

## Kenya Report

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2019, 24 pupils from Limavady Grammar, alongside their seven leaders, set off to experience the trip of a lifetime in Kajiado, Kenya. Everyone who travelled on this trip, and even those who have been before them, commented on how the trip was life-changing, emotional and extremely rewarding.

The pupils from Team SMILE (2019) reflect:

We had spent two years preparing for our journey by taking part in team building days and organising fundraisers to help raise money which would fund our work in Kenya. After much debate, our team decided to christen itself team S.M.I.L.E which stood for supporting, motivating and inspiring lifelong education. Ultimately, this is a concise summary of the LGS goal within Kenya.

Bidding our families farewell, we travelled to Dublin Airport for a lengthy 8-hour flight to Abu Dhabi. Once in Abu Dhabi, we had a few hours to stretch our legs, eat McFlurry's and catch up on the rather unfaithful Wi-Fi, before hopping on our second 5-hour long flight which would take us to Nairobi airport in the capital city of Kenya. Here, we were met by Ronnie and Maggi Briggs who stayed with us and guided us throughout the duration of our trip. On 29<sup>th</sup> June, the sight of the A.C.K Guesthouse, where we would be based for the next three weeks, was a very welcome one. After so much travelling, our first day was the definition of 'chill'. Our second day would be our special and memorable commissioning service, so we wanted to be well rested. The next morning, we walked to the church beside our accommodation where the Bishop welcomed us to Kajiado and prayed for our work. Team SMILE performed songs for the congregation but, we felt like we could improve as the Kenyans completely blew us away with their passion towards worship.

The Kenya trip is commitment to hard work and the willingness to make a difference. On day three, we were warmly greeted by the Headmistress Mwalimu Joyce, the Oloosuyian girls and their teachers, as we travelled to Oloosuyian Girls' School for the first time. We would spend a lot of time here over the coming weeks. While at school, we painted dormitories, dug trenches for the school's water supply and moved dirt in wheelbarrows in order to make a foundation for a new canteen to be built. Our team was sorted into different groups to tackle the tasks, and we were joined by the Oloosuyian girls.

We all worked together and not only did the bond grow between Team SMILE but also between the Kenyan schoolgirls. Together, we sang and danced (the macarena was a big hit!) and shared stories about our families. The culture is very different in Kenya; relationships are far more important than any work. If someone starts a conversation with you, you are expected to drop all work and build a rapport with that person – some of us were tempted to bring that tradition back to the classrooms of LGS but we decided best not. It was an absolute pleasure to create such close friendships with the girls and we will all cherish them forever.

During our time at the school, our leaders organised a cultural exchange class where some members of team SMILE, and a class of the girls, would sit together and talk about our

traditions and homelife. Jessica Gault and Naomi McCracken demonstrated Irish Dancing and in return the Kenyan girls danced 'The Tarantula' – it's something we would have loved for everyone back at home to see. Afterwards, we taught the class a few Irish dancing moves and they taught us a song 'Jehovah has the final say', which was so much fun to sing and so catchy that we don't think we'll ever forget it!

At the Oloosuyian girls' school, the teachers from LGS taught Maths, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. While the Kenyan girls were more accustomed to traditional note-writing, we wanted to bring them innovative creativity in our lessons. For instance, Mrs Dunlop had a classroom of girls running around outside acting out the respiratory system, which they loved. Laura Stewart also held a class of arts and crafts where the girls made a scrapbook about themselves. This was a beautiful sentiment as art was not a common concept for the girls – the joy on their faces showed how much they loved it. Seeing how the girls engaged with their lessons really resounded with the team - education is just something we took for granted but this provided us with a newfound appreciation for our schooling. After each day at the school, team SMILE returned to our accommodation, got a (sometimes cold) shower and spent the rest of the day playing games and sharing experiences together; these conversations went down especially well with chai tea and some cakes which Maggie would kindly bake for us. You haven't experienced Afternoon Tea until you've experienced Kenya Afternoon Tea.

Every evening, the Guest House, where we stayed, would prepare us a delicious meal. After eating that, washed down with seconds, we would sit together and listen to one of our leaders reading out the Facebook comments from our family members, sent the day before. We always loved this and normally got a good laugh!

Of course, school didn't always spell work. One afternoon, we all took part in a very competitive handball game – LGS v Oloosuyian Girls (ranked the 4<sup>th</sup> best team in Kajiado District). The stakes were high! Despite only learning how to play handball the day before, Team SMILE held their own and managed to score a 10-10 draw. For athletes and spectators alike, the handball game was such a fun experience. Thankfully, we all remained friends after the game and we took a huge photo with all of the girls; the atmosphere was incredible. That wasn't even the only excitement for this day as during afternoon tea, we were introduced to the former Bishop, Jeremiah Tama, who was the starting link of the Kenya project back in 2001. It was nice to hear of the impact LGS has had in Kenya over the years.

Now, did someone say weekend? We didn't go to school every day! On our first weekend, after yet another early start, team SMILE headed off to Sheldrick's elephant orphanage...What an experience! We never thought we would get the opportunity to be within touching distance of thirteen baby elephants. The stories about each elephant were emotional, yet inspiring, because it helped us to appreciate the work that the orphanage carries out. Leaving the elephants, we hopped back onto the bus and headed to a shopping centre in Nairobi. Everyone made a beeline for the market as no one could wait to bust out those haggling skills Mr Purcell had talked so much about. Some people were better at the haggling technique than others - Ethan and Eve got their stories straight and managed up to

70% discounts on each of their purchases - impressive! Purchases included paintings, figurines, jewellery and spears, not to mention one epic African hoodie... Apparently, it's still worn today! At the shopping centre, it was also lovely to have Wi-Fi back again, even for a short while, to contact home, but to be honest, we didn't really miss having internet very much at all.

