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## Malawi: First steps in Mzimba



Team Chikaya outside the COIDA office

Submitted by GeorginaNicoli on Tue, 19/04/2016 - 11:31

### Arrival in Malawi

After a long and tiring journey, we volunteers from the UK spent our first five days in Malawi, in the capital Lilongwe, where we met our Malawian counterparts and had our in-country orientation. We have bonded well as a group and are looking forward to getting out in the field and starting to make a difference. After our training, we made the five-hour journey up to Mzimba and moved into our host homes.



As someone who had never travelled outside Europe before, I was not sure what to expect from my first journey into Africa. My knowledge of Africa had been based on stereotypes and some of my own research before I left the UK, but no one can be completely ready for such a change of culture.

A few things that have surprised me so far about Malawi:

1. **Women (and men) really do carry things around on their heads, with impressive balance.** This is something that never happens in the UK. I tried this out myself and the load wouldn't stay put!
2. **The main staple food looks like mashed potato but definitely isn't.** It is called nsima and is made with maize flour and water. It tastes rather bland but it is intended to be dipped into sauce before you eat it, and it is meant to be eaten with your hands. At the in-country orientation, when we tried nsima for the first time, the Malawian volunteers looked at us like we were mad as we ate it with a knife and fork.
3. **Locals may stare at you in the street for looking different, but as soon as you say something to them, they are warm and friendly.** Never have I been to such a friendly country. The people of Mzimba are not used to seeing people with light skin in their town, but once I greet them, they are incredibly kind and curious about me and my life.
4. **Host parents really do treat you as if you are their own child, or perhaps even better!** They are very protective of their 'children'. My host mum worries about my roommate and I a lot, even when we are home before our curfew. Host parents are happy to talk to you about Malawi and advise you on the best places to go in the town. My roommate and I are being treated like royalty and we could not ask for more.
5. **And finally, Malawian oranges are green!**

Arrival in Mzimba



Not forgetting the real reason that we are here, which is to make a real difference to the village communities that surround Mzimba. Our partner organisation is called COIDA, which stands for Communities In Development Activities. They work in the villages around Mzimba, helping the community to help themselves through a variety of development activities. The basis of our project is sexual health and rights, and livelihoods, amongst young people, and the plight of disabled people in Mzimba.



Our first week here has been spent planning for the weeks ahead, and making sure we are aware of what we need to do to complete our volunteer roles. At the end of the week, we discussed the barriers and solutions of working with the stakeholders and beneficiaries of our project in Mzimba. I learnt that we need to talk to everyone with influence in the community if our project is going to have the intended effect.



I am very excited to get out in the field and start making a difference in the next couple of weeks. We will be meeting community leaders to get their permission to start carrying out our sessions. Watch this space for our first trip out into the villages.

Written by ICS volunteer Holly Baker

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