

Anne Buizer
T4t
2014

Malawi 2014

A journey we will never forget!



When I received the letter about the journey to Malawi, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to go. I was already thinking about my internship in the United States and I had already found a place where I wanted to go to. But then, when I started thinking about the whole trip better, I realised that this was the journey of my dreams. Ever since the age of seven, I've been thinking about my future as a doctor. When in 2010, a big earthquake hit Haiti, I made the decision that I wanted to work as a doctor in a country where people don't have the same opportunities as I have. Because of my dreams I knew I had to go, I couldn't just let this trip pass me by, I would never be able to forgive myself!

Our first information day was at the 9th of October, 2013. Students from other schools, who had already been away with Worldmapping, came to our school and told us about their adventures and experiences. This evening was really helpful for me because the students were so enthusiastic and they made me feel the same way. Because of these students and the personal stories they told, I decided that I wanted to go to Malawi, the Warm Heart of Africa.

Then on the 5th of July, 2014, the first real preparation day found place at school. We got to know each other better by doing a personal elevator pitch about your character traits and motivations. We also played a game about the general information of Malawi and had to prepare a presentation. We had to present these presentations about Malawi to our parents which was fun. I became even more excited but I also realised that I still had to wait for approximately four months. I wanted to go at that moment, I wanted to grab some baggage and leave this small and cold country behind me, far behind me.

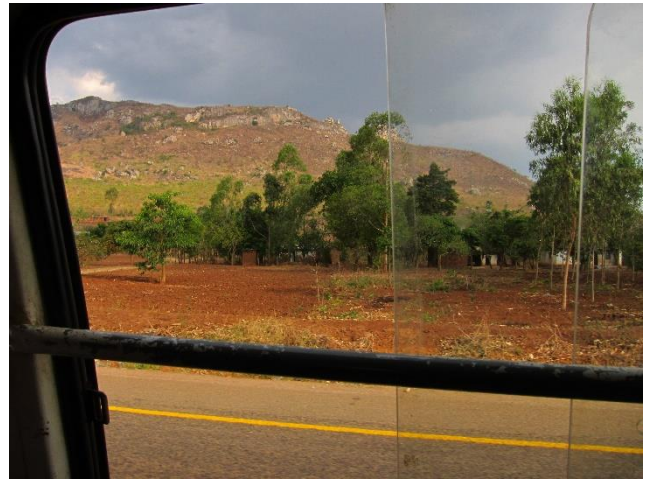
In between the two school meetings I went to a JoHo information and preparation day in Den Haag. I had a lot of fun with the other volunteers and learned a lot about how to treat the locals. They also gave us helpful information about all the necessities you had to bring to an African country. They also had a shop where I bought a headlight, a travel towel, a first aid kit, lots of Deet and a scratch map of the world.

Our second preparation day was at the 20th of September, 2014. Oliver, a Malawian teacher, visited our school and told us about his beautiful country. He talked about his family (his father had three wives) and about the boarding schools they have in Malawi. We also got to know which projects we were going to visit and because of this the realisation began to kick. The projects I had been thinking about for quite a while, finally had names. It became so real and surreal at the same time.

And then, at the 11th of October, our adventure started! We gathered at school with our parents, friends and teachers and after we said our goodbyes, we were off to Brussels Airport. You could see that everybody was excited but also very nervous. At the airport we were allowed to check-in almost immediately and soon after we went through security. This was probably not the best choice because there were no restaurants after security. Because of that we took our first malaria pill without any food.

The flight was very long but quite pleasant actually. On the first plane I was seated next to Hans, we flew over Paris at night which was very beautiful. The Eiffel Tower was all lit up and we saw the stadiums of FC Paris and Paris Saint Germain! So cool, especially for somebody who loves soccer. After that we watched a movie together and I fell asleep. We had to transfer in Ethiopia which was cool but also a bit frustrating because we knew we still had a long journey ahead.

