



# transformational travel

the voluntourism experience

■ BY JAYME OTTO  
Photographs by Jayme Otto

Seven of us pedal mountain bikes along a bumpy dirt road trying not to spill paint from the cans balanced on our handlebars. Children look up, calling out “Jambo!” as we pass. Some run from their homes to greet us, their sunny smiles reaching us before they do.

I’ve exclaimed the Swahili version of hello no less than 30 times already this morning in reply. By the time we reach our destination—the high school on the far end of the African village—I’m exhausted. Maybe it’s the sweaty bike ride dodging chunks of coral and rock, goats and chickens. Maybe it’s the mosquitoes. Maybe it’s the thought of spending two unshaded hours painting the school’s shabby exterior walls.

I ponder my drained state as I stand before what seems like an endless wall, blue paint in one hand, a tired brush in the other. Where is my do-gooder high?

The concept of being a voluntourist had really resonated with me back when

I planned the trip. Who doesn’t dream of a meaningful vacation to some far-flung land where you have the opportunity to make a difference? To make people’s lives better? A Cleveland Catholic-schooler, I grew up under the influence of missionaries like Sister Dorothy Kazel, and icons like Mother Teresa, who brought hope and inspiration by their mere presence in a foreign land.

Plus, I was well-traveled. And eventually, well-traveled people start jonesing for something more authentic than your typical tourist vacation. We want a travel experience that gets under our skin. We want total immersion. Leave no trace? No thanks. We want to leave our hearts and souls. We want to make a lasting impression.

I chose Zanzibar because it’s an exotic cacophony of African, Arab and Indian culture. And it’s 99 percent Muslim, which both unnerved and intrigued me. And I’ll admit, I sort of pictured Zanzibar like the scenes in the Disney cartoon *Aladdin*. Judge me if

you must, but I had this idea of dirt pathways through lively open-air markets, a hodgepodge of animals, fruits, vegetables and spices, and perhaps even a flying carpet. I imagined handsome people in colorful clothing and modest, but clean, little homes built of stone. I dreamed of making lifelong bonds, Facebook friends and, if we get right down to it, someone swearing to name their first born after me.

When I arrived in Jambiani, I shrunk back. The distance itself was daunting. It took me two days and five flights to reach my destination, with twelve hours worth of layovers spent lolling around in rinky-dink airports. Traveling to far-off lands was perhaps better in theory than in practice. There were no dirt road pathways to open-air markets. There were no markets. Just one dirt road that ran along one end of

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(Pictured above) Jayme with her six-year-old students at Millat Ibrahim Nursery School.

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A student practices writing the word "mountain."

town, then a bunch of crude homes lacking the civility of windows and doors, then the ocean. We traveled the dirt road by bike (no cars existed in Jambiani besides the one that dropped me off). We navigated the sand by foot, as it was too deep to ride through. The voluntourist coordinator advised me to keep my shoes on due to parasitic worms that enter your body through the soles of your feet. And there was, of course, malaria.

I got there just in time to join the existing team for lunch. Volunteers live together in a group home, just off the beach. Meals were provided, as well as housekeeping and laundry. I wasn't exactly bowled over by their enthusiasm at lunch. They were friendly, but quiet; tired, I'd learn later, due to demanding schedules with little downtime. A typical day looked like this:

**8-10 A.M. TEACH ENGLISH TO ADULTS AT THE JAMBIANI TRAVEL AND TOURISM INSTITUTE**

**10 A.M. - 12 P.M. TEACH ENGLISH TO PRESCHOOLERS AT LOCAL SCHOOL**

**1 - 2 P.M. LUNCH**

**3 - 5 P.M. COMMUNITY SERVICE (PAINTING SCHOOLS, PLANTING TREES, BUILDING FENCES)**

**6:30 P.M. TAKE SWAHILI LESSONS**

**7 P.M. DINNER**

And there was a dress code. Apparently Islam is not a spectator religion. On the beach (which we seldom had time to indulge in) we could dress as we chose. But off the beach, we had to wear modest clothing that covered our shoulders and knees at the bare minimum. I got a lot of mileage out of the yoga knickers I'd brought on a whim, wearing them under my way-too-short sundresses.

Slapping blue paint on the wall two days after my arrival, I sort of feel like I've enlisted. There is a distinct lack of freedom here. You eat whatever they put in front of you, adhere to a dress and conduct code, and are slave to a regimented schedule. I cross-examine my cohorts in between paint strokes. Is this trip what they'd expected?

"It's hard for everyone in the beginning," says Sarah, an ex-Girl Scout from a small town in Nebraska. "But after awhile, you start to have these 'Aha!' moments where everything falls into place and it all becomes worth it."

She joined up for six weeks, and was halfway through her tour of duty. I am only down for one. I wonder if my measly week is long enough to deal with my doubts.

I look for my "Aha!" moment the next morning when I teach English at preschool for the first time. This has to be a place where I can make a difference, a place to see some change. Three of us have the six-

## getting there

My voluntourism experience was through **The Planeterra Foundation** ([planeterra.org](http://planeterra.org)). The Planeterra Foundation is a non-profit organization that supports sustainable community development through travel and voluntourism. With about 30 projects worldwide, ranging from providing water tanks to families in Kenya to supporting a women's weaving co-operative in Peru, Planeterra offers travelers the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of people and communities around the world.

year-olds, and they certainly deliver. They love us, unabashedly. They want to touch us, sit next to us, repeat our English phrases as best they can for us. When we start off class with a rousing rendition of the itsy-bitsy-spider song, I feel my heart will burst with blissful gratification. But it's not the "Aha!" moment. Because secretly I wonder how this impacts their lives. Will they remember? Are they learning anything, or are we just a welcome distraction from their regular lessons, a recess? Will these songs give them the skills to rise above the poverty line of Jambiani? Will they ever leave this place?

These thoughts stay with me all night, right through to the morning. As I lay in bed just after sunrise, in the safety of my mosquito net, I hear shuffling outside. Some of the other volunteers and I get up to investigate. A small crowd of children has gathered on the other side of the wall separating our house from the rest of the village. They must be standing on tiptoe, their fingers and heads are all we can see. Peeking over the wall, they sing to us:

"Jambo, Jambo Bwana,  
Habari gani,  
Mzuri sana."

They sing in playful voices, oh-so-pleased-with-themselves voices, inviting voices. I recognize some words from our Swahili lessons—basic words meaning "hello" and "how are you?" It's a song you would sing to someone brand new at the language. And it's catchy. I start to sing along. We all do.

And I nearly choke on the "Aha!" moment as it gets caught up in my throat: our students had gotten up early on a Saturday morning to teach us a language lesson. And I didn't have to wonder anymore whether or not our songs stuck with them. Because they etched their song so deep into my heart that my mind will never forget. I realized then that voluntourism begins with a will to create positive change in the places you visit, and ends with the realization that you're the one who changes. •

*Jayne Otto lives and writes in the playground known as Boulder, CO. She manages to tear herself away from her computer long enough to go on trail runs with her Labrador, and bike rides with the Title Nine Cycling Club. More at [JayneOtto.com](http://JayneOtto.com)*