

Volunteering in Sierra Leone - impressions



My name is Arnold Sampson. I am a KIK sponsor and was 75 years old when I visited Sierra Leone in March 2016. I have been asked to describe the experience, to help other volunteers decide if a visit is for them.

It would not be true to say that I really enjoyed the trip, as a diet of banana butties and rice is not great, though the bananas helped avoid diarrhea. It is certainly a good weight loss regime though, as I lost about 4 pounds in the 2 weeks. The travelling was also horrendous - our journey from Freetown to Kailahun took over 11 hours (420 km), including a small accident, a burst tyre, and an enforced stop when we overheated! The heat and humidity were a bit sapping, but no worse than Spain

in July/August, and the mozzies weren't as bad as I expected, though I did get bitten, despite following all the precautions.

Sierra Leone definitely has all the elements of archetypal Africa – mud huts with children playing outside in the dust, chickens and goats scratching around, cooking outside on 3 stone wood fires, babies strapped to their mothers' backs, everybody carrying stuff on their heads (good for the posture, ladies!), etc, etc. However, it is a fertile part of Africa, so I saw no malnourishment – and we did visit quite a few outlying villages. Thus the non-KIK locals can clearly earn enough to afford food, even though most families have become larger with having to take in related Ebola orphans. Everybody is friendly, waving as you go by, shaking hands, asking how you are, and being pleased if you take a picture – especially the children. I had occasion to go round a number of shops (shacks) in the town with one of the KIK local staff, and was made very welcome, with the owners being keen to help me. In one of the shops there were some old chaps playing draughts on a large board on their knees, and I had a good laugh with them – there is a photo of this in the pics – see below. On the down side, in common with many other parts of Africa, FGM is endemic, being part of cultural initiation rituals.

Freetown, the main port and capital on the Atlantic Ocean, is a noisy, bustling, and spread out city, with an energy that has to be seen to be believed. As in Kailahun district, the people are friendly and at no point did we feel at all threatened. When we had a puncture just outside the city, a local tyre shack changed the tyre on the spot, and could not have been more helpful. Once out of the city, the countryside is forested and mountainous, while along the coast there are a number of beautiful white sand beaches.

Overall, and especially after Ebola and the horrific 10 year civil war that ended in 2002, I came to the conclusion that Sierra Leone is a very resilient country. In the airport on the way back, we talked for an hour with an American professor, who told us about her research into the ongoing peace and reconciliation process, which is very much led by women. In the pics below, you will see a house in Kailahun that was burned out during the war, one of hundreds that we saw in almost every town and village. This one is known locally as the slaughterhouse, for very good reason. After hearing what went on there, I am both astonished and encouraged that ANY degree of peace and reconciliation is possible, so well done to the ladies for pragmatically leading the process.

Against this background, KIK is doing a tremendous job, funding the education of over 140 children and young people, and protecting the most vulnerable by bringing them to live in the KIK compound. During the visit, the founder Lorraine Goldsbrough (known there as Moma Loz) conducted 70 interviews with the secondary children and their guardians. The aim was to

look at school results to decide if a year needed repeating (especially after Ebola), and to manage the children's expectations regarding future employment. Most of them want to be doctors, but of course not everyone is bright enough. Loz is very caring, but by no means a soft touch, and she has an excellent memory for situations and previous conversations, so it is difficult to pull any wool over her eyes.

I also saw her in action with the doctors and matron at the local hospital, emphasising to them how much help the hospital receives from KIK, including a free nurse (one of the past KIK beneficiaries). This was to ensure that any KIK children are treated for free. It is this knowledge of Loz that enables me to tell you that money going to KIK is wisely used.

Having been leased a plot of 22 acres by the local Paramount Chief - whom I have now met on a couple of occasions - KIK are close to finishing the building of a secondary school on the site, consisting of 4 large buildings that will eventually take 120 children in 6 classes. It will have a computer room/resource centre that will hopefully double as an internet café to raise some revenue. The land will be developed as a productive farm to help with sustainability and to employ some of the KIK non-academic beneficiaries. Future plans on the site include an agricultural college and a nursing school.

During the visit, 5 of the local staff were baptised by total immersion in the Moa river, which forms the boundary with Guinea. So enthusiastically was this done that, during the final baptism, Moma Loz lost her footing and was totally immersed herself - potentially dangerous, of course, given the water quality in the river.

Throughout my time there I was encouraged to stick my nose in everywhere, so that I would come away with a full picture of KIK's operation on the ground. My own contribution was in 3 parts, really, the first being to sort out their existing IT equipment. This didn't take long, as it was mostly useless!

Secondly, I gave computer training to 2 of the local staff who had never used a computer. This included installing a free typing tutor program on the local laptops, mainly for the more computer-literate local staff - and for the ex-boy soldier whom you see in the [KIK video](#). For the 3 more experienced local staff, I helped them produce a CV, as something that could be useful to them in the future. I have to tell you that getting a reaction - even a 'thank you' - out of these 5 was like getting blood out of a stone! I had to verbally beat them up and threaten to walk away to get any feedback, even to know if they understood what I was telling them.

Finally, I spent a lot of time with one of the local staff on a hygiene and sanitation training programme for schools, prior to installing the water filtration units that are talked about [here](#). It was seen to be important that the young people understand the importance of good hygiene, as opposed to simply installing clean water, which would only do half the job. We did present this programme in one of the large local secondary schools. I built in a lot of audience interaction, which went down well. I gave the training first, with the staff member watching, and then he gave it, with me sitting in the class. It was very satisfying to see him being animated and getting a good reaction to this important but relatively dull information.

I could say a lot more, but I think the important features are above. If you haven't yet watched the 9 minute KIK video telling about the recent history of the country and of KIK's work there, then I recommend you have a look at it on YouTube [here](#) (put your sound on). I met most of the people in the video, but didn't realise that the man breaking stones early in the video is actually blind! You will also see a polio lady in a wheelchair, and we were able to present her with a new chair, courtesy of a substantial donation from the son of one of our friends; very satisfying. There is a video of the wheelchair presentation below, towards the end of the [slideshow](#), which roughly follows the story I have told above. Enjoy!