

Chris' blog from Kenya and Uganda, Jan / Feb 2019 – Part One

Arriving into Nairobi last Thursday was less of a culture shock than some other visits to Africa. I set off just two days after a terrorist attack in Nairobi city centre. It makes me wonder how many visitors have misgivings about safety when they travel to London....

I am volunteering for a month at an NGO (Charity) called Project Xavier, which focuses on supporting refugees. I am here to help refugee organisations (CBOs – Community Based Organisations) to build up their accounting expertise.

I am staying with a local family that works with Project Xavier, in their home in the suburbs. This street scenery might look familiar to residents of Paddock Wood in Kent. The difference is that there is a gate at the end of the street with a security guard, and most of these terraced houses have a secure gate before you can reach the front door. On the plus side, it's a very friendly community, kids play freely in the street!



We are 15 mins walk from the shanty town of Kibera. The bright lights of central Nairobi are about 20 mins drive away. Just outside our gate is a market street along which I walk ten minutes to the charity office at the start of the day, before heading out to work at one of the refugee organisations.



From my brief time here so far, there are two types of shop – big swanky shopping malls (we have four within twenty mins walk), and local market shops such as you see above (and some brick ones with tin roofs which still look like shacks). Quite often I look at these streets and think “what a mess” but there are often reasonably substantial homes just behind the shacks.

Nairobi residents are perhaps a bit more commercially focused than some other places that I have been to recently. I couldn't help laugh at this noticeboard near the end of our road:



This week I have been working at a CBO refugee organisation called L'Afrikana, whose mission is to help refugees to get over the “fear of integration”. They were founded by Congolese refugees. They have a tailoring workshop, an arts and crafts workshop, and also a music recording studio. An example of their integration work is Congolese dance workshops, which works really well because it attracts locals and refugees to come together. I must go along some time to learn Igisirimba! Actually these dance groups are really good and are able to travel across Kenya giving fee-earning public performances.



Their office and the view from the balcony are in the pictures above. I get a crowded bus there from near the charity office. All very basic, but a really warm welcome once you get inside.

Here is the tailoring workshop



And the arts and crafts workshop, with Gilbert (my client) in the blue shirt



I have spent three days at L'Afrikana, understanding their needs and recommending some improvements. Much dialogue has been in French, which Congolese are more used to than English.



I have also designed them a monthly profit and loss account on Excel. I spent quite a few hours last night doing this on my own laptop. The cell-protection feature to protect formulas being overwritten is the most time consuming part. Then when I go to L'Afrikana this morning I discovered that Gilbert's Mac-based Excel protects formulas in a completely different way – so I had to borrow his rather ancient laptop to rework it all....

I was deeply touched when Gilbert presented me with an item he has made in the Craft studio, at the end of my work at L'Afrikana this afternoon. These people have so little, they can't afford to give gifts but that is what they choose to do.



It's a model, about four inches tall, of three very familiar people on route to Egypt – Joseph, Mary and Jesus. People who experienced the challenge of being refugees themselves. I look at this model and I see Joseph, hungry but smartly dressed, walking with dignity and caring for his family. I can see why a refugee chose to make me this beautiful gift to remember the work of L'Afrikana.

That's all for this edition. Next week I will let you know how I have got on with the next couple of CBOs, and share stories of some other wonderful places I have visited at the weekends!

Chris