When we finally landed in Malawi, everybody was excited, relieved and very tired. We drove about an hour to Pakachere, a hostel located in Zomba. I enjoyed the car journey a lot but I was also relieved when we finally reached our final destination. We put up our tents, had dinner and went to bed at 8:00 PM. Quite early but we were tired and it was already dark. The next morning I woke up at 6:45 AM and took a refreshing shower. After we had breakfast, we went into town to explore the city. We had to answer questions and take pictures of the things we saw. We had to film some locals who were singing the national anthem and had to take a picture of a fake



luxury product. We had lunch at a local restaurant and went back into town. We had to buy the ingredients for our dinner so we went to the local market and bought pumpkin leaves, Nsima, peppers and a chicken which was still alive. We walked back to our hostel with all the groceries and relaxed for a bit. The bartender taught us how to play Bawo, a traditional Malawian board game. We prepared dinner by cutting the vegetables and Jelto, Fabian and Niels slaughtered our chickens. The dinner was delicious but also a bit strange because we had already named the chickens. I also tried to put up my first blogpost but there was no internet and electricity that evening.

The next day we visited the project Mawa Otisamala. Mawa is a community centre where volunteers work together to help the local people, especially the children and the elderly of the community. The project is located outside of Zomba which means: no running water, no electricity and no 'real' toilet.

First of all, we had to put up our tents. This was easier said than done. Everybody wanted to help us and the attention we got was a bit overwhelming. Then we were introduced to the volunteers and the group was split up into two. Together with Annick, Hans, Niels and Linde, I helped washing the clothes of an old lady who couldn't do this anymore. The soap didn't smell like the soap smells in the Netherlands but at least her clothes were clean again.

After lunch, we dug a rubbish pit for an old lady who couldn't walk anymore. We had to work very hard because the ground was very solid and that it was almost 40 °C.

The next day we made new ridges in a field for another older woman. Another morning of hard but fun work! A lot of volunteers joined us and they took an old radio with them which was really amusing. In the afternoon we went to Bwalo, a shelter for street boys where they receive education in a lot of necessary life skills. We helped them with their laundry and then we played a game of football. Very difficult when you're wearing a Chitenje (traditional Malawian skirt we had to wear) but we had a lot of fun with the kids. It was really funny to see their faces when they saw that the Dutch girls could play soccer. There were even some guys that told me I had to play without my skirt because it would be a lot easier. I didn't listen to their advice because you have to wear a skirt which covers your knees.

The day after we packed our tents at 6:00 AM and had breakfast. I would never get up this early in the Netherlands but in Malawi it is very normal. It just gets too hot to sleep and you don't need to sleep longer when you go to bed at 8:00 AM. Then we made a floor out of mud

which was a dirty job. We also had a lot fun with Papaya's (a joke with our Malawian expedition leader). Dennis, one of our leaders wanted to climb in a papaya tree to pick a fresh papaya. Aisha tried to help him but the papaya he tried to grab fell on her head. Papaya's are quite big and heavy so this must have hurt a lot but luckily she could laugh about it. For the rest of the journey, her nickname was Papaya!

We left Mawa (after lots of speeches and songs) and headed for Malindi Secondary School. We ate lunch with the students, had interesting conversations, were shown around the school. We also held presentations about our countries and danced, sang and played games together.

I had a really interesting conversation with two boys of my own age. They showed me around the school and shared their personal stories. Prince wanted to study medicine in India and Jeffrey wanted to become a lawyer. They both really loved soccer and were quite surprised when I told them that I played soccer as well. They were also astonished when they found out that medical school lasted for over six years, they couldn't believe that I wanted to study for this long.



All too soon it was time to go back to Pakachere and even though everybody felt sad about leaving Mawa it also felt like coming home. So clean and luxurious. I totally loved Mawa but I was also happy about the fact that I could take a shower again. And I wasn't the only one because when we entered the gates of Pakachere, everybody was singing:

*"I'm coming home
I'm coming home
Tell the world I'm coming home
Let the rain wash away all the pain of yesterday
I know my kingdom awaits and they've forgiven my mistakes
I'm coming home, I'm coming home
Tell the world that I'm coming"*

This night we slept in the dorm room because there was a fire very close to our tents. In the middle of the night our leaders woke us up and told us that we had to gather our most valuable belongings. We also had to take a sleeping bag because we were going to sleep inside, just to be safe.

The next morning wasn't a really good morning, a lot of people were feeling sick. Even though it was almost 42 °C, I was wearing two cardigans and had a sleeping bag wrapped around me. Great, fever... But everybody was also very excited because we were going to Liwonde National Park that day.

