

‘Wot – no Cockerels!’ – A Family holiday with a difference

To celebrate their Silver Wedding anniversary and the longer summer holidays at the end of GCSEs and A Levels, and despite no previous experience of Africa, the Sawers family from Cheltenham volunteered to see what they could enjoy and achieve in a visit of just two weeks. The following is taken from Julia’s account.

“We first heard of Kagando from a surgeon member of our church who has visited regularly for working holidays. His enthusiastic account of the area and its people during a fund-raising appeal challenged us to ask whether there was anything a family of tourists with mixed skills could do usefully during an annual holiday. His positive response and advice found all four of us at the end of June on the eight hour drive from Entebbe. We can be grateful that all our plans worked well even if the standard of travel and accommodation was more ‘basic’ than we expected.

Kagando is a very beautiful area, much more verdant than we expected, set in a valley with an imposing mountain backdrop. The hospital guest house was welcoming and clean with Jolly, the lady in charge, really warm and friendly. The food was high in carbohydrates but all eatable. Most was enjoyable. Probably we don’t need to eat any more goat for a while, and possibly never need to eat steamed plantains, (matoke), again, but the groundnut sauce was magnificent when you got over the surprise at its colour! Chicken keeping on the compound ensured there was no oversleeping. “Wot – no Cockerels!” was the surprised greeting for the first morning without them.

The constant calls of ‘Mzungu! Mzungu! (white person)’, ‘You are my friend’, ‘Give me money’, ‘How are you?’ etc were a wearisome reminder of our inexperience and culture. We could not be anonymous and just get our bearings. We were a public spectacle that we found difficult to start with, but it became easier when we felt more confident and went round on our own rather than all four of us together.

We were given a tour of the hospital in our search for something we could contribute during our brief stay. The hospital facilities were much more limited than we expected and we felt awkward watching other’s distress and suffering. The wards were too full with mattresses on the floor and the cleanliness variable. The ‘intensive care’ areas were just normal beds with wooden frames over them and some extra equipment. Andy had the opportunity to watch a day in theatre where a British plastic surgeon based at a mission hospital in Kampala was on one of his regular visits doing cleft lips and palate repairs amongst other things. This was fascinating if somewhat spoiled by the cockroach in the sink, the rat poo on the shelf with the medical text books, and the virtual absence of any visible organisation on the progress of the list.

Having been briefed to take craft materials for the children, a regular event became a play therapy session at either the nearby orphanage or on the children’s ward for those ready for discharge, their siblings and the children of the ‘attendants’ who live in the hospital to cook and care for their sick relatives. We made lion masks, bead jewellery, card jewellery, crowns etc. We were struck by the sheer lack of any stimulation or fun and play for the children. Some took a long time to get the hang of using a glue stick or felt tip pen, though others grasped them enthusiastically from the start. At the first session an elderly man thanked Ben (our son) and I for caring enough for their children to make them smile. Language was difficult. Those who could translate were busy elsewhere so we had to keep attempts at stories very simple. When Andy joined in the women could not contain their delight that a grown man would play with children.

On our first evening we walked up the hill above the compound. Loads of children followed us, held our hands and tried to talk to us. They mobbed Emma (daughter) and Ben, delighted to try on their sun glasses, laughed at their photos etc and so after that evening, they went back up the hill nearly every night to play games with them. We called it their “outreach.” They made up a variation of ‘Duck, Duck, Goose’ ~ ‘Goat, Goat, Snake’! The children all loved it and Emma and Ben loved bringing joy to these children whose lives seemed pretty empty, some attending school but many from families where education is an unaffordable luxury. Children at the orphanage¹ were materially better off. Although separated by the language barrier, we prayed they would understand the compassion that linked our attempts to amuse them with the Christian foundation that motivates the hospital and its staff.

I also had an introduction to the work founded by the parents of children with disabilities as a means of helping each other². Disabled children have no value or status and this indigenous group helps to challenge that view in practical ways. I was able to visit a few children in their own homes and felt privileged to see a far from sanitised view of Uganda. I saw a wheelchair made out of an old white plastic patio chair on wheels, and a set of wooden parallel bars which a dad had made for his daughter.

Andy spent a lot of time finding out about a micro-finance where small loans are made to projects run by individuals and small groups. He gained great respect for the young accountant who had set the project up amongst his own people, with a growing variety of ideas now limited by lack of start-up capital.

It was stocktaking at the stores which Emma and Ben found the most tedious, filthy and hot. They did more of this than either Andy or I. Medicines well past their expiry date were solemnly put back on shelves or in the fridge. Ben found himself counting condoms with a very elderly Ugandan man, and for the record there were 2,961 colostomy bags at the store of varying sizes and all mixed together!

So, lots of experiences, lots of humour and anecdotes. As our first taste of Africa, much seemed crude and chaotic, but materials were limited in ways we did not have time to investigate. At every turn the staff were committed, kind, professional and generous to us. The almost universal cheerfulness and interest of the people was a joy when we had grown accustomed to it and we never felt threatened. We admired their ambition, fortitude and determination to rise above difficulties that they face every day but which we scarcely bother to think about.”

[Editor's note: Tourism in Kagando is an un-tapped source of revenue at present, though the Queen Elizabeth National park is not far away – the Northern boundary only 5 miles, the entrance to the crater fields only 15 miles and Mweya Lodge, 30 miles. The Guest house makes a profit which goes straight into KARUDEC funds, so volunteers are contributing to the project just by staying there in addition any useful work they can do. There are tentative ideas on developing visits based on ‘ecological’ principles by tourists who will either work in the hospital and community or investigate the flora, fauna and habitat of the nearby hills and valleys, or just enjoy the mountains. A South-Eastern approach to the Rwenzori peaks that would pass through or close to Kagando has been explored only partially.

Friends of Kagando would be pleased to hear from anyone with interests in ‘eco-tourism’ in Africa and willingness to investigate or develop facilities in this amazing geological, biological and sociological intersection. The Sawers would be happy to answer questions about their visit. Please write or email for how to contact them.]

¹ The orphanage started by former nurse aid Dorothy Nziambi is now known as NOTDEC (Nzirambi OrphansTalent Development Centre) is supported by the UK based charity NOTDEC UK [www.notdec.org.uk]

² Save the Disabled Childrens Home (SADDICH). This is now supported by a UK based charity [www.accomplishtrust.org.uk], set up by a former physiotherapist at Kagando, Rebecca Baldock.