

“A HOME AWAY FROM HOME”

A Volunteer’s Journey in Uganda



January - December 2014

By Emma Baker

Chapter 1: Introduction

My Volunteering Project

I lived in Uganda for almost 12 months, from January - December 2014, as a volunteer with Inter-Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE-UK). My interest in Africa first emerged during my Geography degree at Exeter University, where I studied topics such as colonialism and post-colonialism, geopolitics and development. From there, I volunteered in Sierra Leone for three months in 2012 with a youth programme organised by VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas). I loved the country and the people, and found the home stay the most inspirational and memorable part of my whole trip.

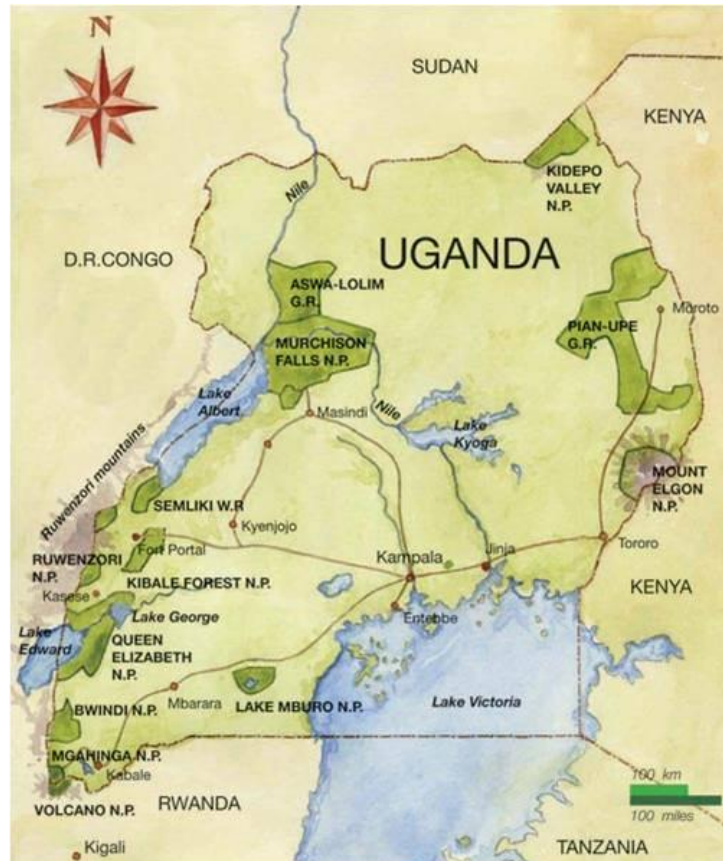
Upon my return to London, I gave a ten-minute micro-lecture at the Royal Geographical Society on the theme 'A home away from home', as well as a number of other presentations to local groups, churches and secondary schools. The "Africa bug" had definitely taken a hold of me; I couldn't wait to find my way back.

I eventually settled on Uganda, another English-speaking country with a fascinating history and culture. I organised a work placement with an environmental organisation in Kampala and, through ICYE-UK, found a host family nearby. I couldn't wait to experience life in East Africa, from the perspective of the local people, and learn about their culture, attitudes and beliefs, as well as their approach to daily life.

Uganda

Uganda lies on the equator, on the elevated basin which rises between the eastern and western branches of the Great Rift Valley. Most of the country is over 1,000m in altitude, and the topography is generally quite flat, except for the mountainous region in the southwest and Mount Elgon, a vast extinct volcano straddling the Kenyan border, in the east.

With the exception of the semi-desert in the extreme northwest, most of Uganda is well-watered and fertile. Almost 25% of the country's surface area is covered by water. Lake Victoria, the largest lake in Africa and second largest freshwater body in the world, is shared by Uganda with its neighbours, Tanzania and Kenya.



Uganda's equatorial climate is tempered by its elevated altitude. In most parts of the country, the daily maximum is between 20°C and 27°C and the minimum is between 12°C and 18°C. Except in the dry north, where in some areas the average annual rainfall is as low as 100mm, most parts of Uganda receive an annual rainfall of between 1,000mm and 2,000mm. There is wide regional variation in rainfall patterns, but generally the wet seasons are from mid-September to November and from March to May.

Country Statistics

Population	38 million
Life Expectancy at Birth	59 years
Adult Literacy Rate	73%
% Population without access to clean drinking water	25%
% Population without access to adequate sanitation	66%
% Population on national poverty line	25%

Chapter 2: Life with a Host Family

My Host Family

My host family lived in the suburbs of Kampala, around 5km from the city centre, in a small, friendly neighbourhood called Lukuli-Nanganda. The family was made up of a mother, father and their four young children (aged 4-8) who lived in a modest house on the same site as a nursery school, of which the mother was the founder and head teacher. Named after the TV programme Sesame Street, the school had around 100 pupils aged 3-6 years, spread across three different classes: Baby, Middle and Top.



