

People over profits

Unfortunately, many 'voluntourism' organisations – companies which run development projects fuelled by the efforts and funds of short-term volunteers – are not always what they are cracked up to be, running more for profit than good. However, as **Sue Watt** discovers, Camps International is one operation where financial gains take a back seat to the needs of local communities and their environments.

It's Sunday morning at Chanukeni Orphanage and 25 little children are singing their hearts out to the tune of 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.' When the next verse tells them to stomp their feet, I join in stomping mine and we all have a fit of giggles. Their teacher chose the perfect song – the happiness here is infectious. Even Henry, my straight-talking guide from Camp Kenya, starts to laugh.

Things are looking up for the children of Chanukeni, who were orphaned through HIV/AIDS. When Camp Kenya (part of Camps International) became involved in their plight last summer, it built them a new classroom, complete with brightly painted desks and chairs and walls adorned with blackboards and posters – a far cry from their former shelter made of mud and a *makuti* (thatched) roof. Agnes, their teacher, shows me the old classroom lying in a terracotta-coloured heap outside, knocked down before it fell. Its dirt floor left a legacy of painfully infectious jigger fleas, which bred in the children's feet and threatened agonising disabilities. Thankfully these have now been eradicated due to the new building's concrete floor, as well as better medication and the provision of flip-flops for every child,

items I'd noticed lined up neatly outside their classroom.

Unusually, Chanukeni's main benefactor has been tourism. Positioned just 30 minutes from Camp Kenya's headquarters, it is one of several community, marine conservation and wildlife eco-tourism projects the company has established over the past six years. A worthy winner of the Best Volunteer Organisation category at the Virgin Holidays' Responsible Tourism Awards 2008, Camps International provides volunteering holidays for schoolchildren, gap travellers, career-breakers and families.

It's easy to be dismissive about 'voluntourism' companies. There's no shortage of bad press highlighting organisations that impose apparently meritorious, yet worthless projects on communities without so much as a whisper of consultation with locals about their actual needs. These companies then charge well-intentioned clients a small fortune to volunteer, pocketing enormous profits.

Henry has little patience for such 'quick-buck' merchants. "We're in this for the long term," he says. "We've had to build each community's trust." And it seems Camps has done just that.



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There's plenty of hard work involved when volunteering for Camps International (inset, bottom), but there are no shortage of smiles (inset, top) or rewarding interactions with locals (main image)

En route to visiting some of their projects, we bounce along dirt tracks in the company jeep emblazoned with its logo. In small villages, kids rush out of mud homes screaming “Jambo, jambo!”, old men on rickety bikes break into smiles and women wearing a riot of colour wave demurely. “It is them who ask us to get involved,” Henry tells me, with a palpable sense of pride.

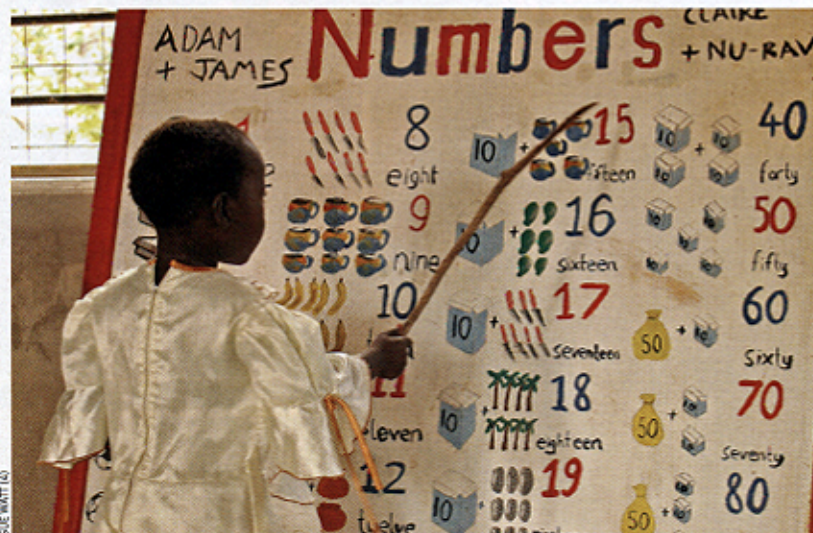
When we reach Stephen Kanja Primary School, a new single-story classroom, I see its motto emblazoned on the outside: “Lenga Juu! – Aim High!” It is a poignant statement in an area where 60 per cent of inhabitants live below the poverty line. Henry explains how volunteers help here by planting trees for income generation, making benches and desks for the school, and building tanks for water conservation.

