

To my clients, friends and supporters

As many of you know, I left the UK for Malawi on Friday 31<sup>st</sup> May with a group of 12 other volunteers to renovate one of the schools that the Tongole Foundation supports.

I arrived at Heathrow airport to meet the rest of the group and wow! soooo much luggage packed with kind donations of stationery, footballs, netballs, football / netball kit, shoes, balloons, books and more!

We flew from London Heathrow to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) before boarding the next flight to Lilongwe, Malawi. On arrival, we boarded two bush planes which would fly us direct to our Tongole accommodation, where we were met by two Land Rover Defenders which would take us 3km to the lodge - our home for the next 10 days.



Once we were shown to our rooms, freshened up and ate dinner, a herd of elephants paid a visit!



After a good night's sleep, we were ready to start the day by going through the MANY donations we all brought to Malawi. It was impressive to see it all in one place!



We then spent the rest of the day enjoying the lodge and were lucky enough to see another herd of elephants in front of the lodge, by the river.

It was now day three and the first day of the school renovations! Despite a Land Rover breaking down en route, we made it to the school and started on the first of two school blocks and got through more than we expected!



On the second day on site, we were starting to get into the groove of the restorations. The teachers and children were getting very familiar with us (and us with them) too. By the end of the day, we had blistered hands and were seeing the hand sanded, primed and painted circle windows in our sleep!



As we managed to pretty much finish the first school block, we were able to add another project to the agenda for the week – decorating a teacher’s house that had recently been built!

Before we knew it, it was already day five and I woke up to hippos on the riverbank opposite my room!

We completed the first school block and got a good way through painting the teacher’s house. We enjoyed a local village ceremony including many chiefs where they recognised the ongoing work completed by the Tongole Foundation. There is clearly a need for ongoing support – toilets and desks are in severe need.



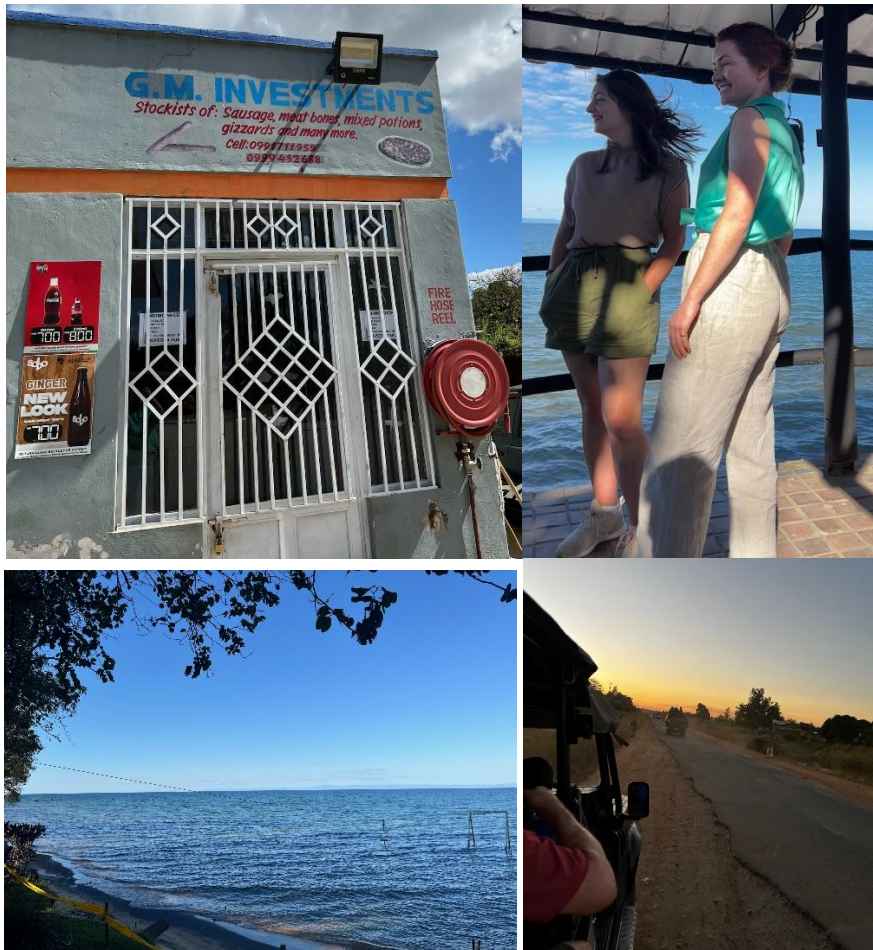
The following day, day six, we had breakfast as usual (7am), left by 8am and got to the school for 9am. We finished off the teacher’s house (all teachers live on site and only accept roles with family accommodation) and we started the second block.

