LGS Trip to Oloosuyian Girls School Kajiado, Kenya

In September 2014 a team of 24 pupils were selected to go on the trip of a lifetime to Kajiado in Kenya along with 8 members of staff in July 2016. After selection we set out for almost 2 years of fundraising with each member of the team organising at least one fundraiser. These ranged from coffee mornings to cultural tasters to sponsored relay teams for the Belfast marathon, with Oliver Mullan running all 26.3 miles! Through these fundraisers, we developed into a team through supporting and getting to know one another.

On 30th June 2016, after all exams were finished, the team attended the final assembly of the year in which Mr Wilson gave his leaving speech, as well as wishing us all the best for our journey. Once we had said our goodbyes, buzzing with excitement we set off for Dublin Airport for a lengthy 8 hour flight to Abu Dhabi. Once in Abu Dhabi, we had a few hours to stretch our legs before hopping on our second flight for 5 hours, taking us to Nairobi airport in the capital city of Kenya, where we were met by Ronnie and Maggi Briggs who stayed with us and guided us throughout the duration of our trip.

After a short bus journey we arrived at the A.C.K Resource centre, our accommodation for the most part of the trip. Shortly after arriving we met with Rev. Naftali who would be our host for the duration of our time there, followed by a cup of tea and a Mandazi (a traditional Swahili fried bread/donut) before heading to our rooms to unpack. Our rooms were very homely with each room of two having their own ensuite. As part of the experience of course a couple of cold showers were had throughout the trip, but the staff at the resource centre always did their absolute best to make sure we were comfortable. Also on arrival we as girls immediately faced our first culture shock when we had to change from our comfy trousers to our long skirts. While in Kajiado it was essential that we covered our knees and shoulders, so to respect the culture of the Maasai people as we were visitors of CMS Ireland.

Following this, the teachers allowed us to walk around the village of Kajiado and take in our surroundings. It was then that we discovered the local supermarket, which as you can imagine we spent many afternoons buying our favourite junk food! As we were walking many of the locals, especially children, stared as they were puzzled by our appearance. The locals were staring purely out of interest as this was probably the first time these people had ever seen such a large group of a different race walking through their town.

Later that night we had our first meal in Kenya. It has to be said that the food at the Resource Centre was nowhere near as bad or different as any of us expected – we even had chicken and chips one night! After dinner each night we remained at the table to hear the Facebook comments from our friends and family at home, often getting a good laugh at the remarks from some family members.

The next day we travelled to Oloosuyian Girls’ School to meet the girls and see the school that we would be working at throughout the next week and a half. Although some of us were slightly nervous we were all absolutely overwhelmed and amazed at the warm, enthusiastic welcoming we received from the girls and the members of staff at the school. There were speeches given by a few team members, giving our appreciation for the hospitality we had already received from the community and emphasising how much we were all really looking forward to the friendships that would arise between us and the girls while working with them at the school. Through song and dance from both the Kenyan girls and an effort from our team, we had already been put at ease by the laughter and light-hearted atmosphere.

In Maasai culture, Sunday is very much a day of worship and rest. On our first Sunday in Kenya we attended a worship service at the school simply held in a classroom. We sang for the girls, and following this they sang for us; they certainly put us to shame with their enthusiasm and powerful voices! The service lasted over 3 hours, another huge difference from what we are used at our churches at home. We sat on plastic chairs in a classroom which had the tables and equipment removed to outside instead of pews, but it did not make a difference to the joy the girls showed during the worship. After the service we got to talk to the girls and they were again so friendly and approachable, making conversation so much easier. The girls speak English for the majority of their lessons so there was very little language barrier, however most of us needed to learn to slow down when talking!

Monday morning was an early rise to begin 5 days of work at the school. After breakfast we travelled the 10 minute journey to the school, with half the group travelling on the back of a pickup, and the other half travelling in a small van. When we arrived at the school we were again greeted warmly by the girls and their teachers, and split into what would be our working groups for the rest of our time at the school. For the rest of the week we were given various jobs such as painting, planting vegetables, digging trenches, general cleaning and constructing outlines of upcoming classrooms to be built using wooden planks. The first few days of working were quite warm, making the physical work slightly more trying, however the girls kept our spirits high by working and singing alongside us. We didn’t have many tools, but we always made do with what we had to get the jobs done! Some of the group were fortunate enough to be involved in the classroom for certain lessons throughout the week such as Chemistry, Physics, French, Biology, English and Arts and Crafts! The girls particularly enjoyed the ‘Coke and Mentos experiment’, along with a Physics lesson involving the water balloon launcher.

During our fourth day at the school there was a football match between LGS and Oloosuyian Girls’ School. We can proudly announce we are the first ever group to defeat the girls in this match! It goes without saying that this was a great achievement as although the girls were lovely and hospitable, it didn’t stop them from playing rough! It was great to see everyone participate, athletic or not. Whether you wanted to play competitively or just for the craic, it was such a great atmosphere for everyone. As there were more Oloosuyian girls than LGS students, they even cut their numbers in half so that half could support OGS and the other half backed LGS. After the match goodbyes were exchanged and we headed back to the centre.

