

Short-term volunteering in Projecto Oceano, Ilha de Moçambique

Daniela Lima, 3rd October- 3rd December 2012

1. Overview

This report summarizes the two months I spent in Ilha de Moçambique volunteering with Projecto Oceano. The main purpose of my stay was to give Chemistry and Biology classes, three times per week. In addition, I helped and participated in the remaining project activities, such as preparation of Voz Jovem, social debates and presentations. Despite some punctual constraints, I think this has been an extremely positive experience, for me as much as for the students. They had a chance to learn Science in a way they had never experienced before in school, and I had a chance to test my capacity to adapt and adjust to such different living conditions. For me, it was an extremely enriching personal experience, as I had the privilege to get to know such devoted students and to live in a piece of paradise called Ilha de Moçambique.



1 Projecto Oceano members.

2. Background

It had been almost five years since the idea of volunteering in Africa started burgeoning in my mind, however, as I started doing my PhD, the possibility of taking some time to do it was constantly being pushed aside. I didn't just want to go to Africa to have a volunteering experience; I wanted to do something that mattered, that had a real impact in people's lives, for an organisation worth of my time and effort. Furthermore, I had the desire to do it in a Portuguese speaking African country, so that communication with the locals was not an issue. When I saw the words "Projecto Oceano-Ilha de Moçambique" in a volunteer ad I immediately felt it was worth having a look, and there it was, what I had been looking for all this time – AZLera's Projecto Oceano-, an education project, recent but ambitious, in Mozambique, to which I could contribute with my expertise. Adding to the initial interest, I saw AZLera's promotional video and I came across the project's students, bright and young full of drive to fight for their dreams and I empowered with the possibility to be a part of it.

After an initial contact with Freddie Brunt, AZLera's Project Manager and, later, an online meeting with both Freddie and Wilbert Sanchez, AZLera's founder, I was convinced that with such a supportive and enthusiastic team, our collaboration would be productive. Time came to confirm my first impressions, as they were extremely helpful during the process of preparation for my stay in Ilha. On Ilha de Moçambique, Jessica (Projecto Oceano's In-country manager) was organising everything to welcome me: a place to stay, transport from the airport to Ilha and even a surprise party for my arrival! This would be my first time in Africa and Jessica had patiently answered all my naïve traveler doubts, from mosquitoes to food and daily difficulties. So, when she picked me up at the airport, it seemed like we had been friends for ever!



2 Part of Azlera team: Daniela, Jessica, Freddie and Wilbert.

3. Travel and Ilha's first impressions

Ilha's nearest airport is located in Nampula, a mere 180 kms and 2.30 hours from the island. However, getting to Nampula from Portugal implies a very expensive plane ticket via Maputo or a cheaper (and much more exhausting) plane journey via Paris-Nairobi. Getting a Visa and all the vaccines (the yellow fever vaccine is now mandatory to enter Mozambique) was also a complicated journey. Mosquito repellent and high protection sunscreen turned out to be the most valuable items in my bag, since they were very hard to get in Ilha.

As I landed in Nampula, I tried to pay attention to everything I was seeing on the journey from the airport, to keep all the first impressions of Mozambique in my memory. I remember mostly the colours, the reddish land contrasting with the green of the trees and the bright colours of the capulanas (Mozambican traditional and coloured fabrics). I remember seeing countless children on the side of the road selling "cajus" and "piri-piri", dancing, running and smiling, and I vividly remember them shouting when our driver accidentally hit a chicken that crossed the road. Oops!

When we finally arrived to the Ilha, the sun had already set and all the streets seemed the same to me: narrow, confusing and full of dust. Since there were no names on the streets, I was disoriented for about a week and in that period I think most of the times I took the longest possible way to get to my destination. After dropping bags in my new home, I went to the project, supposedly, to help Jessica carry some stuff she had bought in Nampula. I was really surprised to see that all the project members were there to welcome me with a nice dinner they had prepared. They immediately started talking to me, making me feel comfortable and at home. Dinner was delicious, by the way. 😊 Only after dinner I started panicking about my new life, when all the students decided to dance and invited me to join them. Dancing, me? No way, I don't know how to. And if someone had told me that night that two months later I would love to dance those Mozambican rhythms I would not have believed it. But the truth is, Ilha seems to have its own rhythm, a special charm that gradually engulfs you and makes you feel welcomed, loved and at



3 Projecto Oceano welcome dinner.

home.

The first week was an adaptation period: to the weather (so hot!), to the schedule (people start their days at 5 am!), to the constant delays and to the widespread poverty of the population. I also learned where to find basic stuff such as food, internet and phone credit. Gradually, I was introduced to Projecto Oceano's daily activities, routines, rules, students, etc. Participating in Jessica's English class was a good way of introducing myself and to get to know the rest of the students. I was impressed with the overall quality of the students attending classes, but mostly, with their enthusiasm for learning; English, Spanish, French and later in my Chemistry and Biology classes.