Having spent over a week at the school, it was time to say a tearful farewell to our Oloosuyian family. During the short time that we spent at the school, we formed such strong and meaningful friendships. The bonds that have been created will be long lasting and cherished by the whole team. Our leaving service, with the girls, was held in a classroom and we were touched to find beautiful cards personalised for each of the 31 members of our team. The service was very moving as each class came forward to say their own, personalised, goodbyes either through dance or song. Reflecting the emotions of the Oloosuyian girls, some of our own team became teary. As our contribution to the service, we performed a crowd favourite – 'Jehovah has the final say' and the girls happily joined in. It touched each one of us that the girls valued the time we spent together as much as we did.

Five safari jeeps accommodated our next journey – from Kajiado to Oltiasika. The journey took 6 hours, on bumpy, not entirely clean roads, but we forgave that as it felt like we were on safari with all the animals we saw along the way. After arriving at Oltiasika we met with Ronnie and Maggie who supplied chai tea and MORE delicious cake. We settled into our new beds and the next day headed to the local primary school where around 300 Maasai children go to school. There was a presentation of sanitary products and sports kits for the school from team SMILE, all paid for with money raised by fundraising and donations for Kenya from everyone back home.

The fun began when the sport began. Three games of netball, volleyball and handball commenced against the primary school. The kids were all determined to win, and everyone involved had a competitive and fun time. After the sport had finished, the boys returned to clean water in a storage tank for the village while the girls in the team headed back to the school for a cultural exchange. It was eye opening and difficult to hear of the challenges facing Maasai girls including body modification and early pregnancy. However, we also shared laughs talking about some other differences, including the fact we keep dogs as pets. What really struck us all was how open and honest they were to discuss some topics that, for us, were very hard to hear. The challenges of the Maasai girls really put things into perspective, especially when we were asked what the main challenges in our lives were. As we had just listened to how girls walked 15km to go to primary school and that their education prospects, which ultimately dictate their future, are so limited, we realised our problems maybe weren't so huge!

Oltiasika is a beautiful place and it was on our second last day that most of the group decided to go hill walking. The biggest hill walk took four hours and along the way, our Maasai guides pointed out lion footprints. The view at the top was beautiful and, on the descent, we saw a giraffe only 100m away. A Maasai women market was organised for us to buy some of their amazing handmade jewellery – not forgetting spears for the boys - and

it was great to know we were supporting the women who would use the money to provide their children with medicine and food. On our last night, David and Schute, our guides from the hike, roasted a goat on an open fire and we had a wonderful meal together. Ronnie and Maggie told us how they had come to be missionaries in Kenya, and we asked them lots of questions about their time in the area. Team SMILE also sang songs and the Maasai women, who worked for Maggie in the kitchen, (and prepared us some wonderful meals) sang traditional songs and danced for us. It was amazing to hear and see!

After an emotional goodbye from Oltiasika, we all got back into our jeeps and headed to Amboseli. The journey was long and bumpy but, again, we managed to see much of Kenya's wildlife including giraffes, ostriches, gazelles, wilder beasts and zebras. Upon arrival at Serena Lodge, it became immediately apparent that we were going to be in for a treat. Luxurious pools, flavoursome buffets, extravagant rooms and bustling wildlife welcomed us to our stay at this special resort. Oh, and not forgetting, a heated face cloth for our not so clean faces. After a quick (and cold) dip in the pool, we got ready for our first proper game drive in the Amboseli savannah. This was an amazing and truly unforgettable experience! The evening safari ended with a busy photoshoot at the observation point which overlooks the beautiful African plains and the mighty Kilimanjaro, as the hazy red sun set for the night. The change between staying at the secluded Oltiasika and Amboseli was really dramatic. Despite this, it was incredible to see the commercial side of Kenya as well as the part of the country that so few people get to see; the most authentic and arguably the most beautiful.

The trip to Kenya was absolutely the adventure of a lifetime. Team SMILE bonded like family and the work which they completed at the Oloosuyian Girls' school was fulfilling for the team as well as the girls. Those girls, at the school, taught us to enjoy every moment and live life to the full. Each member of our team took a part of Kenya home with them and we all came back to our homes with a new appreciation for life and all that it brings. The memories we made together will last a lifetime and the friendships we made with the Kenyans are unforgettable. We are all so grateful for the opportunity given to us to go out to Kenya.

On behalf of Team SMILE, thank you to all of the staff involved in the preparation of this trip who gave their time and efforts to ensure it was well organised both before we went and while we were there. Moreover, THANK YOU to the Kenyans for the kind hospitality they gave us and for teaching us the importance of the simple things in life. Of course, we cannot forget all of the support we received from everyone back home. Once more, thank you to Mr. Purcell, Mrs. Given, Mr. Hamilton, Mrs. Dunlop, Dr. Henderson and past pupils Laura Stewart and Alice Purcell for making the trip to Kenya the greatest Team SMILE could have dreamed of.