But there is more to voluntourism than simply shifting bricks and mortar. Since Camps International's involvement three years ago, it has worked to increase pupil numbers from 200 to 550. It's the interactions with these schoolchildren, and the whole village, that makes volunteering for Camps so special. “We've absolutely loved spending time here,”

Ben, on honeymoon with Verity, says. “We want to come back with our own kids, maybe in ten years, and see how things have progressed.” Speaking to them, it strikes me that volunteers gain as much as they give, or, as Henry puts it: “It's a win-win situation.”

I spend the night at Camp Mukurumui, the most luxurious of Camps' Kenyan bases. My accommodation is a classic safari tent set in lush grounds where elephants regularly roam, and the camp's open-air dining room and bar area overlook the tantalisingly green Shimba Hills. Over a delicious dinner and much-needed beer, I meet Sarah, a volunteer who's brought her mother for a three-week break. Last year she came with her teenage daughter.

“The first time I came, the school had no water and I helped to start build the tanks. It's great to see them completed now; they've made such a difference. You do small pieces of work, but it all builds up to bigger things,” she explains. “All the little pieces come together.” Volunteering critics often doubt the value of short-term placements yet Camps International, with its long-term vision, seems to have found the answer. >>



This page: Many of Camps International's programmes involve work helping local schools gain their footing in turbulent situations

Opposite: A little football usually breaks the ice between volunteers and students

In the morning we drive further into the hills to Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary, an eco-tourism initiative owned by the local community. Home to the highest density of elephants in Africa, it makes sense to use their by-products, and one of the volunteers' tasks is to help create paper products from elephant dung – recycling at its finest. The resulting items are sold, with proceeds channelled back into the community.

Heading west towards Tsavo East National Park, shrubs gradually replace the roadside trees as we enter the semi-desert that is home to Camp Tsavo. Following a burnt-orange road flanked by brittlebush, we reach a sign stating: "Rukinga Wildlife Sanctuary". However, what really strikes me is the persuasive slogan attached that reads: "Extinction sucks. Get involved. Get informed. Evolve."

Strategically positioned between the national parks of Tsavo East and Tsavo West, and hence a critical wildlife migration corridor, Rukinga is Camps' most ambitious Kenyan conservation project. It's certainly the bravest, given the country's circumstances when the organisation acquired it in early 2008, during Kenya's political maelstrom. Committing to a 10-year conservation plan for this 32,375ha sanctuary when other companies were closing or downsizing was a bold and financially costly move, but with the will to protect wildlife and a commitment to both its staff and its projects at its core, Camps International chose to expand in Kenya.

In Rukinga's fragile ecosystem, Camps helps maintain the sanctuary, as well as improving water conservation, planting trees (an essential task for all volunteers), making elephant-dung products, counting the wildlife and, as ever, working with the local communities.

Camp Tsavo, in Rukinga's grounds, has accommodation ranging from a luxury lodge to thatched-roofed bandas and tents, the latter usually reserved for school-group volunteers. For these visitors, aged 15-18, taking part in a Camps International project is often their first insight into a different culture. The man responsible for their introduction to this new world is Rob Dobson, author of the "Extinction Sucks" motto. Perfect for the job, his enthusiasm shines through. "It's great watching them see their first elephant or giraffe. But it's also amazing to witness them seeing how these very poor communities live, then realising local children are just kids like them. When they first arrive at the school in Sasenyi they'll be nervous, but then they'll play football with the local students – soon they'll be nattering away, debating whether Rooney is a good striker."