4 Participating in Social Debates and Volleyball tournament.

4. Classes and working at Projecto Oceano

I had decided to start my teaching with Chemistry classes, because I imagined they had never had practical classes at school before and it would be more appealing to them. But I wasn't expecting them to learn things so quickly! I had semi-prepared my classes back in Portugal and on Ilha I had to reformulate them, because it became apparent that they could learn more in one class than what I expected. It was a great surprise and allowed me to teach almost everything I had planned. I chose to do more interactive classes, with many group work activities and "hands-on experiments" to allow them to think independently, to discuss and to reach their own conclusions with minor help from the teacher. Another surprising aspect was the presence of many 12 year olds in my classes, although the classes were directed to a more

advanced audience and they probably didn't get all the content. It was a good surprise to see their interest and curiosity though.



5 Chemistry classes group work: simulating volcanoes and filling balloons using chemical reactions.

I imagine the reason is the more theoretical and complex nature of the subjects approached, but in my biology classes I had a more homogeneous and older group of students. Once again I was happy to see their interest for learning. I used videos to demonstrate visually almost everything I was teaching and I think that worked pretty well, along with PowerPoint presentations.

I wish I had had more time to teach Biology. However, as the subject is so vast and interesting, it was impossible to approach everything in just one month. Plus, Biology experiments usually take longer to perform and many of them involve waiting for a few days for the results. I noticed that the students had a huge interest when I was talking about the

human body and diseases, but it was impossible to approach all the systems and diseases, given time restraints. Furthermore, many classes took longer than I had planned to answer all their doubts. It was great to see them learning and I hope the knowledge they acquired may have an impact in their daily decisions, attitudes and behavior.



6 Biology class: the DNA.

I did try to evaluate classes, in order to understand how the classes were being received and what I could do to improve what I was teaching, but the feedback I had was that they were really enjoying and learning a lot. If I had had more time, I doubt I would have change anything in my classes, I would just be able to teach more subjects and to do more practical experiments. The only small complaint from my end was that the quality of some videos I showed was of poor quality, because I took them directly from YouTube. This could have been improved.

Regarding the other tasks involved in the overall functioning of Projecto Oceano, I managed to coordinate very well my time with Jessica. Mornings were either spent in the project (we had classes two mornings per week), preparing classes or dealing with general management issues. During most of the time I was in Ilha, we had no internet access at the project, so we usually used this “free” period to try to access internet somewhere else. Friday afternoons occupation would vary between project cleaning, Voz Jovem meetings and social debates. Overall, during the week, most of my time in Ilha was devoted project activities, especially preparing classes, and I think that 3 classes per week turned out to be the ideal number and more than that would not be advisable.

5. Recommendations for future short term volunteers

I think that with internet access in the project, some things can be better in the future. I noticed that most kids now have access to internet in their phones - maybe creating a Facebook group for each of the classes, where you could put “class teasers”, photos, interesting stuff and so on... It would be a kind of advertisement and divulgation, in addition to the postcards we’ve put to announce these classes. Of course all of these things take time and energy, and that is not always is an abundance.

If I had to do a “fresh start”, based on what I now know on Ilha and the kids, I guess I would have chosen to do a 3 month period focusing in Biology only. That way I would have time to explore more subjects and in more detail, to perform more experiments and to develop scientific projects with the students. Everything takes time in Ilha. I feel that what I’ve done in Ilha was great but at the same time it was all done in a bit of a hurry. I did not have the time to mature the ideas with the students, to see what they actually learned, to explore their talents and to see how far they could go with what they were learning. That is my advice for

future short term volunteers, instead of squeezing the courses into a short period, Projecto Oceano should do a more progressive and consolidated learning. For instance, it would have been important that they shared their learning with the community, especially concerning diseases and so on.

The period of volunteering is also important. In part of my time there, kids were busy with school exams. Many times students from the project and others that didn't attend my classes asked for help the day before or the morning of the exam itself. I had people knocking on my door to ask for help at school. It made me feel powerless and overwhelmed, sometimes, because I had things to prepare and could not give them the attention they needed. I wish I'd had time to set up a proper study group to help them to prepare well for the school exams, but I guess it would require at least one intensive month or so.

I think more time to do things is actually the most important aspect that deserves improvement. A three month period for the short term volunteering would be the most suitable, but I guess it may also depend on the subjects and the availability of the volunteers themselves. Another simple aspect would be the inclusion of an island map in the volunteer guidebook, it would have helped me a lot in the beginning, when Jess was not around! ☺

Finally, the thing I found more difficult about preparing experimental classes was that some basic stuff were not as easy to get as I assumed. Things such as having enough ice for the experiments or finding pineapple are much more difficult than they seem. Having internet or energy to prepare classes is also not guaranteed! I think voluntaries in Ilha de Moçambique must be prepared for these kind of contingencies and see them as a great opportunity to stimulate their imagination and develop their capacity to overcome problems.



7 Extracting DNA out of a banana

6. Final considerations/thoughts

I had forced myself to be prepared for some potential disappointment, just in case my classes and my stay in Ilha didn't go as planned. But in the end, everything enormously exceeded my best expectations. The Island itself was more beautiful than I imagined, people were warm and generally very nice, sharing work (and life) with Jessica was a wonderful experience, and students were so intelligent and friendly that they always made me feel I was the best teacher in the whole world. I guess that's a privilege of working with the brightest and more talented students in Ilha de Moçambique! It was definitively the two most amazing months of my life!



8 Friends and amazing moments I will never forget.