Gemma’s Testimonial - Tanzania 2016

Living with the Maasai, taking part in pioneering work for widows and girls and touring the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Ngorongoro Crater and Zanzibar… as a travel-loving person with the desire to make a difference (in some small way), from the moment I heard about Naserian’s trip my attention was well and truly caught. But if you’re going to spend a considerable amount of money on a volunteering/tourist trip there are so many ways to travel and so many charitable organisations and travel companies to partner with - why choose this one?

Having been on previous international development and volunteering opportunities I’d done my research before, so I knew the main factors I wanted to consider: 1) having a real, positive, sustainable impact, 2) the cost being reasonable and profits being used to benefit the charity’s beneficiaries, if anyone, and 3) having a worthwhile, enjoyable learning experience whilst being introduced to a new country and culture. Serene’s learning and service project went above and beyond in fulfilling these criterion - to the point of providing an experience I’ve found to be utterly unique.

**Serene**

The trip was organised and led by Zarin and Soroush, as well as the partner charity Naserian’s coordinator, Alais. Naserian is small, grassroots and sustainable charity ran by Maasai widows for their own empowerment, with Alais, a Maasai warrior, as their coordinator.

As well as a true friendship, what unites these three people is an unbelievable amount of energetic determination, meticulous planning, caring and passion for what they do. Our days (until Zanzibar) were structured and full, but any niggling illness, worry or question was always kindly and proactively met, and it’s wonderful to be amongst those who all know the community inside out - having helped to found and develop Naserian. The focus was exactly what international development should be - highly conscious of always being open-minded and learning as much as possible from the community; promoting sustainable and community-led development in our discussions; and offering what knowledge we could in return.

**Learning & Service**

The first phase of the trip was the service project. From the moment we arrived in the Maasai village of Lendikenya, we were welcomed as extended family by Alais’s family, who took fantastic care of us throughout - watching over us in our separate (and admittedly very basic, but homely) group of huts*,* just a short distance away from their own *boma*.

In partnership with Naserian, as volunteers we were able to create a project plan with Alais that made use our own areas of expertise in pinpointing areas where we could help to develop the charity’s capacity. Working with Naserian was also a unique insight into all stages of international development, given Naserian’s recent conception, our involvement in its current workings and seeing its potential whilst planning for the future.

Personally, I took on the role of documenting widows’ life stories to compile into a book sharing their voices and achievements. Others visited medical clinics, shared basic but important health advice or helped to develop jewellery marketing techniques. There were even many more ideas we didn’t have time to explore - such as documenting the medicine the Maasai harvest from the forests or developing water harvesting facilities. Whatever you know in theory about gender, or poverty, or international development, I can promise that, whilst your knowledge is undoubtedly useful, it is completely different from hearing real people explain their experiences - which is one huge draw of a trip like this.

**Impact**

When our service activities were complete, having consulted with the community and widows throughout, we were able to share our learning and suggestions for development of the charity going forward. It was fantastic to share with our fellow volunteers what we felt we’d gained from our trip - from intellectual to cultural knowledge, and personal realisations and bonds. We’d all been struck by the strength and peace of the Maasai community, as well as the enormous power that these women had by raising their voices together - to the point of entirely changing their lives and their daughters’ futures. Feeding back to the community, it felt only right to include our own gains and thanks, alongside what we could give in terms of concrete suggestions and the structure we’d come up with to allow Naserian to develop.

We presented our ideas first in a public meeting we held for the widows to share their work with local government and media, raising awareness of Naserian’s achievements and successful approach. But in addition to local meetings, we also had two opportunities to present our learning, questions and suggestions about gender and international development at an international level; whilst in Arusha we had informative and productive meetings with both the UN’s Residual Mechanism for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the East African Community’s Principal Gender and Community Development Officer who were very happy to consult with us.

Not only were the widows delighted at these opportunities for them to share their work, but it was incredible to have our suggestions were embraced by the community, and we were amazed that as a result both the officer at the EAC, the local member of parliament and NYU Radio station have decided to support the charity themselves.

Overall, the service was undoubtedly a massive learning experience of a new culture and international development issues and work for us, but it was equally important for me and fantastic to see the tangible progress and support garnered for Naserian as a result of our work, as well as the positive anecdotal feedback from the community.

**Tourism and Value for Money**

In terms of cost, I could see just from looking at the brochure that the big contributors to the bill were going to be the Ngorongoro trip we took at the midway point of our stay with the Maasai, and the few days in Zanzibar before we flew back to the UK. As a young person, funding this trip independently, the logical question then would be whether they were worth it.

Initially, the chance to explore Tanzania for me was a great draw - on previous strict volunteering programmes where there was no travel allowed, I found it frustrating to travel so far and only experience one area of a very wide and varied country. Secondly, what I’ve found in practice on volunteering trips is that, some physical and mental space away can allow you some time to process the sudden immersion into a very different culture and prevent it from being overwhelming, so having the safari trip halfway through was perfect - whilst of course providing an utterly unforgettable opportunity to come face-to-face with countless varied, beautiful (and wild!) animals.

The Zanzibar stay served the same two purposes again, was a lovely and surreal location to relax and enjoy, and the final sight of wild dolphins after a choppy sunrise in the slightly-too-small speedboat, was an absolutely incredible way to tie up such a diverse and fulfilling trip.

To be honest, regardless of whether any of the above attests the value of those two trips, when it comes to justifying the total cost of the trip (I spent just over £3000 including vaccinations, antimalarials and limited spending money) - if you look around you’ll quickly find that there are many equally expensive, and probably shorter, trips, and which offer negligible charitable impact and I would argue are massively less value for money.

**Conclusion**

So, ultimately, what’s my verdict? This trip is not for everyone. You will stay in mud huts, become accustomed to a bucket shower, and you probably will come across a good few *extremely* questionable toilets. Unfortunately, you will even meet some women who have undergone suffering in a way many of us don’t have to imagine. However, if you take the time to listen the same people will astound you with their strength and achievements, shake your hand warmly as you mangle their Maa greetings and chuckle as they dress you in their jewellery and try to teach you the traditional dance.

You’ll begin look forward to the homely handmade bed and *boma* over noisy Arusha hotels. Being greeted with a vibrant wall of voices, colour, smiles and dancing, and exchanging *takwenya* and *supai* will soon become more familiar to you than a simple hello. And hopefully you’ll learn as much, if not more, from Maasai life, Naserian and each other than you will offer in return.

The opportunity to take part in this trip and be welcomed into the Naserian community with overwhelming generosity and trust was an utter privilege, and I would wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone regardless of your age, experience, or interests - all you need is an open mind, a desire to learn… and hand sanitiser - I definitely recommend hand sanitiser!