

School building project in Agnena – Pioneer Programme

As part of the January 2009 Pioneer scheme, building a school in Agnena was eye-opening, rewarding and utterly, utterly magical.

Agnena is a tiny village, 4km from the market village of Mahatalaky. Its setting is the stuff of Jurassic times: once off the dirt road, our camion navigated an expanse of grassland, traveller's palms and the odd zebu before arriving at the bank of a river. Agnena lies the other side: a 2-minute pirogue ride separates it from, it seems, civilisation. And because it is so remote, and has so little, his beautiful spot is known locally as 'fish shit'.

Before we arrived, nothing could have prepared me for the sight of children running out of a school built by Azafady in 2005, to wave at the camion. That moment will stay with me forever: it was then that I got an inkling of the significance of this project.

When we came to Agnena, there was already a school but the building had multiple purposes. As well as a centre of learning for the 100+ children, it acted as a cyclone shelter, town hall, mini-market and church. A 2-room affair with a dirt floor, it leaked profusely and had no working doors or window shutters. When it rained, you might as well have been outside for the protection it lent.

I had no idea what to expect of school building. We were prepared for the fact that we might not finish the school itself, since our allotted time on site was reckoned to be tight in terms of what was required to get the job done. But our group was special: with 8 boys and 7 girls; all of us keen to learn new skills and finish the school, we were off to a flying start!

We were given a demonstration of how to use tools: Malagasy shovels, chisels, saws, hammers and 'spaghetti' nails (our term) were the main players. Tape measures, set squares and pens completed our list of tools – and the only materials we used were wood, paint, varnish, sand paper and cement. Having just decorated my house in the UK, it really brought home how little you really need.

From the beginning, the locals were involved in the construction. Digging holes was something of a challenge for some of us - this was early in the scheme and before we were lean, bronzed, digging machines! – and watching the Malagasy men dig an 80cm hole in 10 minutes, with a tiny shovel, laughing and chatting all the time was humbling.

Personally, I found the variety of activities employed during the project extraordinary. From putting up the walls, making the benches, to rock weaving the floor, mixing cement and painting, the enjoyment never waned – even when it rained. The enthusiasm for the school and what we were doing was also wonderfully obvious from the children. They watched and joined in with sanding or painting at break-times and we became friends with many of them: their singing and dancing welcomed us on our first day and continued throughout our stay.

This project is so important, for so many reasons. Everything that can be done to ensure its survival should be. I could write for hours about having my birthday in Agnena; doing Tai Chi with the guides at 4.30am; the camaraderie in our group; watching the stars; our welcome from the Chief de Quartier; the opening ceremony when the first apex was erected; practising Malagasy with the locals at the well; the satisfaction of completing a window shutter (EKA!); health education in the form of a hand-washing song and game with the children; the final party and dancing in the rain... even our evacuation in the face of a cyclone. All these memories, along with the incredible team-work, sense of achievement and pleasure on the faces of the children, contributed to make the school building in Agnena – happily, because of the school, no longer known as 'fish shit' – one of the most special times of my life. The school stands proud now, and so do I.

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Azafady is launching a new volunteering scheme called the **Azafady Conservation Programme**. The new programme is based in the beautiful coastal region of Sainte Luce which is surrounded by extremely rare and threatened fragments of littoral (coastal) forest. Register your interest and request further information by contacting: info@azafady.org Tel: **+44 (0)20 8960 6629**