Franc, the owner of the camp, told us about the animals that live in Liwonde National Park. At night, hippo's come ashore and walk through the garden. He also told us that they are used to people but that you are not supposed to stand between them and the water. He also told us that was afraid because he believed that within the near future, Liwonde National Park won't exist anymore.



I went to bed early because I was still very sick and the next day we were going on safari. There were still a lot of people feeling sick, including two of our leaders. The group was split up into two, one group went on the boat safari first, the other went with the Jeep.

The safari was so cool, we saw a lot of hippo's, herons, king fishers, elephants, baboons, waterbucks, sable impala's, warthogs and a lot of birds. I still had a fever and even though I thought it was really cold because of my fever, I enjoyed myself a lot.

Franc made us dinner which was incredible. Quite simple but delicious, cow meat and potatoes prepared on the BBQ.

Our Sunday started off with a typical Malawian church service which included a lot of songs, readings and speeches about money. We learned that every community member has to donate 10% of his or her weekly wage to the church. I thought this was really weird because most people don't have a the money to buy enough food.

After the church visit we went back to Pakachere. Because I still had a fever and a headache, the leaders wanted to take me to hospital to get my blood checked out. They just wanted to be sure that I didn't have malaria. Together with Jelto (who also needed to be checked out), Dennis and Aisha, I went to the hospital. They ran some blood tests and after that we had to wait for over two hours because the doctor wasn't present in the hospital. When he finally arrived, we went into his office, he discussed the results (everything was negative) and we could leave again. Luckily there was nothing wrong with us but we had to wait for very long time and we missed the walk to Zomba Plateau.

The next day we went to our second project called YODEP (Youth Development for Productivity). YODEP especially helps children and elderly who can't take care of themselves (anymore).

I was already feeling a lot better and I was really excited even though I knew that we wouldn't have running water and that we would have to use a hole in the ground as a toilet.

When we arrived, we put up our tents and went to work immediately. We transferred bricks from one place to another. These bricks belonged to a fifteen year old orphan who didn't have a house. The volunteers at YODEP were going to build a house for him so he would have a place to live.

After lunch, the group was split up again. Hans, Koen, Saskia and I replaced a roof for a young woman. We cut down some bamboo and threw straw-bundles onto the roof. We also had a lot of fun with the children who lived next to the house we were repairing.

After dinner, we went to bed but not after we had asked our leaders if the fire we saw wasn't too close to our tents.



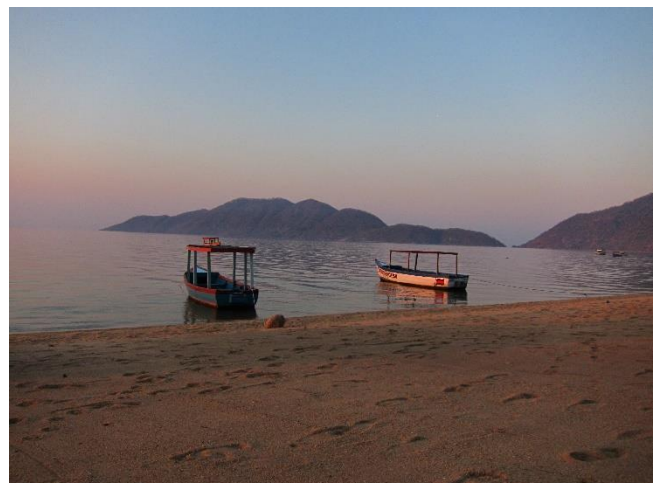
This night we were not woken up by a hippo but by the sound of hyena's. So cool! The next day, Koen, Saskia and I dug a rubbish pit for a woman who has AIDS. The walk to her house took twenty-five minutes and when we had been digging for approximately an hour, the volunteers noticed that they had taken the wrong tool for digging in this kind of soil. They decided that we couldn't go on and we walked back, again twenty-five minutes.

In the afternoon, we took part in a soccer tournament. All the YODEP volunteers were very sure that they were going to win. Well bad luck because my team became 1st and the other Dutch team comes 2nd. We won an amount money which seemed really strange to us, so we donated it back to YODEP immediately.

That night, after we brushed our teeth, me and my friends sat down and looked at the stars. It felt so weird and amazing at the same time. I didn't know why, probably because I had grown so close with the people sitting next to me.

