

Sex education – African style

It was just five minutes after she'd invited me in for a cup of tea in her Malawian home and Edith was questioning my prowess in the bedroom. "You have been with your man for five years and still no babies, what is your Aunt doing?" the school teacher exclaimed.

Much giggling followed as I was told that in some areas of Malawi, if a marriage is childless after 12 months, a family elder comes round to watch you have sex... just to make sure you're doing it right. There were plenty of offers of help from Edith's packed living room.

I expected a lot of things in Africa, but I never expected to laugh quite so much. From haggling in Moroccan souks to learning to surf on the South African coast, the people had a sense of humour that lightened the soul day after day.

I also wasn't prepared for just how beautiful the continent is. In Mozambique, I sipped fresh coconut milk on beaches so idyllic I felt I was walking through a honeymoon brochure. In Namibia, I watched as the dawn light turned towering sand dunes from a delicate pink to vibrant orange. In Ethiopia, in a scene unchanged for thousands of years, the heady scent of incense hung in the air as the sound of chanting priests carried on the breeze outside one of the sunken churches of Lalibela.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all was just how safe I felt. Sure, there are places where you don't walk out alone at night, but you can say that about areas of London or Paris and we don't stop going there. In a year-long trip through 22 African countries, I was the victim of crime just once, when some washing was stolen from a clothes line in Ghana.

The difference between some people's perceptions of Africa and the reality can be vast. Many are frightened off by news reports of war, famine and kidnapping, but they forget that these are isolated problems in a very large continent.

And now it's not just Africa's public image that stops people visiting, but concern about the environmental impact of travelling there as well. The very idea that flying to Tanzania to see the snow shimmering on the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro might contribute to the disappearance of that snow altogether is a sobering thought.

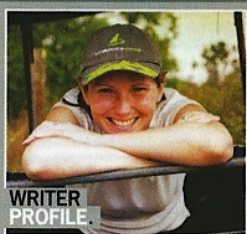
All of us have to find a way through the minefield of responsibility that global warming throws up and, inevitably, each of us will make our own judgement about travelling. If you have time to spare, why not drive to Africa instead of flying, hitching a ride with one of the many tour companies that bus there from Europe?

Once you're in Africa even the smallest investment can make a vast difference. In many countries the average person earns little more than the equivalent of one US dollar each day. It is also a sobering thought that if people do stop flying and the tourist dollar leaches out of Africa, then so does a potential to lift much of the continent out of poverty.

Back in Malawi, I met the extended Singano family in an isolated hill village. For the past four decades they have all been supported by just one person, Nesto, who has learned to carve intricate and very accurate wooden models of cars which he sells to the trickle of tourists who pass his door on their way to the cool waters of Lake Malawi. Africa is full of people like Nesto; people who rely on tourism.

Perhaps it is because your money goes so much further in Africa that the current explosion in 'voluntourism' has its heart in the continent. A carefully chosen volunteer project will mean both you and your cash can make a real difference to an African community.

As anyone who has visited will testify, Africa has an ability to make you feel incredibly alive. Wherever you go, the continent throws up the highest of highs and – when you see the poverty – the lowest of lows. Life there is a rollercoaster of emotions that is addictive. It would be a shame never to experience it.



WRITER PROFILE

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INFO. Mary is happiest when she's watching wildlife. She recently spent a year travelling through Africa photographing tree-climbing goats in Morocco, penguins in South Africa and everything in between.

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