



Volunteering in Kenya (for therapists & teachers..)

To sum Kenya up in a short paragraph would be like describing a haute-couture gown as a dress. For many people, Kenya is many different things: game parks or desert, peace or insecurity, big skies or crowded cities, a political quagmire or relative stability, abundance or poverty. The range is vast as are the feelings and opinions about it. The best thing you can do is come and see for yourself, and based on the experiences of a plethora of guests and volunteers in the last two years, I can promise you will have an amazing time.

Kenya is a country of approximately 30 million inhabitants. Located in East Africa its neighbours are Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan to the north, Uganda and Lake Victoria to the west and Tanzania to the South. To the east, Kenya's coast spills into the Indian Ocean. The Kenyan people are exceptionally friendly and welcoming and though Nairobi has an outrageous reputation for violence and crime, within the city you will find lush leafy neighbourhoods, fancy restaurants and shopping malls only short distances from sprawling slums. I reiterate- Kenya has the spectrum.

The education system like everything else has a range and on the lower end are the local government schools. With free primary education and more recently free secondary education, everybody (theoretically) has access to school. Some primary schools have 3000 registered students, so class sizes can exceed 120 students per class. Usually students are crammed into seats and sharing books, but you will find that classroom behaviour management is not something you will have to deal with. Students are diligent and attentive and the general attitude towards education is that it is a privilege to be here.

In the last 2 decades with a push from international organizations a fairly comprehensive special education identification, assessment and referral system has been put in place, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and the support of Kenya Institute of Education (KISE). Each district has an Education Assessment Resource Centre (EARC) which is staffed by experienced KISE trained special education teacher. In addition to assessing children and placing them in appropriate classroom settings, EARC staff are responsible for community outreach and disability awareness, setting up special needs classrooms within schools, supporting teachers, supporting community based rehabilitation groups and liaising with the District Education Office. Because of the competency of these teams, their varied work loads and their receptiveness to working with volunteers, anyone interested in coming to Kenya would be placed within a district EARC. The EARC team can then be responsible for your placement in an appropriate school.

The Nitty Gritty: Volunteering - all these positions would be unpaid and officially you would be a VISITOR. You are welcome to come for a short or longer period of time (Kenyan visas are 3 months and can be purchased on arrival). Please note terms run from January-March, May-July and September-November. It is difficult to get visitors satisfactory experiences in April, August or December. Schools are out and most EARCs are busy training teachers for KISE's distance learning program.

In most districts the EARC can find you accommodation with a family or we can help direct you to a cheap option.. for example in Mombasa people stay at the Polytechnic which is less than \$10 a night and lovely!

The following are some of the districts which I would highly recommend placing visitors in. Some people have pretty specific preferences over rural versus town placements so decide what sort of experience it is you are looking for. Please note that all these schools have serious needs! Whilst the basic infrastructure might be in place (walls, doors, roof) this is not always the case!



Outdoor classroom, Kisumu district

Below are some details about the individual districts but do your own research on the place by reviewing a Lonely Planet Guide or go online.

- City Primary School, Nairobi

This could be a rewarding and frustrating placement. City Primary has the main autism program in the city (perhaps country?). They need help, but are receptivity to feedback can be mixed. You would be able to model one on one interaction with children and help teachers to lesson plan. There are lots of staff here so it can be hard to motivate and implement change. The kids typically spend their days going on long walks. Informally I would say there is more developmental delay in this program than autism. Some children are friendly and interactive, some are vocalizing and some have one word utterances. You would have to arrange your own accommodation in Nairobi.

- Kajiado EARC

Kajiado District stretches south of Nairobi down to Namanga on the Tanzanian border. On a clear day you can see Mount Kilimanjaro. Amboseli game park is in this area. Kajiado feels like a dusty frontier town. This is Masai country so you often see the Masai in their beaded jewellery and tire footwear. This would truly be an experience to be based here! Though it's less than an hour from the capital it feels like the middle of nowhere! There are several schools that could benefit from a volunteer and most of them can probably find you a place to stay nearby. The EARC team is dedicated and in close contact with a District Education Official who used to be their coordinator.



Il Bissell Primary School, Special Unit for the Hearing Impaired

- Kakamega Educational Assessment Resource Centre (EARC)

Kakamega is in western Kenya about an hour north of Kisumu (the third largest city in Kenya- it's really a large town). Kakamega is where the national forest is located and it really is a cool and beautiful part of the country. There are two schools in Kakamega district that would be AMAZINGLY receptive to having student or volunteer teachers: Daisy School for the Physically Handicapped and Emusala Primary School.

