

Kenya 2022

Cara Projects

From the moment I arrived in Kenya, the differences from Ireland were immediately evident. The roads in Nairobi are chaotic, unlined and drivers weave all over the place. The further we travelled from the city the roads became rougher until we driving on dusty mud tracks with gigantic potholes. All the vehicles are jostling to avoid the potholes. We arrived at the centre quite late, after dark, so we pretty much just bedded down immediately in the volunteer's dormitory.

The first morning we had fresh fruit for breakfast, the bananas there are sticky and sweet, but delicious and oh the mangos, yum! We met all the girls outside in the garden, there are 30 residents ranging from tiny babies to young women the oldest was about 22. The team gave us a tour of the grounds and buildings, showing us the animals and vegetable gardens. They are fairly self sufficient and sell lots of their produce, particularly eggs, they have about 1,000 hens!

The girls live in a separate wing and some of them cook for all of them. The cooks included some quiet young children, in Kenya even the young have to work. There are about 5 women employed as carers at the centre and the girls call them all 'auntie'. At first all the girls seemed quite shy, cautious and reserved, it felt pretty awkward initially and really uncomfortable. I saw one of the girls making intricate beaded traditional Kenyan bracelets called 'shanga' which caught my attention. I went to talk to her about them and instantly sensed we were going to get on well; her name is Jessica and we are both 16. She has a one year son called Sean. She is lovely and set about teaching me how to make 'shanga', I spent loads of time with her over the fortnight and I miss her very much. I am quite sure I will always remember her and her shocking story that brought her to the centre. She is very kind, patient, brave and a good mother.

The centre is made up of children and siblings who are orphaned, girls who have undergone genital mutilation, girls seeking refuge from underage marriages and girls who have suffered all kinds of assault. A few residents like Miriam and Alex are living there as their medical needs can't be met at home.

Many of my days there were filled with chores and improvement around the centre, we did a lot of painting, gardening and spending time with the girls and children so I won't describe those days individually. There many highlights to the trip and activities beyond the centre.

A couple of times we went to a service in one of the local churches, before we went we were taught the local dance moves. This was nothing like mass at home. It was a very loud, joyful and celebratory experience. The women wore traditional Maasi colourful clothing, wonderful large bright beaded jewellery, they sang and danced for hours on end. We danced with them. The atmosphere was relaxed, informal and fun with the children running round freely.

During the fortnight we went on many walks around the area, but one particularly stood out for me from the early in the trip. It was a long walk to a visit a local woman in her house where she lived with her twelve children. The house was tiny and the walls were used for the children to do their homework in chalk, so they were covered with timestables etc. It was considered large which seemed curious as it was about the size of my bedroom at home, however once I saw the smaller homes in the same village, it seemed placial.

Local children ran from all directions in the hills to join us and accompanied us all the way back to the centre. They would be playing with my hair and touching my skin. Walking along I might have at least three children holding onto me on my left and my right.

The Maasi women would visit the centre regularly with their wares. They sold hand carved wooden spoons, amazing beaded jewellery, various items of clothing made from their traditional Kenyan colourful cottons. I was happy to buy things from them, particularly as it was obvious that we were an important opportunity for them to earn money for their families.

One day we went to buy plants for the centre but it isn't anything like going to a garden centre. Many people have a patch of land where they grow a variety of plants by the side of the road. We were able to support one local grower, by buying so many plants that she probably earned a month's wages in the one sale. It was great to see the joy we could bring when we supported people in their given trade. This wasn't a hugely memorable day but I thoroughly enjoyed seeing all the beautiful different plants and flowers as I was unfamiliar with so many of them.

About five of us walked to the nearby primary school in Kibiko. It took us about 45 to 50 minutes, the majority of the Cara girls do this walk daily to and from school. They rise at about 5am to be on time for school. At the school we were swarmed by hundreds of children all once again keen to touch my hair or skin and to give me a high five. It was a bit like being a famous celebrity, it was very strange. The school regime is very strict and one of the teachers carried a piece of black pipe for smacking the children. They were terrified of her and so was I. Before leaving the school, they gather in the yard for assembly and to say prayers. They are instructed to close their eyes, I whispered to my friend Róisín – do you think we should close our eyes too? – A little in front of us a child whispered back – Keep quiet and don't look – it reminded me of Matilda and Miss Trunchbull. The children would be given grief if they arrived dirty to school, an almost impossible ask. The roads everywhere are dirt tracks and red dust from them sticks to everything.

