

Kempson-Rosedale Trust Report

Name - David Cope

Country visited - Tanzania

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End Date – 08/12/2014

Report

My name is David Cope and I have recently benefited from the generosity of the Kempson Rosedale Enterprise trust, whose substantial grant allowed my friend, Callum Riley Pitt and I to undertake a two month trip to Tanzania. We are extremely grateful to the trust for providing us with funds to make the trip possible. We are also grateful to the FutureSense Foundation who were invaluable in facilitating out volunteer work as well as the major activities we undertook, making our trip as memorable as it could have been.

Upon arrival in Tanzania and after a good sleep, we were greeted by our country manager, Samina, who showed us around the volunteer house. Although our first day was intended to be relaxing, Samina suggested she should take us to Engilang'et, the school where we would be volunteering. We found out later that Engilang'et translates as "education is the light", an ethos reiterated loudly at the start of each lesson by the class. The trip to the school was far from relaxing, as after a short walk to the main street we were squeezed into a small minibus called a "Dalldalla". Although only twelve seats typically feature on these vehicles, on average twenty passengers cram onto the minibus. I spent my first Dalla journey with half of my torso sticking out of the window, but for the equivalent of twenty pence a ride in my opinion it is worth it. However, the most people we ever had on a Dalla was twenty nine, it was so uncomfortable I actually resented being charged for the journey.

A second dalla took us to an open field, where after a short walk down a path we emerged onto an open expanse of ground where close to a hundred children were playing football. The "pitch" was slanted at an angle, continuing down to a river and was really nothing more than cracked earth with two rocks at each end for goalposts. Due to the steepness of the pitch the ball would disappear down the bank, followed by a crowd of screaming children. Upon seeing us many of the kids playing football surrounded us, hanging onto our arms and smiling up at us, asking strange questions like "what is your favourite colour?" in English which they must have learned in class. We were surprised by the openness of the children and found out from Samina that the Maasai culture promoted values of brotherhood and community. Close physical contact, even with strangers was considered normal and we saw many men holding hands while walking together as a sign of brotherly friendship.

The school was made of three separate buildings, the largest containing four classrooms. The second building specifically for class five and the third containing the head teachers office, staffroom and one classroom. It became apparent that equipment was minimal, each classroom contained a blackboard, desks and chairs while the staffroom had all these amenities in addition to a bookcase containing the textbooks used by the entire school, organised by subject and grade. Despite the low

standard of educational material, the children at Engilang'et had a very high standard of English and were performing mathematical functions at a similar standard to an English primary school. The children's ability with English also made teaching much more manageable as our Swahili was very poor!

As far as the teaching was concerned we played to our strengths. I taught English grammar and spelling while Callum took some of the mathematics classes. We both helped relieve some of the workload from the teachers by taking the sports classes which inevitably involved an enormous game of football. We also took on some of the more vocational skills lessons, helping the children learn to draw and also teaching them aspects of gardening and growing vegetables. As well as leading many of the lessons we also assisted the teachers in their own lessons. Some of the most challenging times at Engilang'et came when a teacher would leave the classroom to talk to a colleague, forcing us to improvise and occupy the class in a constructive way. Although we were fulfilling the role of teachers we saw our main function as helping to alleviate some of the workload from the teachers, allowing them to focus more on the core curriculum and improve the weaknesses there. However, both me and Callum felt that by the end of our time volunteering at Engilang'et, we had made a positive and permanent difference to the school.

Our volunteer work during the week was broken up by our activities over the weekend. Although we used Friday as an opportunity to relax and plan our lessons, both Callum and myself were keen to experience what Tanzania had to offer. One weekend all the volunteers opted to visit an oasis outside of Arusha. After a two hour drive in a hired Dalladalla, an hour of which was spent sliding offroad across swathes of nondescript wasteland, we miraculously arrived at an oasis surrounded by palm trees. The oasis was the source of a stream and seemed to fit the stereotypical paradise in the arid desert. We had never seen water as clear and clean before. A rope swing hanging from the canopy above let people dive into the deepest part of the pool and many of the tourists and locals were competing for the most spectacular dive. We watched as one of the Maasai warriors was goaded into diving from the rope swing and rose to the surface thrashing and gasping for air. He was pulled shaking from the water and we overheard that most of the Maasai cannot swim. It was surreal to see such a serious and imposing man reduced to childlike fear. We also found out that if a Maasai male cries he becomes an outcast of the tribe. It seemed that he came very close on this occasion.

