



Mrs Price's Rwandan Experience

Dear Parents

It has taken me some time but I have finally put together a document about my experience in Rwanda. I could probably write a book, and I do think there is probably a screen play in there somewhere, but what I've tried to do is give you a flavour of the whole week. I hope you enjoy reading it.

A Flavour of My Rwanda Experiences

It was a cold and snowy Saturday on 4th February as seven colleagues and myself set off on our journey to visit our link schools in the Nyagatare District of Rwanda. Little did we know that it would take an amazing 51 hours to reach our destination as we waved goodbye to our families and set off from Ivanhoe College to Heathrow Airport. The journey though turned out to be much more of an adventure than we expected. In fact it had it all – missing passengers, delays because of snow, aborted take offs, missed connections, lost luggage and a lost passport including the intervention of the International Police and the threat of jail for a Rwandan airport official. However, much to our relief, we did eventually arrive late on the Monday evening at the Moon's Charity Lodge, which was to become our home for the next five days. Once there we just had time for a meal before we unpacked the bare essentials and got some much needed sleep in a proper bed for the first time in two days.



Monday - Moon's Charity Lodge

The accommodation was basic to western standards but clean, there was electricity and a flushing toilet and most essential of all mosquito nets and very friendly and helpful staff. Our bathroom was not much bigger than an airing cupboard and you could almost turn on the spot to use the shower, the sink or the toilet – yes there was not enough room to swing a lizard let alone a cat! (And we had plenty of lizard visitors to our rooms- fortunately they don't bother me.) The shower only had cold running water with a flow that varied from a steady stream to nothing at all, and on occasion was rather brown in colour – apparently because of rust in the pipes. Hot water came once a day and was delivered in a bucket to the room by a smiling teenage girl and we were provided with a cup and a plastic bowl to make our own makeshift hot shower. I have to say I really looked forward to the knock on the door and the delivery of my water and I got very adept at washing myself, my hair and the odd item of clothing in my bucket of precious water and I really began to appreciate its luxury. When you see all the people, many of whom are children, walking to collect their water in large yellow cans then you really understand how lucky we are just to be able to turn on a tap and have the choice of hot or cold water. We certainly don't have to worry about boiling our water before we can take a drink.



Tuesday

As a result of our lack of sleep we were allowed a lie in, until around 7 am, so we could have breakfast at 8 and set off for our schools at 9 am. (Although we soon realized African time can be somewhat different to British time and nothing seemed to happen at the times we were told and everything took much longer.) Breakfast consisted of a thin rubbery omelette and two doorstops of quite dry bread with coffee (and proved to be the same each day). We then set off in our rather battered mini bus on a journey to visit our schools. We dropped a colleague off at her school and then headed to Bushara on the supposedly one hour journey. After three bumpy hours on dusty orange roads, through banana plantations and lots of small villages we finally approached the school with hundreds of children running after the bus cheering at our arrival. It was quite overwhelming to be treated in such a special way. We felt very special as the bus was surrounded by a sea of happy faces, eager to touch us and talk to us. A homemade welcome sign stood at the entrance to the school. Once off the bus I was ushered to the Heads office and then began a whirlwind of being introduced to staff, members of the parent association and governors – everybody had come to meet me. A tour of the school followed and we were greeted in each class with the children standing up and chanting a special welcome to our "viz tors". Everybody wanted to speak to us. The school then gathered outside in the heat of the day to put on a welcome presentation with dances, songs and speeches (this was a common pattern in all the schools we visited). We were also expected to speak, but this was quite easy you only needed to start with how you felt when you arrived at the school eg the goose bumps up the arm- yes it was a teacher's tingle moment- and it all flowed quite easily after that.



So what is Bushara PS like? Well what you see are several rows of long buildings where the classrooms are, a small office and a new block of latrines surrounded by green grass. The classrooms are basic, quite dark inside and everything seems old. They have concrete floors and walls, a blackboard and rows of “Victorian” style wooden desks. However, it is the people who make the school and it has fantastic people. There are well behaved pupils who are eager to learn and adults (parents and staff) who are committed to doing the best for their children. There was a high commitment by the whole school to make our global partnership work and a great desire to find out about Packington. I was very relieved to find out that the ethos of the school was very similar to our own and this made working with our Rwandan partners so much easier.



Anyway, we stayed at the school until around 2.30/3.00 pm and then headed off to another school (Ribega) where we had lunch in a local café and then participated in another welcome celebration. School finishes at 5 pm in Rwanda but after the end of the day we went on to visit another 2 schools. We arrived at the first school to find that all the pupils had been kept back, it was now 6pm and the children had been sitting outside for hours! Yes in the hot sun and we doubt any special permission had been granted to keep the children back. So it was a quick presentation and speeches with lots of hand shaking and we did our best to make the school feel that it had been worthwhile to stay open to meet us. It was well after 7pm when we arrived at the final school – fortunately no pupils had been kept back as they could have been walking home in the dark for anything up to an hour. We still had a full tour of the school before starting the 2 hour journey back to our lodge for something to eat. The hot food was most welcome and I did enjoy my meal of rice, chips, spinach and a savoury banana dish. Rwandan people don't seem to snack like we do in England but seem to eat a mound of food at their lunch and evening meal. Banana is an obvious favourite, and apart from breakfast, I think I had it in some form or other at every meal be it mashed, roasted, boiled or just a traditional banana.