Sasenyi is only 30 minutes' drive from Camp Tsavo, yet it is worlds away from the schools Western teenagers are familiar with. The old single-storey buildings, with their rusting tin roofs, bare brick walls, dirt floors and gaps where there should be windows, are crumbling and crowded. Across the square, the new buildings – solid and shining in the sun – are a complete contrast. Some of the project's efforts at the school have seen volunteers digging water-breaks to stop classrooms getting washed away when rainwater pours down the slopes of nearby denuded hills.

Headmaster Robert Mwasi bounds out of his classroom in a yellow T-shirt telling its readers to fight HIV/AIDS at schools. "Camps gives us hope," he says, without hesitation. "Before, our school wasn't conducive to learning, the rooms were dangerous. But the new classrooms encourage our children to learn – we really appreciate what they're doing."

Mercy Joshua, the charismatic chairperson of both the Marungu Hills Conservancy and the Imani Women's Group, also appreciates Camps International's involvement. Driving towards her house, we see the verdant Taita Hills in the distance, contrasting to the grey hulk of Mount Kasigau jutting out of the Taru Desert. It seems wild here, a place where tumbleweed should be rolling down the dirt tracks, but it's home to over 12,000 people,

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many living in poverty. Volunteers help the women's group weave baskets and handbags, chatting about their lives as they work. "Our aim is to change life for women, to empower them," she explains. "Meeting other women encourages us. They give us ideas."

Mercy, whose house is at the end of a narrow dirt track lined with trees, initiated a project to replenish the woodlands on the bare Marungu Hills overlooking her village. A deeply religious woman, she states simply: "Our idea was to change the environment. Last year, we planted 6000 trees, but when Camps came, we planted 10,000 in just a month. It was like God had sent them."

"We're not a run-of-the-mill tourist operation," Simon Englefield, Camps International's East Africa Director explains on my return to Mombasa. "We can't just stop what we're doing; we have a small army of people depending on us. We don't want to fail them and that's quite a driving force." Winning the prestigious responsible tourism award illustrates that Camps International has earned the respect not only of its clients and the communities it works with, but of its peers as well.

If Ben and Verity, Mukurumui's honeymooners, come back in ten years time, they should have plenty to see: Camps International is clearly here for the long term. I want to come back too – to see Mercy's hillsides full of trees, to find Robert's pupils doing well at school, and to sing with the children of Chanukeni – though I'm not sure I want to wait ten years. ❀

■ Sue Watt was a guest of Camps International (www.campsinternational.com). Her flights linking London Heathrow with Nairobi and Mombasa were graciously provided by Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com).

Other groundbreaking eco-tourism initiatives in Kenya

Borana

Winner of the 2007 Responsible Tourism Award for Poverty Reduction, Borana Lodge is set in 14,000ha of the Laikipia-Samburu ecosystem. As well as supporting community projects, a mobile clinic and micro-businesses, it employs 200 people, including disabled staff in its innovative 'Hide & Sheep' tannery. www.borana.co.ke

Campi Ya Kanzi

Lying between the national parks of Chyulu, Tsavo and Amboseli, multi-award winning Campi Ya Kanzi aims to make wildlife profitable for the community. A Maasai-owned luxury tented camp, it employs only Maasai, provides reimbursement for livestock killed by lions, and funds educational scholarships and a medical clinic. www.maasai.com

Il Ngwesi Group Ranch

In 1996, the pioneering Il Ngwesi, which sits on the edge of the Mukogodo Hills, became Kenya's first community-owned lodge. Although winning several awards, its greatest successes are its continued efforts in running education programmes, health clinics and conservation training within its Maasai community. Omni, their hand-reared orphan black rhino, is a popular attraction. www.lewa.org/ilngwesi.php

Oi Donyo Wuas

The local Maasai community holds shares in Oi Donyo Wuas, an exclusive luxury lodge in the Chyulu Hills. Ensuring that communities benefit from wildlife, its Maasailand Preservation Trust funds a predator compensation scheme, a tree nursery and protection for black rhino, alongside community projects. www.oidonyowuas.com

Oi Malo

Oi Malo, a beautiful lodge on the Laikipia Plateau, started a jewellery business employing 6 Samburu women in 1998. Overall Winner of the 2006 Responsible Tourism Awards, its projects have since included "Beads for Food" benefiting 700 women and an eye clinic helping over 300 trachoma sufferers. www.oi-malo.com