Another weekend me and Callum decided to go on a coffee tour to one of the villages in the foothills of Kilimanjaro called Materuni. Compared to the dry and dusty air of Arusha the air in Materuni was refreshing and clear. The village is situated at one thousand six hundred metres above sea level and is used by climbers to acclimatise before ascending Kilimanjaro itself. The best way to describe the landscape of Materuni is to imagine a combination of Tuscany and the Alps. Huge lush ridges and valleys separated the houses of Materuni and to get from one place to another required a number of lengthy ascents and descents. By the time we had reached the village hall we were covered in sweat and breathing heavily, while our guide Eli was smiling cheerfully at us. With the combination of the steep climbs and the altitude the villagers were naturally extremely fit. Because we were sweating, Eli decided to show us the Materuni falls, pointing out the wild Rogusta and Arabica coffee plants growing along the winding paths.

When we arrived at the waterfall it looked like something out of a fairytale. The water fell over a cliff covered in tropical flowers and vines while hummingbirds flitted in and out of the crevices. The water cascaded into a deep pool which Eli encouraged us to go and swim in. Trying to get through the pummelling sheet of water was a struggle but once we were through we discovered a grotto has formed in the cliff face. Sitting in the cave with nothing but the pounding water and the rainbow cast by the sunlight through the spray felt very special, this was a part of Tanzania few people got the opportunity to see.

After being served one of the best meals of our trip we were ushered out to see the peak of Kilimanjaro which had revealed itself from behind the cloud. Even though the night was warm the snow covered peak made us feel cold. Although it appeared to be only a few miles away we were assured it was not as close as it looked. Interestingly, the forty kilometre square encompassing Kilimanjaro has the biggest range of geographical extremes anywhere in the world, starting at tropical rainforest in the foothills up to arctic desert at the peak. As we looked at the mountain I tried not to think about the fact we were going to attempt to climb it.

The weeks of teaching passed very quickly after we returned and although our volunteer work provided a distraction from thinking about the climb we were still counting off the days each night. Eventually the day arrived and we were greeted by Ezikil who was going to be our guide on the trip. We climbed into the minivan and greeted the rest of the porters who would help to carry the tents and food for our trip as well as our main bags. The final man we met was our cook who insisted we call him Mr Delicious, or Mr D for short. Although Ezikil was our guide he spent the majority of the trip coordinating the porters and managing their progress as well as our own while Mr D walked with us.

We arrived at the Machame gate which we found out was one of the most difficult routes to take up Kilimanjaro. Although the moderate tarmac incline for the first mile suggested otherwise the path became less pronounced and steeper as we continued. We started the walk in our t shirts through the dense forest laughing and chatting with our third party member Katie, an extreme sports coordinator and PE teacher from Canada. However, laughter gave way to more strained conversation as the path rose again to a forty five degree angle. We were encouraged by Mr D who said the path was only steep in some areas and was flat in others. Unfortunately we found out that Mr D's idea of "flat" was anything below 45 degrees. Seeing our faces he stayed quiet but smiled as if to say 'you'll soon see what steep is'.

The first two days we walked for approximately eight hours each day. Although some parts were extremely steep our progress was fast and steady. Despite it being winter I only walked wearing two layers, the temperature varied dramatically as the clouds rolled in around us blocking the sun, forcing us to put our coats on temporarily until the clouds passed. As we progressed the plants around us became more and more sparse and wiry as the air became thinner. Reaching our second camp the site was barren rock with only a few weather beaten trees upon which a number of black crows sat and stared at us like we were their next meal.

On our third day we were told we would be climbing high and sleeping low, a technique that should give us the best chance to acclimatise to high altitude by climbing to lava point at 4600 metres then descending into the valley of Barafu and sleeping at Barafu camp at 3100 metres. We expected to

feel some symptoms of altitude sickness and both me and Callum began experiencing headaches as we descended to the Barafu camp.

The next few hours were, for me, the hardest of the entire climb. My dizzy head became worse and worse and I was unable to keep any food down. Callum and Katy coped better than me and ate dinner in the tent while I sat outside trying to ride through the waves of nausea. My biggest worry was that I wouldn't be able to take on enough calories to complete tomorrow's section of the climb. Despite how I felt I asked Mr D to leave a covered plate outside my tent in case I felt better during the night. I woke at midnight to discover that most of my dizziness had abated. A ring of ice had sealed the plate and the cover during the night but fortunately the food was not frozen, just very cold. I also discovered that if I am hungry enough I will eat almost anything.