Wednesday

This was quite an exciting day for me as I went on a motorcycle taxi to visit Bushara on my own and I was able to get down to some real work with Felix and myself discussing our schools and our aims for the project. I also had the opportunity to have breakfast with the staff (more dried bread and a big mug of sweet Rwandan tea) and at a later point lunch with the staff. And although there were still some formal speeches and swapping of gifts I did have the opportunity to talk to staff and answer questions and felt I got to know them much better. The most brilliant part was that I got the chance to deliver a lesson. I have to say it was quite interesting trying to deliver a lesson to a class of 60 pupils with quite basic English who are used to chanting and copying, but the children did take on board that I wanted them to work in groups, to think and to tell me their views and they were very keen to ask me questions.

In the afternoon I went back on the motorbike taxi with Felix to visit his house and on to Nyagatare to visit more schools where other colleagues have links. It was yet again another late return to the lodge for a meal and shower and a quick re organization of bags at around midnight for an early get up the next day.



Thursday - Safari day.

We were up very, very early – too early for a proper breakfast and then we set off to meet up with our heads, plus a teacher and student from each school to visit the Akagera National Park. However, we were once again caught out with “African time”, so we were ready to go at the agreed time but it was at least another two hours before the Rwandan's were ready and we actually set off. (I have to admit that I'd stopped true clock watching by this time!) This was an epic day – both in terms of the length of the day but also the experiences. It did take quite a while to get to the park but once there we had some amazing views of different animals. I was most pleased to see a hippo as I'd not seen one in the wild before and was fascinated to find a 5 star hotel in the middle of nowhere that our Rwandan visitors conned their way into so we could use the toilets by pretending they were looking to organize a conference there! However we did have some fraught moments eg it was not clearly communicated to us that we should take food and there's only so many cereal bars a girl can eat in a 24 hour period, the mini bus broke down in a remote area of the park (it was near twilight – feeding time for many animals so not the best time) and we had to use all our water for the over-heated radiator. We also went through a wooded area swarming with tsetse fly which caused great panic amongst our hosts. I was fortunate though during the trip as I was able to spend a lot of time talking with Felix (the reason for the day had been to allow Heads time away from the daily business of running their schools to concentrate on the project whilst giving us another perspective of what is a beautiful country.) So Felix and myself reviewed and agreed our partnership agreement, discussed different approaches within our education systems, outlined a skeleton plan for a new topic and agreed what work we would complete by May. But I have to say it was a long dusty, tiring day and I had developed a rather hacking African cough as a result of breathing in lots of dust. It was well after 9pm when we returned, extremely hungry and dirty for a much welcomed meal and shower and it was midnight before we got to bed to be up again at 5.45 am the next morning.



Friday

Yes it was early again as we needed to be at Katatuma High School for a farewell presentation and celebration at 9am. Once again we were ready but timing was typically African and we eventually arrived at 11 am. We were ushered into a hall of over 800 students who had been sitting in there for 2 hours but gave us a marvellous welcome! Then more long speeches by us, staff, governors and other leaders as well as British Council Representatives, a fantastic presentation of music and dance and a wonderful meal of Rwandan food. It was fantastic. Everybody got up dancing – it is quite an expectation that staff and governors join in and they do go for it! There are no inhibitions. A particular favourite is a cow dance, where the dancers stamp their feet and use their arms to imitate the long horns of the traditional African cow.

Then we had some time to complete the final pieces of partnership work before we headed to our final school in the afternoon for a tour, presentation, speeches and a question and answer session with students. Bonny, the head of the school, then took us to a local venue for a meal with all his staff and another long and interesting question time session with them – and of course more speeches. We arrived back at the lodge at 8.30 pm for a shower, food and to pack.



Saturday

Up at 3am!!! No breakfast. All bags and adults packed into the mini bus for the 3 hour return journey to Kigali. Once we finally agreed with the driver that we wanted the boot shutting properly so suitcases couldn't fall out we set off. It was very cramped, as we were surrounded by our luggage, but we were ok. The mini bus then stopped and we were told that we had to make space for a reporter who would travel with us to Kigali to interview us. This was the point that our flexibility had stretched too far so 4 Rwandan men had to share the front seat of the mini bus. However within minutes I think they came to the conclusion that we were over crowded even for Rwandan standards so a driver was dropped off. We eventually arrived in Kigali at 8am and went to the Genocide Museum. This was a very emotional experience and to read how quickly the genocide took place and how many people were killed in such a short time was horrifying. I visited the children's room as I felt I had to as a mark of respect. We actually didn't speak to each other during the visit – it was so quiet and you felt like you were in a bubble of your own thoughts and emotions and of course the tears flowed.

Almost surreally we then had a hurried 10 minutes at a craft centre to buy some resources for school and then headed to the airport.

The return journey was much smoother – which suited the 8 exhausted members of the group. We managed to get a small beer at Addis Airport and then entertained the awaiting passengers with a reading of diary entries made throughout the week and despite some things being hard work actually we did try to laugh our way through things so it really didn't matter that the water out of the tap was brown or a trickle, or we had to make interesting manoeuvres to use a "toilet" or rescue a colleague from the lizards and frogs in her room. It was the people who had made this trip and what we'd learnt about life in Rwanda. We all agreed our visit had changed us in a positive way.



Sunday

Glad to arrive home and cuddle my family. Exhausted and dirty but extremely pleased that my governors had supported this opportunity. I'm humbled by what I have seen and the way I have been welcomed and I do think it has changed my view towards life. I am lucky to be able to turn on a tap and drink the water – I don't have to walk 2 hours with my water can to the stream or pump and I don't have to boil the water before I can quench my thirst – so I think I will appreciate my life just a little bit more.