One of the things that really moved me to the core during my trip was our visit to the shanti town called Kibera, which is the largest slum in Africa. We drove there in the centre's minibus, with something of a party atmosphere, playing music and full of chat we headed off. We were dropped off pretty much in the centre of Kibera which is a huge maze of tin huts and filth. Our guide Peter, who was from there, brought through the streets. We passed unusual sights like cow's legs being cooked on spits, they stank so much I was nearly sick. Everywhere was strewn with litter and the stench was all consuming, I wore a mask as I thought it might help but it was fairly useless. We walked as far as the train tracks, the rubbish consisted of mounds of rotting food, general waste and clothing. Animals were scavaging through it, stray dogs and chickens everywhere. There were dogs in sewers and drains not far from stalls with raw meat and fish for sale that were smothered with flies. We visited a small factory making items from bone, like bottle openers, keyrings and spoons. It was a good form of environmentally friendly industry but once again the stench was horrific. My words can't really do justice to the dirty, awful and impoverished lives these people lead. It was quite surreal, I felt so sick and shocked by the abject poverty.

I think the most striking and astonishing thing about my trip was although I met many people with tragic lifetimes and deeply impoverished circumstances, I can honestly say they were the most friendly, kind, caring people I have ever met. Despite their situation they were

incredibly joyful, contented and happy. I found this somewhat baffling, how can they be so happy and yet so poor?

Although most of the trip was based around volunteering at the centre and in the surrounding community, the Cara Projects team like the volunteers to see a bit of Kenya too. One such day we were taken to an elephant orphanage. It was very sad to hear how hunters and poachers were the reason they are orphaned. We saw 24 calves in total and they were gorgeous. The aim of the orphanage is to reintroduce them into the wild once they are old enough. We got an opportunity to go into a national park and had a thrilling safari experience. It was amazing to see exotic animals in the wild that I had only ever seen before in a zoo, such as Rhinos, Buffalo, Zebra, Giraffes, Lions, Gazelles, Ostriches and loads of other African birds.

The girls soccer team was in need of a decent pitch. Making them a pitch was one of our tasks. We spent hours leveling the ground, weeding and raking. Loads of young children from the surrounding area were helping us. I had loads of interactions with them during my trip. Their clothing was always the same, tattered and torn, random ragged items worn together, I imagine it was whatever was available. Most of them were barefoot but some had shoes but they were inevitably worn out and full of holes. All the children were so friendly and eager for contact with us.

One of my favourite days of the trip was my birthday. It fell on one of the days we went to mass and the whole church sang happy birthday to me. After mass we played a soccer match against the local girl's team on the new pitch to christen it. Being my birthday I got to captain our team, this didn't help us win, they were so much better than us! Back at the centre, it is a Cara Projects tradition to drench the birthday girl in water, I reckon I was blessed with about 12 buckets full. This of course turned into a fun water fight for all. Jessica gave me a lovely beaded bracelet that she had made for me along with a very sweet heartfelt letter.

An outing I recall well was after a seemingly endless drive on the rockiest and bumpiest of tracks we arrived in the middle of nowhere, a place called the Rift Valley. It is was incredibly tranquil and very beautiful, with giraffes grazing casually only a handful of feet away. It reminded me of cattle grazing in the fields at home with the ditches full of Fuschia, but this was giraffes and cactii! Kenya is a country known for its butterflies and the Rift Valley was full of them. We drove further into the beautiful valley and eventually arrived at the tiny village of mud huts. We were there for a house warming, a new home that was sponsored by Cara Projects. We chilled under a large tree, while the Maasi men slaughtered and cooked a goat for us. I have now been to a goat sacrifice, not quite in line with my vegetarian living! We climbed a mountain above the village to taking in the stunning views, it was amazing.

The times spent in the centre itself and the surrounding community were the most impactful, special and memorable for me. Over the two weeks I got to know the girls very well. Something I didn't expect was I became friends with them in a way that surprised me. Their stories touched me so deeply, the most horrific and tragic experiences had happened to them and yet they were lovely, warm and joyful inspite of it all. Every evening we would go into them after they had eaten, when they pray and sing with such heart. We played with them, having fashion shows, discos, played bingo and sometimes just chatted. They were all so nice and sweet natured. One of the girls that most impressed me and really touched my heart is called Jessica, I am determined to sponsor Jessica throughout this year. All of the volunteers had a special connection with one or two of the girls. For me it was Jessica and a dear

michevicious little boy called Alex. Alex and his mother Vivienne have been living in the centre all his life. He was never expected to survive, tube fed as a tiny baby and very delayed in his development as a result. Aged 4 when I met him, yet only the size maybe of a two year old, what he lacked in stature he made up for in character. Apparently he had only learnt to walk and talk in the past year. He was my absolute pet and had me wrapped around his little finger. He stuck to me like glue and got me to carry him everywhere. Tragically he died quite suddlenly in late July, it was such utterly heartbreaking news. I will never forget him. I feel privileged to have met him. I hope to return to Kenya and volunteer for Cara Projects again next year. I am looking forward to seeing Jessica but I know it will be find to find Alex gone.

I want to thank you once again for your generous sponsorship for my Kenya trip and this letter only scratches the surface of the profound impact this life changing experience had on me.

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