The next day we began our journey climbing the wall of Barafu; a near vertical rock face that rose six hundred metres into the sky. This was the only part of our trip where we actually had to climb using our hands. While most of the climb was relatively safe there were a few points I would have preferred a harness. Due to the dangers we took this section slowly and crested the ridge without incident. How the porters managed to ascend the wall while balancing heavy bags on their heads is another testament to their skill and dedication. After the wall of Barafu, we then made our way over endless ridges and valleys until we finally reached base camp. The air had become noticeably thinner and looking towards the horizon we could see how far we had come since starting at the Machame gate.

After eating our dinner we were given hot water bottles and were told by Ezikil to have everything ready to go at eleven o'clock. Both me and Callum were nervous and didn't sleep much at all. I remember lying awake and dreading the sound of Ezikil's voice. It seemed as soon as I drifted off Mr D appeared at our door, offering us hot tea and biscuits. We had slept with most of our clothing already on as everything we had to put on was freezing, even the hot water bottles had turned to ice outside of our sleeping bags. After quickly eating breakfast we strapped on our headlamps and followed Ezikil into the night.

Although it was winter we had been very fortunate with the weather and the sky was clear. One of the most special sights of the climb was halfway up to Uhuru peak, seeing the thousands of lights from Moshi beneath us. As the air became thinner we were told to control our breathing, taking one breath and exhaling consecutively on each step. The steady rhythm made the ascent easier as we could switch off our minds and focus on other things. Both me and Callum replayed films in our heads and Katy even found enough air to sing Hakuna Matata. Before we knew it we had reached Stellar Point, which signified we had summited the ridge of Kilimanjaro. We celebrated as we knew we were going to make it to Uhuru peak. As we had climbed so quickly we had reached Stellar Point a few hours earlier than Ezikil had anticipated. We wanted to reach Uhuru Peak when the Sun rose so we spent half an hour at Stellar Point jumping up and down and singing to keep warm.

As the sun started to rise we began our walk around the crest of Kili towards Uhuru peak. The euphoria counteracted any tiredness I was experiencing. However, our trajectory did deviate occasionally due to the dizzy meandering caused by the altitude. We reached Uhuru Peak at 5:45 in time to witness the full spectrum of the starry night and the dawn sky as the sun rose. The euphoria was quickly replaced by the bitter cold. Me and Callum scooped up a piece of lava rock each as a souvenir and we hastily began our descent. Ironically, in my opinion, this was the most punishing

part of the trip. We had to maintain a level of concentration to avoid slipping on the rocky scree while enduring the strain on our knees. However, although our descent was painful our happiness from knowing what we had achieved made the journey much easier.

At Mweka gate Katy bought everyone some bottles of Kilimanjaro beer and the porters performed various celebratory chants. All of the porters looked happy, I remember asking one if he was glad it was over, he smiled and said he was going up again the next day. After six days of no showers and constant exercise I had never been happier to be back at the volunteer house.

We only had a day to rest before we began our safari, making our recovery very short lived. We were picked up by the Jeep early the next day and although we were tired the long journey to Lake Manyara gave us the opportunity to rest. We had waited in anticipation of what we would see on the safari but nothing could have prepared us for how spectacular Lake Manyara was. The lake itself was pink from the sheer mass of flamingos drinking there; compared to dusty Arusha the lake looked like a paradise. Over the next few days we had the privilege and good luck to see all of the big five: lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo and leopard.

Although both me and Callum had seen wildlife documentaries of the Serengeti and other national parks, nothing could have prepared us for how vast and spectacular the parks were in reality. The sheer volume and variety of animals and birds they contained was extraordinary and it was hard to believe they all coexisted in such close proximity to each other. One of the most memorable experiences for me was seeing a leopard walking within a few metres of our vehicle, a sight even the guide stopped to photograph.

We were told that we would be safe while camping in the Serengeti and that we should ignore the ominous rustling during the night and above all else stay in our tents. Despite our trust in the guides assurances, during breakfast we watched an enormous bull elephant wander into the camp, absent mindedly trampling one of the tents in the process. It then charged at a group of tourists trying to take photos and had to be scared off using flaming pieces of cardboard. Fortunately nobody was in the tent at the time but it was terrifying to see something so large charging at us.

The Safari signified a perfect end to an incredible trip. Over the few months we had stayed in Tanzania both me and Callum had truly experienced local life, making genuine friendships, some of whom I still keep in contact with over email and facebook. Although it was not all a relaxing experience with some situations demanding a lot of effort and perseverance, it is these times that I am most proud of and remember most vividly. I feel that the trip has changed my outlook on the world upon returning to England, but that I had fundamentally changed for the better. It was an experience that I will treasure for the rest of my life and certainly never forget.