

# Memories of Madagascar

Last summer Kathryn Pettit spent ten weeks in Madagascar, one of the poorest countries in the world, working on projects for the UK charity Azafady.

Why Madagascar? Well, I knew the film, but I had no idea where the real country was, except that it was really remote. But this appealed to me. All the other places I'd looked at were quite well known. As soon as I saw it I wanted to know more.

When I read about Azafady on their website ([www.madagascar.co.uk](http://www.madagascar.co.uk)), it really attracted me as it's an NGO with a tiny staff, but it had won a Whitley Fund for Nature award for conservation - the so-called Green Oscars - and was judged the Best Volunteering Organisation in the 2007 Responsible Tourism Awards. It also works on both conservation and humanitarian issues. I didn't know what I'd be doing - it could have been anything, including working with animals - until three days before I left the UK. Then I learned that I would be helping to build a school from scratch.

I was one of eight UK nationals in an international group of 24, ranging in age from 18 to early 30s. I was the second youngest. The only tools we had were chisels and mallets, saws and spades, hammers, axes and machetes - all made from metal from shipwrecks.

There was only one set per group, so everything was soon blunt. Our first job was with the chisels and mallets making holes in 5" x 5" blocks, so that everything for the foundations would fit together. There were no nails. At the end of each day, our hands were covered in blisters. We were up at 5 a.m. and fell asleep, exhausted, by early evening. That went on for two weeks.

Also the land on which the school was built was covered in bushes and trees and wasn't flat. All we had were spades and wood, no rakes. It would have taken five minutes with a digger, whereas it took us probably six or seven

days. And the temperature was about 35°C. It was hard and really quite disheartening at times. But then all of a sudden within half a day the whole school went up and you could see what you were building - and that was fantastic.

conversations in Malagasy with the local people, which was great. In return we taught them English. We also carried out some health education programmes and did mapping and surveys of water sources and population, which will help Azafady with future projects.



The completed school at Tshialanga

The two-classroom school is the first in the area and will provide education for 300 children up to the age of 16. It's open seven days a week. We also built a teacher's house and a double-drop latrine.

The people in the village of Tshialanga were just amazing. Before we arrived, the news that we were coming had travelled from village to village just by word of mouth. So there were about 200 people to meet us, all singing the national anthem. On the first day the men brought us four chickens - a fantastically generous present, as one alone costs the equivalent of eight times the average weekly wage. We later got invited to weddings, funerals and circumcisions and were given food, though the villagers had virtually none to give.

By week three, and after an hour a day of lessons, I was able to have

While we were in Tshialanga we lived in tents and did all our washing and laundry in a river about 20 minutes' walk away. This was crocodile-infested, so we took it turns to keep watch for each other. The crocodiles didn't bother us, but I did get bitten in the leg by a poisonous spider and it was still swollen and sore months later.

What have I learned from the experience? A great deal about other cultures and how people with so little can be so content. Nowadays, I find it easier to cope with life's difficulties. I don't worry so much. I'd also like to work for an NGO in the next few years as I've developed a passion for travel.

---

Kathryn is in her final year at Newcastle University, studying for a BA degree in Applied Communications. She was interviewed by Peter Meech.