Sesame Street Kindergarten

The family was Muslim and the father was polygamous (fairly common in Uganda) so he was rarely at home, spending most of his time with his other two wives. A man of 44, he has over 20 children with four wives; one of whom died tragically in childbirth a year ago, leaving nine children to fend for themselves in the village where they grew up. My host mother, Madina, took in three of the children (8, 18 and 21), but looking after them in addition to her own children is a challenge. She has also been sending food and clothes for the new baby, via a friend of hers who visits them in the village, however a recent family dispute forced her to stop.

It is not usual for Muslim wives to be so open and caring for the children of their co-wives - most of the time their relationships are full of tension and jealousy - but Madina has a loving and compassionate heart, and couldn't help but put herself in the other woman's shoes. Madina often talked to me about her worries of what would become of her children if she died; when it comes to her family, Madina is the sole breadwinner and caregiver.



Madina serving one of the staple foods, '*Posho*', in the kitchen

My Extended Host Family

In addition to the three extra half- brothers and sisters Madina had taken in, we also had two more girls (aged 11 and 14) living with us. Their mother, Madina's cousin, had asked her to take them in as 'house girls' because she didn't have the money to take care of them along with her three other children. House girls are very common in Kampala, where poverty drives people to look for any way to support themselves or their families.

As the name suggests, house girls take care of all the chores that keep the house running: cooking, cleaning and looking after the smaller children. Most house girls do not go to school but Madina, being a strong advocate for education, decided to pay for them to attend the local primary school, 'Happy Days Quality School'. Although the girls have a tough life, away from their family and without any parental support, both are larger than life and are always full of fun and laughter.



Namuddu, 11, one of the house girls

House Help

Luckily for the girls, they are not expected to do *all* the housework. Madina also employs two maids, Mama William and Mama Fina (named after their children) to cook and clean the house and pre-school six days a week. Both start work at 6:30am, bringing their young children with them, and finish at around 9-10pm at night. It's a hard job that keeps them on their feet all day, but there is not much alternative for uneducated single mothers in Uganda.

Although their wages are fair according to Ugandan standards, the money is just enough to live on. Neither of them have bank accounts, as they do not earn enough to save anything at the end of the month. I came to realise how serious this situation was when I found out one day that Mama William's house had fallen down during a storm in the night. She had come to work anyway (what choice did she have?) but had no idea where she and William were going to sleep that night, or the next, or the next. The landlord had declared it wasn't his responsibility and advised her to move out, but without any savings Mama William couldn't afford to rent anywhere else.

Thankfully, I talked to my Dad in England, who agreed to transfer me the money to help Mama William find a new place. It didn't take long; within two days she had found somewhere closer for the same price (£80 a month) – and this house had electricity! This meant that Mama William could install a light bulb, charge her phone and cook by gas cylinder rather than charcoal fire, saving her not only precious money but time too.



With Mama William and William in their new house

My Impressions

I loved staying with a host family, and felt attached to them straight away. Everyone at home spoke English (except for Mama William and Mama Fina), as that is the language they are taught in at school, but I also picked up some of the local language, Luganda. I decided to learn Luganda not just to communicate with those who didn't speak English, but also to understand conversations that were going on around me, at home, in the workplace or on the street. For example, minibus taxi drivers often updated passengers in Luganda, and were always extremely surprised and relieved when I confirmed that I had understood. These taxis were my primary means of getting around, so it helped to be able to communicate with them, not least to stop them from charging me a higher price when they saw my skin colour!

The biggest challenges were the food, in terms of the lack of variety and nutritional content, and the bathroom facilities, which consisted of a pit latrine and a jerry can for a shower, filled up from the standpipe. The cold water was often a welcome relief from the heat and dust of Kampala, though on the days when the weather was cool and wet, it rather lost its appeal. At least I wasn't in the children's position of having to strip off and bathe outside in the rain!

Living with a host family gave me the opportunity to experience the 'real' Uganda, not the one that most tourists or visitors experience. My preconceptions about Uganda were turned upside down when I first arrived, but after some time, the complexity of the living situation began to emerge. For example, from the outside Kampala might look like a modern city with skyscrapers, expensive hotels and fancy restaurants, but the reality is that most Ugandans still struggle to earn a living selling vegetables in the market or cheap Chinese electronics on the street, living in a one-roomed house without electricity or running water. Illnesses such as measles, typhoid and HIV are rife and some families survive on just one meal a day,

leading to severe malnutrition and a low immunity to other infectious diseases such as malaria and even cholera.

At the same time, the middle classes and social elites or 'socialites' are enjoying their buy-one-get-one-free pizzas, driving around in expensive 4x4s with blacked out windows, and dancing the night away in a VIP section of one of the many nightclubs in Kampala. As in any country, the inequality is there beneath the surface, but you only really understand it when you live with a host family and see the reality of how the majority of people live.