After a week of work at the school it was time for us to act as tourists for a day! On Saturday morning we set off to Nairobi to visit the elephant orphanage. It was such a unique experience having only a rope separating us from a herd of baby elephants. We got the opportunity to hear how each elephant was rescued and brought to the orphanage, and also to pet them and get an abundance of photographs. Following this we travelled to the shopping centre for a nice lunch of pizza and a bit of shopping at the Kenyan markets. We tried our hand at some bartering for the first time and many of us were successful at getting souvenirs for reduced prices. On the way out of Nairobi we picked up both Mr Dunwoody and Mr Paul Stewart from the airport to join us on our adventure. That night it was goat and chips for dinner – a bit chewier than beef, but not as bad as you’d think!

The next day we had another early rise to go to the cathedral for the church service. The cathedral is a huge and beautiful building, however instead of pews they have plastic chairs. The Reverend later explained in the service that they were encouraging donations from the members of the church as they were hoping to install pews in the near future. Again the service was 3 hours long, but was a lot of fun with songs performed by both the Church choir and our group. The afternoon was a time for relaxation and many of us chose to sit in the sun and talk as it was a very hot day.

For the next three days we were back at the worksite with the girls. On Monday the electricity went out, which surprisingly turned into one of the best nights as we all lay down to stargaze after a candlelit dinner. It was such an amazing experience to be able to see Mars and Saturn and to be able to spot many of the constellations.

Two days later it was time to say goodbye to the girls. This was extremely sad as they had been so welcoming, with many of the team receiving goodbye letters and gifts such as handmade bracelets. The girls told us so many times how thankful they were for what we had done for them, showing their appreciation and gratitude. We as a group will never forget how much they value their education and how hard they work to achieve their goals in life.

For another part of our trip we spent time at a rural village called Oltiasika. To travel to this very remote part of Kenya we spent 5 hours in a jeep off track which was bumpy to say the least. However the journey was by no means boring as the view from the jeep was spectacular with the array of wildlife on show such as giraffe, zebra and wildebeest. We stopped at a huge rock half way through to stretch our legs and have lunch at the top of ‘the picnic rock’, from which we viewed a landscape that can only be described as true Africa with miles of orange dry land and trees stretching as far as the eye could see.

When we reached Oltiasika Maasai Rural Training Centre the Maasai people again greeted us with open arms. We were then given the chance to explore our surroundings before regrouping to have dinner and learn about the history of Oltiasika and the work being done by CMS Ireland to develop the area. The next day some members of the team climbed one of the many mountains in the area, taking various routes depending on how adventurous they were feeling. The groups were led by some of the local Maasai men, and by the time we reached the top everyone was filthy with dust. However nobody minded in the slightest due to the breath taking view awaiting us at the end. Later that day the women of the community provided a small market for us, selling hand crafted ornaments, beaded jewellery and spears. That night we enjoyed a traditional celebratory goat roast. The goats were placed on a spits beside the fire as we all sat around the heat. Following dinner the ladies of the village performed a traditional Maasai dance around the fire in colourful, handmade outfits.

When our time at Oltiasika was over it was time to journey 3 hours oin the jeeps to Amboselli National Park. When we arrived we got settled into our luxurious rooms and were surprised to discover that there were monkeys roaming freely around the complex. We had been previously warned to keep the doors to our rooms closed at all times incase the monkeys would enter, however Conor and David got a shock after they left their door open and monkeys ran in and stole their sugar! After a huge buffet lunch and a quick dip in the pool we were off on our first of two game drives around the park. This was a remarkable experience as we drove right next to elephants, zebra, gazelle and wildebeest. We even got a glimpse of hippos and a cheetah, which we were told was a rare occurrence at the park.

After a well needed sleep we had an early rise at 6am for another game drive where we got to see different animals as it was a different time of day, before setting off back to Kajiado Resource Centre to say our goodbyes. At the farewell service some members of the team and staff gave speeches along with a talk from Bishop Gaddiel Lenini, the Bishop of the Kajiado diocese. The farewell service evoked a lot of different emotions from the team; we were sad to be leaving, but also so grateful for the experience that we had and we couldn’t wait to share it with our family and friends.

Before leaving Kenya we were informed that the money raised by the team through various fundraisers and kind donations from the public would be used to refurbish the classrooms at the school, and to build a second floor on to the girls’ dormitory which allows an additional 180 girls to attend the school! Thank you so much to all who supported our fundraising efforts, your generosity is very much appreciated by all those at Oloosuyian Girls’ Secondary School.

The 3 weeks that we spent in Kenya affected all members of the team in different ways. Many of us are now a lot more appreciative of our education, our families, our homes and simple things that we often take for granted. Some of the team discovered their love of travelling, and some hope to continue similar voluntary work abroad in the future. We will never forget the response we received from the girls and the people we met while in Kajiado, as they were definitely just as much a blessing to us as we were to them. When we arrived in Kenya Ronnie told us that the trip came in 3 parts; a long stretch of fundraising, a short burst of activity while we were in Kenya, and then a lifetime of memories to share when we arrived home.

We would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the entire team to thank all of the staff involved in the preparation of the trip for all their hard work. Thank you to Mr Dunwoody, Mr Purcell, Mr Dixon, Miss Doherty, Miss Lindsay, Dr Henderson, past pupil Zara Brown and Mr Stewart for making our unforgettable trip possible.

We hope you have enjoyed reading about our experience, as we would happily do it all over again.

Emma McGraw & Chloe Whiteside