Our day started off with a visit to St Luke's hospital. Suzan, a Dutch co-assistant gave a presentation and showed us around. Everything was so different in this hospital. Not enough blood, no ambulances, not enough doctors, not enough beds, not enough of anything actually. She also told us that the nurses only provide your medicine so you need to take a guardian with you, otherwise you don't have anything to eat.

After the St Luke's visit, we set off for Cape Maclear. A drive of more than 4 hours but nobody cared because we were going to one of the most beautiful places in Malawi. The lodge where we were staying was so beautiful! We put up our tents on the grass (which felt like heaven) and Hans, Niels, Annick and I went for a walk on the beach. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to swim because there is Bilharzia in the water. We sat down at a piece of beach where all the locals were swimming and playing. It felt so weird to us that all the tourists had their own piece of beach. I got



the impression that other tourists don't do this very often because immediately there were 10 children surrounding us. But not in the way the children did at the projects, these kids just played and didn't ask for money or water.

The next morning we made a boat tour around the island closest to our lodge. We saw a lot of tropical fish and even bought some of these fishes from a fisherman. We used them to attract the fish eagles. They came really close to our boat and because of this we could make a lot of beautiful pictures.

In the afternoon we went into town to spend our last Kwacha's on souvenirs. I bought an elephant carved out of ebony, a wooden land rover which I fell in love with, some bracelets, a necklace and Bawo.

After we had dinner, we made a campfire and sang and danced. We also shared our feelings and experiences about this amazing trip and laughed about all the fun we had this journey. We also got a necklace with an ebony heart from our local expedition leaders ♥.

The next day we left for Lilongwe where we would spend our last day. The contrast was so big, there were so many people and cars! We put up our tents for the last time and then we went to the pool. After dinner we played 'weerwolven' for a really long time and then we went to bed.

The next day we packed our tents and went to the airport, we said goodbye to our local expedition leaders and even sang the national anthem again.

In the plane, bus and at the airport, we had a hard time adjusting to all the Dutch and Belgian people that were surrounding us. All at once there were people that could understand what we were saying. I saw people laughing behind us when Niels made a comment about his dirty socks.

*"Tell everybody I'm on my way
new friends and new places to see
with blue skies ahead, yes I'm on my way
and there's nowhere else that I'd rather be*

*Tell everybody I'm on my way
and I'm loving every step I take
with the sun beating down, yes I'm on my way
and I can't keep this smile off my face
cause there's nothing like seeing each other again
no matter what the distance between
and the stories that we tell will make you smile
oh it really lifts my heart"*

On Monday, we had to go back to school again, it felt so surreal. Everybody was worrying about their homework or a test they still had to learn for while I was still thinking about the kids I had met in Malawi. Concentrating was really hard for the first week because my thoughts kept drifting to the Warm Heart of Africa, the country where everybody is happy, no matter what had happened the day before. The country where everybody cares about each other and helps out their neighbours during difficult times. A country where Christians and Muslims live together hand in hand.

When I look back at this trip, the only thing I can do is smile. I have had so much fun with all the new people I have met. I can't even count how many times I have sung the national anthem and thanked the volunteers for their hospitality. I don't even know how often the children of the projects have asked me for my water bottle and how often I had to say no to them. I will never forget the look on the faces of the volunteers when I scored a goal against their team, it was priceless. All the laughs we have had together about the jokes that Niels, Koert or Hans made, the fun we have had whilst playing 'weerwolven' and the discussions we have had about whether the sun was going in a straight line. All the conversations we have overheard because the boys didn't realise we were sleeping right next to them. All the things that you will never understand if you haven't been with us on this amazing trip.

Because of this trip, I have seen how it is to live in one of the poorest countries in the world. I have gotten even more respect for the people who have to live in these conditions and I have realised that there are so many things we can learn from them. I also know that I definitely want to go back when I'm a bit older and maybe even work in St Luke's hospital as an intern.

I know that this is a journey I will never forget. I have made new friends and became even closer with the friends I already had. I learned about another culture and the traditions that belong to this particular culture. I also learned a lot about myself, about how good my life actually is and that my problems aren't as bad as I think.

*'Goodbyes are not forever. Goodbyes are not the end.
They simply mean I'll miss you until we meet again.'*

