughed. It was such a beautiful moment, everyone went quiet and I was struggling not to cry, I can't wait for the rest of the week!

'I spent most of today bricklaying which I'm VERY proud of! We carried loads of bricks to a man named Ezachiah's house where we made cement and built a wall around his newly dug pit latrine. I

also spent a very long time pumping water from the borehole into massive yellow jerry cans which I then had to carry 10 mins back to base. Godfrey made me carry two at once for a while and I made it about 10 steps before nearly falling over, so he taught me to carry it on my head like an African, you have to put a thumb in the lid to keep the water in, but mine had cracks and I got pretty wet! Godfrey was very impressed with me though and spent the afternoon telling Hannah she was no good at carrying water!



'We spent today at Divine Cornerstone School, which is supported by WateringRoots. It's a two roomed wooden hut with only wooden benches inside. We spent a while painting blackboards which is very messy work as the paint does not wash off! Then while everyone else prepared lunch (this takes several hours) Millie and I varnished desks to seal woodworm and keep out the termites. It was really tiring as we were in the full sun at midday in 40 degree heat. . . so like proper Brownie leaders we ended up singing and the children joined in whether they knew the songs or not!



'After lunch we finished our varnishing, which also sealed blackboard paint on our hands for days, and then played games with the children. We did the okey-cokey, blew bubbles, did face painting (this picture is Jovia who is the happiest child I've ever met, but has the biggest story), sung songs and even learned a bit of traditional Ugandan dance. We weren't much good but it was loads of fun and we had a bit of a party with the children and an amazing meal!

'We left late afternoon though as Rachel, Jacqui, Millie and I had to buy cabbages and rice on the way home. . . Not such a good plan. It started raining very suddenly and we got absolutely soaked;

something Ugandans don't understand. We walked back through deserted village clinging to each other on the soupy slippery streets, with cabbages in our arms (and Millie holding her 'dead animal carcass' which would be our lunch) and wound up in fits of laughter while Ugandan's frowned at us from their nice dry huts!

'Today was the first time the children had ever left the village as we took them their first ever school trip. We spent the morning swimming and then in the afternoon went to a place on the Nile called Bujugali falls. It was amazing to see the children in the water, they'd never seen it before but they all loved it and tried swimming. Our boys did too and it was hilarious to see guys in their twenties wearing pink arm-bands and throwing themselves in the water. Everyone loved though and it was nice to be in cold water, even if they had to keep fishing frogs out with a net!



'The afternoon was just as good, we paddled in the Nile and saw a man kayak down the waterfalls which looked awesome – definitely something I'll do one day! We went out on boats for a bit too and saw spider monkeys in the trees which was pretty awesome. The man steering the boat lifted me up next to him and put my hand on the rudder so I steered us down the Nile for a while which I'm pretty pleased with!

'This morning there was no trotting (the Ugandan word for a run, I've been going with the boys every morning)! So we all had a lovely lie in which was definitely appreciated as Zoe, Bethany and I stayed up far too long talking last night. We then went to a different village to help out a little there. It was a really beautiful place, but the bus drove along a footpath which meant bouncing off the seats and trees poking in the windows. When we arrived, we split into groups again and Lori and I went with Millie to deliver a bed and put a door onto a home as Millie is now the 'Professional English Builder' after her



bricklaying earlier this week. This was good but it was so hot today so very tiring work -collecting water was refreshing though! Everyone went back for lunch, but Millie, Jacqui and I wanted to see the door in place so stayed to finish the job. . . Not quite as we'd expected! Instead of cement we had mud which Jacqui and I trod to mix it (like squashing grapes) and then the three of us had to fling it onto the walls! Did mean tiny bits of mud spraying back at us, but lots of fun and lovely and cold!

'I then travelled home in the bus with two chickens, named Mr.Living and Godfrey, sat under my chair! I was very scared they might fly up my skirt when we went over a bump – but we'll eat them tomorrow so not too much worry. The bus journey and arriving were also a little surreal, two marriage proposals including Godfrey offering me a significant dowry, and Dowda asking for Millie! Now everyone is giggling across the room because my 'husband' has just shown his face! And on that note, cold candle lit shower then bed!

'This morning we had a lay in and left the hotel after lunch. When we were in the community my group delivered a wheelchair, some clothes and a bag of school things. We then had to walk to the church in the POURING rain! It was a full on thunder storm and I am pretty sure that our navigator took us the long way round for entertainment purposes as many of us didn't have rain macs! Church was loads of fun though, we sung a few songs to them and then they had their usual worship which was amazing. There was such a great atmosphere and I sang and danced with all the Africans – basically a party for God followed by a massive welcome speech and Jacqui was presented with some banana leaf mats to thank us for what we've done. I loved every minute of it!



'Scouts and Guides today! We started with around 12 children and ended up with near on 120. . .but in true guiding spirit we invited them all and carried on! We made bracelets with them which worked even with the little ones, no language barriers at all. We also brought out a parachute which can only really be described in with a picture!

'The afternoon was homestay and I was with Millie and Bethany at Mamma Phiona's which was great because her daughter Esther had been attached to me since the hokey-cokey on the first day! She has four children still at home, Rose, Phiona, Esther, and Annika and is heavily pregnant with her sixth who she insists is the last! (Sixth child was born in September after we left and is called Rachel). They are the loveliest family I've met, the children are so polite and they're all so thankful and caring. We cooked the meal with them which was interesting as we found out exactly what we'd been eating all week! I was stirring a pot of meat which I'd assumed was to make a stock or soup, it was full of bones and I'm sure I saw an eye in there, but then it was served up with our meal! Apparently it's an honour to be given the bone! We also had a lot of matooke which is a sort of plantain which can only really be described as a thick bright orange gritty mash! We ate what we



could though and the rest is a long and secret story involving plastic bags, pit latrines, chickens and balconies. I'll leave you to ask or guess what happened – it's not pretty! But moving on, I can safely say that I've never been fussy but now I'll honestly eat anything!

I've tried to include a little bit here about everything I did while I was away, But it was such an amazing experience and so much happened during the time I was there that to me it feels like I've hardly mentioned anything. I met some truly inspirational people, both Ugandan and British, who I'm still in touch with and thoroughly enjoy emailing and receiving letters from. . . even if one of them still wants to marry me! The only thing I struggled with was the culture shock when I returned home, people didn't always say hello, my house felt too big, there was too much choice in shops and food was wasted. Now however, I realise it's all part of the experience and despite struggling at home I understand how it's opened my eyes and shown me how complicated we make our lives here compared to the simple but hard working lives of my friends in rural Uganda. Just flicking through my inch thick diary to find a few words for this has made me realise just how much I loved about the trip and how much I've changed since my initial selection over a year ago, I now feel I really can take on the world and have set the dates to return as part of my Gap year in 2013!