

Commonwealth Reflections – Tanzania

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In 2015, I spent two and a half months living and volunteering in Tanzania, East Africa. One of the first things I remember noticing – apart from the terrifying road rules in the unofficial capital, Dar Es Salaam (it seemed to be a contest for who could hold their nerve the longest at a roundabout) was how lush and green everything was. We often have a western stereotype of Africa being dry and dusty, and I did see some landscapes matching that description, but what stands out in my mind are the glistening Ashoka trees lining the streets of Dar Es Salaam and the riots of red and purple flowers blooming from roadside bushes in Arusha.

Never left home before

As a 19-year-old who had never left home before, I took this slightly daunting step because I wanted to see the world from a different perspective, and I certainly got my wish. From handwashing my clothes in plastic tubs in the garden to catching a dala dala (minibus) to town in order to connect to the Internet, I experienced a very different way of life, although I was staying with relatively affluent host families and would never claim to have known the life of an average Tanzanian citizen.

Until prompted by this project, I had never thought of Tanzania in terms of its Commonwealth connections – to me, the term is a slightly queasy reminder of empire and the forceful subjugation and cultural erasure this often entailed. I'm so glad that Tanzania has not been defined by its time as a German and later a British colony – it has a colourful, laid-back, friendly culture that is all its own. Looking back, there were a few tangible reminders of how the links between our countries are now used for good – my first host family had two sons who divided their working time between Birmingham and Dar Es Salaam, sharing knowledge and enriching both cities.

Experiences

My time in Tanzania provided me with so many experiences I'll never forget: watching zebra and gazelles streak across Ngorongoro Crater after a lion hunt; travelling to work in a dala dala crammed with goats, chickens and bags of grain; seeing an impossible number of stars glinting above Kilimanjaro's snow-capped Uhuru peak. I can't claim to have done much more than scratch the surface during my ten weeks there, but the country and the people I met will always hold a special place in my heart. If I'm lucky enough to meet any Tanzanian competitors at the Commonwealth Games this summer, I'll be more than happy to dust off my few rusty phrases of Swahili and start a conversation. After all, isn't that really what it's all about?