

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF... 'SHE WHO HELPS'

As she sits on the sofa Dr Cheryl Mvula appears relaxed but you can see the energy and dynamism in her even here. With a Doctorate in Chemistry and a high-powered career in the oil industry she did not feel fulfilled, so she left to run a social enterprise called Tribal Voice Communications (TVC). In this new and very different role she is able to make a real difference to people's lives - using profits from the company's wildlife conservation and responsible tourism consultancy work to fund poverty reduction work in Africa. Grimacing when she talked about her previous job, her demeanour completely changed when we moved on to what she now finds herself doing on a typical day - and her enthusiasm for her subject is quite contagious: "I work on our own initiated projects (responsible tourism and wildlife conservation) and also as a consultant to other conservation and tourism organisations such as international wildlife conservation charity the Born Free Foundation (founded by Born Free film actress Virginia McKenna)."



Responsible Tourism

"One of my key projects at the minute is the 'Maasai Villages initiative' in Kenya - for which TVC has just won a global award in the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards 2009 - ranking us as amongst the top-three tourism organisations in the world for poverty reduction." Not bad for a one-woman/man band... "This initiative has overturned over 30 years of exploitation of the Maasai tribe by Kenya's driver guides who, up until we intervened, had been siphoning off 96% of the fees tourists to Kenya paid for excursions around Maasai villages (unbeknown to these visitors). Now these excursions (in the Maasai Mara, not elsewhere in Kenya) are 'fair trade' with the villages receiving between 75-100% of these tour fees. This is making an incredible difference to their lives"

CHERYL'S TOP TIPS FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

1. Sample local cuisine by avoiding all inclusive resorts - you can then enjoy taking some of your meals at local eateries - in this way you benefit local businesses and learn more about the culture of the area.
2. Don't pay cash in Maasai villages for cultural tours - instead ask your tour operator or accommodation provider to purchase a ticket for such an excursion - if you don't the village you visit won't benefit.
3. Don't give sweets, pens, or money to children - this only serves to propagate a begging culture which is very demeaning to local people. If you want to donate to a community give through your tour operator or headmaster at a local school or orphanage.
4. Never feed wild animals - they can become aggressive and may end up being shot!
5. On safari encourage your guide to show you the smaller things in the bush - not just the 'Big Five' - crowding of these animals, particularly big cats, by tourist vehicles is threatening their survival as they can't hunt when constantly being followed.

Find the full list at:
www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk

Poverty Reduction

When working on the Maasai villages initiative in Kenya (see www.tribal-voice.co.uk), it is completely different again: "I'd wake up very early to the sound of cows being lead out of the manyatta (homestead) for the day's grazing and after a quick wash and a mug of smoky Masala tea boiled on an open fire I'd head off to the big acacia tree on the escarpment overlooking the Masai Mara game reserve for a meeting with village elders."

Timings are more 'flexible' in Africa: "If the meeting is due to start at 9am it can take until 10.30am to actually start, as the Maasai come on foot from villages miles around to attend. You can see them coming in the distance - the black dots of wildebeest are interspersed with the brilliant red robes of the Maasai drifting across the plains." They meet to discuss their village tourism enterprises - the challenges they are facing and the developments they are planning in their communities with the fruits of their new-found tourism income. "These meetings can take a very long time as in Maasai tradition things never go to a vote - we have to debate and argue things out until everyone is in unanimous agreement!"

Lunch is usually thick creamy milk that the Maasai ladies have taken from their cows that very morning, decanted into gourds. "In the afternoon I usually visit one of the developments the Maasai are implementing in their villages - this could be a rainwater harvesting system, a new school or a biogas project (where the villagers are using cow dung and leaves to produce fuel for cooking in their huts as an alternative to firewood)." The evening could be spent around the fire in the village discussing anything from cow herding to protecting livestock from leopard attacks - or visiting one of the nearby safari lodges to discuss how the manager can begin to operate fair trade Maasai village excursions to his safari clients.

Wildlife Conservation

As a consultant to the Born Free Foundation www.bornfree.org.uk on wildlife projects in Malawi and Zambia, a typical day in Zambia could begin with a visit to someone's house to confiscate a monkey being illegally kept there as a pet (usually on the end of a very short chain) followed by arranging health checks and veterinary care for the rescued animal. They usually arrive in very poor condition and extremely stressed: "A baboon we confiscated on my last visit to Zambia used to be chained to the roof of the man's car to act as a 'draw' for his driving school business!"

A visit to Zambia Wildlife Authority headquarters to secure permits to release a troop of previously confiscated and now fully rehabilitated monkeys back to the wild could follow, along with a meeting later that day with a local company to try and secure sponsorship for the primate release project for things ranging from vehicle tyres to army tents for our anti-poaching patrol scouts.





She Who Helps

It is easy to see why the Maasai name this woman Naretisho - 'She Who Helps' - and their respect and affection for her are clearly reciprocated. It is plain, after talking to Cheryl for a short time, that she passionately believes in what she is doing - and she finds it incredibly fulfilling and exciting to make such drastic changes to the quality of life of the Maasai people: "People think that they can't make a difference on their own, but they CAN! That's why Manny (my husband) and I set up the High Five Club www.highfiveclub.co.uk in our spare time. Anyone who wants to help reduce poverty in Africa can join. The ethos is simple - each member puts £5 a month into a collective High Five pot and every two months or so we collectively fund a community project in Africa which gives people a 'hand up' (as opposed to a 'hand out') to support them in their quest to escape the poverty trap. So for two fewer speciality coffees a month or less than the cost of a cinema ticket - you too can become a member of the High Five Club and 'help change lives, £5 at a time'. 100% of monthly membership goes directly to these projects - nothing is used for admin - unlike a lot of charities - and, importantly, these are communities that for the greatest part we know personally... so we can be 100% sure the money is making a real difference."

ALTERNATIVE CHRISTMAS

Cheryl and Manny have just launched the High Five Club Unwrapped Gift scheme in time for Christmas - so if you're worried about buying something for the person who already has everything, why not choose this alternative route, log onto www.highfiveclub.co.uk and buy a high Five Club membership for yourself, a friend or a relative? Or you could buy the gift of an egg-laying chicken for a community-owned poultry project in Zambia for £5 - to provide protein to a community who are lucky if they get protein more than 5 times a year - or, for £10 - a stake in the building of a classroom block for Kamanga School in Zambia, set up by the community themselves for orphaned and vulnerable children in Zambia's biggest slum area.

AFRICA FACTS

- 1 in 2 people survives on less than 50p a day
- 1/3 of Africans suffer from malnutrition
- 1 in 6 children dies before the age of 5
- Only 1 in 3 children completes school
- Fewer than 1/2 Africans have access to hospitals and doctors
- Average life expectancy is 41
- Every minute a woman dies during pregnancy or childbirth

Articles on Cheryl's work in Kenya have been published in the Sunday Observer, Times Online and Spotlight magazine - see the PRO POOR page of the Tribal Voice website to www.tribal-voice.co.uk

Christina Birkett

