

Stories from the Warm Heart Of Africa by Francesca Thomson

Expectation is a strange thing. It twists and warps all feeling and thought to convince the brain of exactly what is in store. We as people never cease to anticipate and expect, to always want to know the unknown, and we never seem to be content with the concept of "wait and see." Despite this need, we never fail in losing our quest for knowledge, and we are constantly surprised by the unfolding of events.

I myself had given a countless number of attempts at trying to anticipate how two weeks spent in Malawi would be. We stayed with girls of our own age in their boarding school for a week in the northern region of the country, and then travelled through the southern region, exploring what the country had to offer. Despite my best efforts, my trip was so much more than anything that I could have imagined.

Some aspects of the trip were exactly what I expected. For example, the incessant amount of creepy-crawlies of all nature, found in every crook and cranny anywhere we went was an unfortunate truth, but one which I had anticipated. Similarly, I predicted that two weeks in Malawi would not leave us all smelling like roses, therefore I raided Boots and as a result had a veritable drug store worth of baby wipes, sprays, and dry shampoo packed in my suitcase.

However, aside from these trivial things which a combination of common sense and an awful lot of Googling had prepared me for, Malawi never ceased to amaze and surprise me, every hour of every day that I was there.

Staying at the school, in the boarding hostels where all of the girls stay when at school gave me an authentic and in depth understanding of what life can be like for people there. One thing that I still remember vividly, and I continuously think about, was when we walked around the school grounds. We visited one of the other hostels, and it was quite shocking to see the extremity of how basic the conditions were where some of the girls lived. The hostel was a miniature labyrinth of tiny rooms and corridors, and girls made their beds by laying out mattresses on every inch of floor.

However this is not the thing I remember. I recall the pride these girls took in their home. The place was spotlessly clean, beds were a kaleidoscope of colour, spread with every shade of material imaginable. Each girl wanted us to sit on *their* bed, or look at *their* belongings. Not once did I hear any of them complain about how they lived, and instead they focused on all of the positives, for after all education for girls is scarce in Malawi and so they are part of a small minority who have access to it. But their endless positivity rubbed off on me and so I no longer saw it as very basic living conditions, but instead I remember the beautiful materials they had covering their beds, and the panoramic views of the mountains from the hostel. I surprised myself by not feeling sorry for them at all, but instead all I had was the utmost respect and admiration for them, and their incredible attitudes.

This attitude had a huge effect on me and stays with me still today. It all sounds horribly cliché, but it makes me stop every now and then, to realise just how lucky I am and it also makes me realise I never appreciate what I have enough.

The sense of community around the school was everywhere, and we all felt part of this community because of how welcoming the girls were. I had always hoped that I would get to know a lot of the girls before I came, but I never expected to find just how well I got on with so many of them. I grew incredibly close to a girl named Nomsa, and even after only one week I would say that I became solid friends with her, and I still communicate with her fairly regularly now. I spent several evenings in her dormitory, and we chatted about a vast array of topics – everything from books to family to future plans. Although our lives are so different, in some ways I felt that we were actually very similar and this exceeded my expectation as I did not expect to share so much in common with a girl out there, but it turns out that our polar opposite lifestyles didn't seem to make much of a difference.

Something else which is glued in my memory of my experience, was the singing. It is hard to imagine how special the singing is, but song is everywhere. On a visit to church one Sunday, the entire congregation sounded like an award-winning gospel choir, even though for them this was just normal hymn singing. It turned out that this was not exclusive to church on a Sunday. The girls at the school taught us so many songs, some of which they wrote themselves. Almost all the time spent at the school, somewhere, a group of girls would be singing. The voices were always spectacular to listen to and formed a harmonious chorus of richness – it seemed on rather a different league from our Monday morning assembly hymn practices! One of my fondest memories of the school was in our leaving celebrations, when everybody joined together and sang and danced in a traditional Malawian way. For me, this was one of the most beautiful and vivid tangible representations of the incredible culture.

For a long time I had encountered people, whether that be in person, on the television or by reading articles, who had travelled to Malawi, and I was fascinated, yet confused by the common opinion they all shared about it – that it was a place that you could fall into a deep love with. I had never understood how a place riddled with horrible disease and crippling poverty could be a place which was possible to have so much affection for. However after visiting there myself, I too shared in the romance of this wondrous place. I fell in love with the landscape and the wildlife; one of the most peaceful and enchanting experiences was watching the birds glide over an evening sky on fire with the exquisite brilliance and utter serenity of the African sunset. I fell in love with the people too, the endless grace, humility and pride they had, reflected everything the country stood for, and made me see the beauty in everything about their simple lives. I consider myself incredibly lucky that I was able to experience this country, and two weeks there was enough for me to become drawn into a love affair with the warm heart of Africa.