- Kisumu EARC– also New Life Orphanage & Kisumu Provincial Hospital

There are plenty of opportunities in Kisumu. If you are a rehabilitation health care professional you could also spend time at the hospital and the orphanage. For all volunteers, spending Wednesdays at the EARC helping them with assessments and going on outreach visits would be an insightful and useful way to spend your time. Schools that may particularly benefit from a volunteer include: Magadi Primary School, Kosawa Primary School and Alara Primary School. A homestay with a Kenyan family in the nearby Maragoli hills (A short walk and 20 minutes by matatu from town) would be possible. Alternatively there maybe accommodation for about \$12 a night at a guest house in Milimani (the wealthy neighbourhood where the orphanage is). Kisumu is an easy place to live..



Community Outreach in Kisumu District



Early Childhood Classroom in Kisumu District

- Mombasa Educational Assessment Resource Centre (EARC)

Mombasa is Kenya's second largest city and a wonderful place to visit and live. It can be **exceptionally** hot and humid in January and February but it has a fantastic coastal feel. I love Mombasa and the surrounding areas. North and south of Mombasa are beach areas and far north you have Malindi and the Gedi ruins. From here you can do snorkeling day trips on a dhow, or get to Shimba Hills game park and perhaps further afield Tsavo East and West.

The EARC had a VSO supported speech therapist for 2 years and in my tenure here has successfully supported two other short term volunteers (a physio and a speech therapist). You would be working closely with Dorothy Mvoi (who is delightful). Previous volunteers can be contacted directly about their experiences living with a family and working at the EARC.



Special units, Mombasa district

- Mumias EARC

Another EARC, Mumias is a small town about an hour east of the Ugandan border and about an hour west of Kakamega. This is a great team, and they have a beautiful new facility. You would work closely with Martin Nafukho an occupational therapist (I can send you an article I wrote with him to give you more of an idea if you like). There are plenty of schools in this district to choose from and a home stay could be provided by either a family or the EARC coordinator. They have recently had a very positive experience with a short term volunteer. Jane Emes could be contact directly for more information on her experiences. There are usually also Dutch volunteers based here at St. Mary's Hospitals. St. Mary's has a guest house which is a relatively cheap accommodation option if you would not prefer a home stay.

- Vihiga EARC



The EARC compound

Vihiga District borders Kisumu, so you would be based 45 minutes outside of town. You would be working alongside Wellington Manyola who is wonderful and dedicated. I am fairly certain he could organize a homestay for you in Vihiga. Much of your time with him will be spent on the back of a motorbike going to very rural schools, however, St. Ursula's School for the Mentally Handicapped, Madegwa Primary School or Ebusiratsi Special School would all be receptive and willing hosts. The district is fortunate to have a very invested and competent District Education Officer who is involved in the activities in his district. This is the one district where quality assurance actually happens in special education classrooms and teachers actually do lesson plans and paperwork.



Madegwa Special Unit

Visitors need to have realistic expectations about what they hope to achieve during their time here. For most people, all the benefits of this exercise will be in your own personal growth and understanding. You may see very little change in the classroom, and have to recognize that the way people generally teach is the way they were taught unless there is extensive support (at all levels) for new, creative and innovative ideas. The school system here is based on learning by rote memorization, chant and response. Whilst there are significant limitations like class size, lack of materials, lack of texts etc. it would not be impossible to encourage project work, or reframe questions in a way that promote problem solving and critical thinking rather a direct delivery of the information. Small groups work could be also accommodated even at the early childhood level.

I advise you however to go in and watch and observe. Support teachers, don't criticize or start throwing suggestions at them. After a week volunteer to take over the teaching of one class, model your ideas and then discuss them. People really are receptive and will be THRILLED to have you in their classrooms, but tread gently. **They are the experts** on their children and their system. You are merely coming in to see what is going on and how you might work together.

Protocol must be observed. You must meet with the District Education Officer before going to a school and you must always meet with the Head Teacher (principal) when arriving at a school. The EARC team will be able to take you through this. Listen carefully to people. Kenyans don't always say 'no' but it is clear they are not in agreement. Ask questions and incorporate feedback for greater buy in. Make your ideas seem like their ideas if possible. Please also dress like a professional. It will be hot in most cases, but trousers and a shirt is appropriate for males, perhaps even a tie. Long skirts are appropriate for females. Dress conservatively wherever possible especially on the coast and in rural areas, it will make people more responsive to you.

Most visitors want to bring things for the schools and this is highly recommended. However, to support local economy it is better to fund raise back home and buy things like scissors, paper, glue, pencils etc. in Kenya. However, children's books, good quality crayons and markers and stickers are difficult to find.

Do not bring valuables to Kenya. Although I have never had anything stolen, I rarely have anything on me that would upset me if it disappeared. This gives you one less concern so you can focus on the good stuff! If you are careful and sensible about your personal safety you have nothing to worry about.

This is an amazing country and it is with much confidence that I say, most people consider a stay here an experience of a lifetime. If you have any questions or concerns feel free to contact me at beastaley@gmail.com

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