

Life in a Mud Hut - Volunteering in rural South Africa

By Rachel Lassman

You wake up in the morning to the sound of the cockerels and the village slowly stirring while the sun is still below the horizon and then you watch the sun creep into view filling the sky with a pale, orange light. The rondavel (traditional mud hut) walls have a warm glow.



The Rondavel – Mud Hut

The kitchen is a hive of activity in the mornings, everyone up and hungry plus the dogs and cats requesting to be fed. Breakfast is either homemade bread with homemade jam or homemade cereal – toasted oats, seeds and raisins. You start the day with a sense of satisfaction knowing that your labours yesterday helped put the food you are now eating on the table.

At 8am there is a short meeting, all the volunteers and the locals employed by the project plan the priorities for the day before getting started.

CART – Centre for appropriate rural technologies aims to support the local community in developing sustainable ways of living and managing resources. The project aims to develop skills in the community to allow people to live healthy and sustainable lives. Currently skill development areas include holistic gardening, building and construction, animal husbandry, alternative technologies for water and energy and healthy lifestyles. The project aims to empower and unite the community to rather than direct and take over so project grows in an organic way which at first may seem slow but is ultimately more sustainable. The centre is based in the Eastern Cape of South Africa – in the village of Sicambeni just outside Port St Johns. The area is a stunningly beautiful part of the world – on the wild coast – a magic mix of coastline, semi tropical forests and mountains.

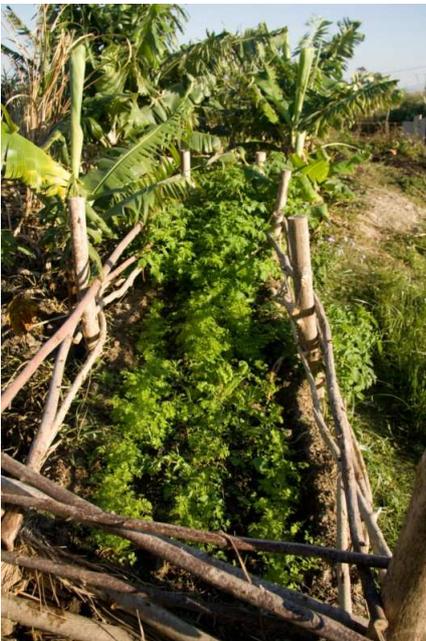


The views from Sicambeni Village

The first job of the day (in the dry season) is to water the garden. Everyone does this together – the garden rings out with morning chatter in both Xhosa and English and beautiful songs in Xhosa.

Once the garden is watered the days tasks are varied – brick making, designing and building a chicken run, gardening, helping make the meals, working with the local children developing skills and playing games. Ideas are very much welcomed and everyone has a unique contribution to make during their time at the project.

Working in the gardens is a great way to get back to nature. The gardens are stunning and plentiful no matter what time of the year. The beds are arched or circular in shape and edged with local wood – walking along the many curves has a profound calming feel. The beds are all layered composting beds - designed along the principles of permaculture. A dizzying array of things are grown - fruit, vegetables, herbs including wheat, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, pepperdew chillis and my all time favourite – loofahs – no they don't come from the sea they are in fact grown! Being in the garden means helping build raised beds, planting seeds, weeding, harvesting – all contributing to the production of food that will make its way to the dinner table.



The gardens

Brick making and building was a very new experience for me. The local guys are keen to share the skills they are learning and to pass on their knowledge. Bricks are made using a hand press and local soil. Its good old fashioned manual labour – but a lot of fun and an enormous sense of achievement is doing something to

fundamental – being involved in building a home with your own hands. The use of locally sourced resources means that the building methods are replicable by the local community.

Working with Dianne in the kitchen to make lunch or dinner is amazing – in a few weeks I have learnt to make so many things I would normally buy – deemed too complicated or fussy to make. Bread, jam, chutney, cream cheese, peanut butter recipes are now all stored in my travel journal for when I return home. Lunch is a spread of freshly made bread, chutneys, homemade bean pate, salads from the garden - all so good you just want to spend the afternoon munching your way through more and more.

Twice a week a group of local women come to learn to make jams and chutneys – the project is supporting them in developing a preserve making business so enable them to make an income from their gardens. It's a joy to work in the kitchen with them - to learn from them and to share skills with them at the same time. The atmosphere that they work in is light hearted and fun and the beaming smiles show how proud they are with the finished product! And so they should be the banana and vanilla jam is divine – take my word for it!

The local children, though they have nothing compared to children at home, are full of joy and excited to be involved and learn. Whether you decide to join them for a kick about on the very overgrown patch of land they play football on or are involved in working with the local school you can guarantee that fun will be had by all.

They say you learn something new every day – here this is not the case. The learning curve here is steep – you learn so much each day. You learn about who you are and how you can sustain yourself – practically and emotionally. The centre very much meets its aims of being a skill development centre for both the community and the volunteers that are part of the project.

After a hard days work is time to shower – which is an experience – the paraffin jet shower once lit sings away like a didgeridoo whilst you scrub yourself clean with your loofah from the garden! Then you can watch the sunset over the rows of hills and the coastline and marvel at the beauty of the area.



Another beautiful sunset!

Dinner time is a chance to sample yet more homemade delights from the hard work done in both the garden and the kitchen. The wood burning oven is put to full use and pans boil and vegetables bake whilst

the fire is constantly stoked. It's also a time to reflect on the day as a group and discuss ideas and share stories.

After dinner the night starts to close in quickly and with no electricity in the rondavels the evening plays out by soft candle light. The bright milky way is high in the sky above you as you settle down to sleep.

If you are interested in volunteering:

www.southafricavolunteers.org

or

www.voluntoursouthafrica.com