

PROJECTO OCEANO – JULY 2011 REPORT



What do the female anopheles mosquito, tear gas, the Yorkshire Dales and a wounded leopard have in common? The answer is very simple...they all played major roles in the holiday of a wandering Projecto Oceano employee. If this has piqued your interest, please read on...!

After 3 busy months managing Projecto Oceano, AZlera's flagship education and social entrepreneurship project in Northern Mozambique, I packed a tent and a change of clothes and headed West for the great African interior. As expected, D-Day brought a mixture of sadness and excitement. Sadness at leaving a place which has very quickly become 'home', but excitement at setting out for the great unknown of modern-day Nyasaland (Malawi) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). The 'warm heart of Africa' beckoned first, with the promise of laid-back beaches and mountain scenery interspersed with outrageously uncomfortable hitch-hikes, followed by some big-game viewing in Zambia. I was lucky enough to spend a couple of days on a cotton estate in Northern Mozambique on the way, getting a first-hand experience of how cooperation farming works at grass-roots level in Africa. After a whistle-stop tour of the operation, it was over the border by bicycle and into English-speaking Malawi, famous for the warmth of its people, it's wonderful animals and the stunning Lake Malawi.

Unfortunately, the first beast I encountered happened to be a mosquito which, equally unfortunately, happened to be malarial. It is certainly not ideal to get malaria when camping in the bush, and it definitely wasn't ideal to have to head for a third-world hospital having just arrived in Malawi. The lake was more blurry than stunning by the time I finally managed to leave (fuel shortages mean horrendously infrequent public transport in rural areas), but it was a relief to get to the city of Blantyre and lie low for a week or so to recover from the medication.

My first Malawian experience didn't curb my enthusiasm to spend more time on the Lake, so North I headed to meet up with my incredibly (and perhaps unfortunately...?) Frenchified twin brother. White jeans and designer facial hair whilst backpacking in Africa...*je crois qu'il a vecu trop de temps a Paris.*

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Luckily even a dubious blond moustache couldn't allay my happiness on arrival in Nkhata Bay, a small lakeside town near Tanzania. This buzzing little port happily fulfilled all the clichés that surround Malawi – friendly locals, lovely weather, and some incredible sunsets over a Lake which did indeed reveal itself to be truly stunning. Some sober birthday celebrations were conducted on 4th July, this time without the traditional plethora of cold beer, given malaria's effects on the liver. We did some fantastic hikes through the mountainous Northern provinces, which fully deserve their reputation as Africa's version of England's Yorkshire Dales. We visited Livingstonia, a beautiful Scottish-style town perched on the edge of Africa's great Rift Valley Escarpment – a truly bizarre experience enjoying a cup of tea in coffee shop that could have been plucked straight from a small town outside Edinburgh. Interesting in hindsight were the stories recounted everywhere about the 'chilled-out' attitude of Malawians. We were repeatedly told that in this country, one of the few in Africa to have never experienced a civil war, the thought of aggressive populist politics were so far away that "serious civil strife is unimaginable", despite constant criticism about its government. Unbeknown to all, the definition of irony was soon to rear its ugly head...

Before we discover how tear gas fits into a blog about education on a small island in the Indian Ocean, a quick resume on a memorable few days in the hinterlands of Eastern Zambia. Having spent a few months working there back in 2009, it was great to be heading back to the edge of Zambia's famous South Luangwa National Park. All our hard work in anti-poaching seemed to be finally paying off through some healthy animal numbers, including a group of loping giraffe that looked curiously like Peter Crouch. Often derided as a romantic Hemingway-style luxury experience, there is still no wildlife experience comparable to time spent in the African bush. Having passed through numerous filthy bus depots, avoided hassling touts and pickpockets whilst picking our way through rubbish-strewn streets (as well as some very good experiences!), it was fantastic to encounter so much pride in preserving the raw natural beauty of parts of this continent. A lengthy nocturnal encounter with a wounded leopard was less than pleasant, with an hour and a half spent worrying whether death would come via a charge from the cat itself or from a stress-induced heart attack at the tender age of 25 + 7 days, but overall it was great to get back to nature!

Returning to the acrid smell of tear gas, those optimistic words "serious civil strife is unimaginable" soon seemed well, wholly unimaginable, as Malawi experienced some, well, serious civil strife. With Malawi providing the quickest route back to work in Mozambique, I crossed its Western border from Zambia with well-founded trepidation due to the previous day's violent demonstrations about fuel prices. Like a match to a tinder box, these organised demonstrations provided the spark to briefly turn the 'warm heart of Africa' into the burning heart of Africa. Lilongwe, Blantyre and Mzuzu, places that had seemed so tranquil only 10 days previously, were the scenes of looting, burning supermarkets, trampled policemen and ultimately some moderate military intervention. Holed up in a grubby Lilongwe hostel with no transport advised (or even available, given the fuel problems), it was a nervous couple of days listening to the odd burst of gunfire and tear gas explosion. It was with considerable relief that I managed to get a lift East to the Mozambican border and, a couple of days later, back to the tranquillity of Ilha de Mocambique. Despite having an incredibly interesting and varied few weeks, it has never felt so good to get home!

In my absence Projecto Oceano has been wholly managed by our young local teaching staff. It was rewarding and satisfying to see how well the Project had been run, with our regular social debates, I.T. classes and homework sessions just as popular as before. We face challenges in the coming weeks that we must prepare to face, with school-leaving exams now a month closer, and managing motivation during the upcoming four weeks of Ramadan. Also in the pipeline is our inaugural monthly participation in a new community fair, with our students keen to raise money for the Project through capoeira demonstrations and carefully made handcrafts. The ravages of malaria mean that rugby practice has been suspended for a few weeks, giving us all more time to spend in the classroom...