Chapter 3: Intercultural Learning

Ugandan Culture

Culture is very strong in Uganda, which has over 50 different tribes, each with its own language and traditions. I was fascinated to learn the subtle differences between the tribes, and to see some of the cultural elements displayed during ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, to which I was invited. Weddings, for example, are in two parts: an introduction ceremony, where the two families meet for the first time, followed a week later by the wedding itself, usually held in a church or mosque, with a raucous reception afterwards.

Ugandans are very proud of their roots, so for people living in Kampala, it's important to stay in touch with and visit the village where you grew up from, even if none of your immediate family members live there anymore. I was honoured to visit villages connected with my host family and friends I'd made, and even more honoured when an animal would usually be slaughtered for me, as chief guest. Although conditions were not as comfortable as in Kampala, the friendliness and relaxed nature of the countryside definitely hit a spot with me.



My host family's village home

Sharing British Culture

I was also keen to share some of my British culture with my hosts, wherever possible. Ugandans are not prone to celebrating birthdays, so when the children's birthdays came around, I would make them a card and present, and take the whole family out for the day, usually to the local swimming pool followed by a "muzungu" meal of pizza, fish fingers and chips. We'd finish up with a cake, which *has* made its way into Ugandan culture, and sing Happy Birthday, with the extra Ugandan verses: 'How old are you now?' and 'You look like an angel'.



Celebrating one of the children's birthdays

I was also heavily involved in the Kampala Music School whilst I was in Uganda, and shared my love of music with the children by teaching them songs using my guitar. The older two of Madina's children showed great aptitude and interest in music, so I spent more time with them, teaching them guitar chords and making up songs together, as well as taking them to performances at the Music School. I also took them to the cinema to see the Hobbit, which they loved. It was their first time not only in a cinema but also in a shopping mall, so we had great fun on the escalators too!

Chapter 4: What I Learnt/Gained from the Experience

In the last year, I have learnt a great deal about myself, particularly how I adapt to situations and respond to problems or challenges. I have learnt the importance of having an open mind and giving time to people because you never know what they might have to offer. And of course, the biggest thing I have learnt is probably being grateful for the life you have, and valuing relationships over material possessions.

My perspective changed greatly during the time I was in Uganda, particularly through living with children. I was constantly amazed by their maturity and selflessness, despite their young age. Madina's kids have next to nothing; they share clothes, shoes, school equipment, even beds, and yet they never complain or fight with each other over such things. When one of them receives something, they all share it, no matter how small it might be; even a single biscuit will be shared out, crumb by crumb. When you witness that level of generosity, you can't help but wonder how the greed and selfishness of the Western world has become the norm. I was surprised to realise how little I could live on, and how one gesture of kindness can go a long way.

Of course, the well-known 'Africa time' phenomenon also had an effect on me; I am now much more relaxed about timings and less stressed about running late or rushing to finish something... tomorrow is another day!

Interestingly, my religious beliefs have also been strengthened. The presence of death is very strong in Uganda, as people die for a great number of reasons including traffic accidents, infectious diseases or simply because they didn't manage to access medical treatment in time (due to distance, overcrowding or financial reasons). As a result, many people put their fate and fortune completely in the hands of God. This is a refreshing attitude that I had never experienced before, which led me to question and explore my own religious beliefs, stimulated also by the church I attended in Kampala.



Singing in church in Kampala

Chapter 5: What Next?

During my year away, I kept an online blog under the name 'Emma's Adventures in Uganda', journaling my thoughts, impressions and stories about life in Kampala. It was here that I noted down and tried to make sense of many of the important issues I had witnessed during my stay, and convey to people the complexity and difficulties of situations I had experienced as a volunteer. It is also an interesting record of how my perspective and personality changed subtly over time, as I adapted to the country and culture. To visit the blog, please follow this link: <http://www.emmasadventuresinuganda.wordpress.com>

There are many topics that I didn't get round to writing about, and some that have occurred to me since returning to the UK, so I will continue to add to the blog as these reflections arise. With over 1,000 visitors to the site last year, and endorsements from volunteering and development organisations in the UK and worldwide, it has clearly been interesting and insightful to many people and something worth continuing.

So, what next? Living in Uganda for 11 months gave me the self-assurance to enrol on a Masters course in Cape Town, South Africa, for the duration of 2015. During my placement with a Ugandan organisation, I gained a real insight into the effects of climate change in East Africa and the efforts that people must go to to adapt and mitigate those impacts. Choosing to study Climate Change and Development will therefore build on this experience, further my research skills in this field, and contribute to my employability for a future career in Africa.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the trustees and team at GIFT, for the support towards my trip. It was humbling to join the list of previous bursary holders, and to know that people with a shared vision of intercultural friendship could offer me the opportunity to follow my aspirations of living and working in the 'Pearl of Africa' - Uganda - for one of the best years of my life.



With my special friend Fina (short for Josephine) at Sesame Street