

VOLUNTARY SERVICE OVERSEAS WAS A PASSPORT TO AN INCREDIBLE LIFE



Charlotte Beauvoisin left London for Uganda in 2009 to work as a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer with the Uganda Conservation Foundation. Twelve years on, she's still there.

Approaching Entebbe Airport, bright orange sunshine filled the plane. I felt like the sun was rising over Africa and my new life. I was a little nervous and very excited. In London, I had a corporate job and a long-term relationship, but the end of the relationship reignited my dream of visiting Africa. VSO was a passport to an incredible life. I didn't know anything about Uganda beyond Idi Amin, Lake Victoria and mountain gorillas, but I had a feeling I might stay longer than my two-year placement.

I felt bad for leaving my wonderful family in the Cotswolds, and Mum was

upset when it hit her that I might not be coming back, but they were, and remain, so supportive. I was passionate about the environment and animals, and the role of marketing development manager for the Uganda Conservation Foundation summed up everything I wanted.

There was a lot to learn, including adjusting to the protracted Ugandan way of greeting, which involves asking how your family are and whether you've slept well. But I think a culture shock stretches you. I wanted to record every experience, so I started a blog called Diary of a Muzungu (which means 'foreigner' or 'aimless wanderer').

After my VSO placement I moved into tourism, but continued the VSO philosophy of sharing skills with Ugandans. In 2011, I met Dr Katongole, a tourism lecturer who said my blog made me 'Uganda's tourism philanthropist'. It now highlights Uganda's incredible attractions, and I've since developed a marketing training programme for the tourism industry.

After 10 years in the capital, Kampala, I moved to Sunbird Hill on the edge of

Kibale National Park. It's 40 acres of regenerating farmland, with a thriving habitat rich in plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, over 270 bird species, and thousands of species of butterflies and moths. We're regularly visited by ornithologists, botanists, primatologists and nature enthusiasts.

Before lockdown, I was teaching the Uganda Wildlife Authority tourism wardens how to promote gorilla tracking and birdwatching online, and my next project will promote 'butterfly tourism'.

We contribute to global databases monitoring biodiversity and the impact of climate change, and our guests can experience guided walks with Silver, an incredibly knowledgeable ex-poacher who laid

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down his weapons to become a ranger.

Silver can identify every butterfly, bird and paw print, and knows the medicinal use of the forest's plants. At night, I hear the 'wahoo' of baboons and the eerie call of the black-and-white colobus monkey. I wake to an incredible dawn chorus and occasionally hear elephants pushing through three-metre high grass.

Sometimes I have to pinch myself. The warmth here – like the people – envelops you in a hug and makes you want to stay forever.

✦ For information on volunteering abroad, visit vsointernational.org

✦ Read Charlotte's blog at diaryofamuzungu.com

As a VSO volunteer, Charlotte fell in love with Uganda