We finished everything we could and moved on to the main event of the day – playing netball and football with the children at the school, which was GREAT fun! Jade ran a small netball tournament with the girls whilst Chris took the boys through football drills. They were all EXCELLENT! We finished the day by playing a match with the local boy’s football team. Needless to say, even with the help of the teachers on our side, we lost 2-0!



At the end of the first week, we had a day off from the school. David and Bentry wanted to show us a little bit more of Malawi...

We started off by visiting Chillimani Primary School that the Tongole Foundation built from scratch in 2015. It had toilet blocks and a bore hole. It was great to see the school in action! From there we went to the market which was a real cultural experience before heading to Lake Malawi for a late lunch. It was great to see more of the country from open top Land Rovers, driving through the town and villages and seeing people go about their daily lives.



Getting from A to B takes a long time. One partially paved road we came across was more potholes than anything. The dirt roads are severely affected by the rains each year leaving great ruts in the road and causing sink holes. We ended up getting back to the lodge at around 6.30pm, a good bit after dark. The stars were amazing!

The school was closed for the weekend, but we had a truly amazing day spent at the lodge and experienced two lots of local singing and dancing: in the morning, the Tongole team serenaded us, and the evening brought a dance and drum group from one of the local villages. The music these men can make with a single drum is amazing!



Dinner was a selection of delicious local curries.

Our in-house band of guitar (David), vocals (Matt), piano (Leigh), and bass (Will), started off a fantastic dance party to finish the day off. What a day to remember!

Monday, and off to work again! With one Land Rover having issues, we all piled into the remaining Landy and the truck bed for what would be the last day on site.

On arrival, it was great to see the structures already full of children. It was almost a shame to clear the rooms to finish them off! We completed the final touches at the teacher's house and got through one school block. We were pretty efficient by now and knew what we were doing!

Chris and Jade gave away more football and netball kits – it was great to see the pupils starting to make use of our donations!

The satisfaction of seeing both blocks completed was immense. The only slight twinge: knowing the children would be sitting on the floor as they don't have enough desks!

We returned to the lodge and were surprised by the Tongole team performing local songs for us. What a talented bunch! Our attempt to respond by singing "Tiny Dancer" wasn't nearly as accomplished!



Our last day at the lodge had come round quickly. It started with a pang of sadness, quickly replaced with excitement as some of us headed off for a trek to the top of Kasukusuku Mountain. The fact that the temperature was hitting the mid-20s meant we got away with leaving at 8.30am rather than the initial suggested time of 6am. Phew! It was a beautiful hike and made us feel very intrepid. We started off by kayaking across the river opposite the lodge – thankfully the hippos and crocodiles let us be! We then made our way through the reserve on constant elephant watch to the peak of the mountain!

En route, our guide Yohan taught us a lot about the trees and how they can be used. I think we'd all be better prepared for a night in the bush in Malawi rather than the UK! Our efforts were certainly rewarded with the most incredible view of the reserve. We returned back to the lodge in time for lunch and an afternoon making the most of the Malawian sunshine.





Our final day came about too quickly. Day 12 saw us travelling back with heavy hearts. Whilst we were looking forward to seeing our families again, I think we all felt Africa, the people and the work we were able to complete for the children had gotten under our skin. The entire group left planning our next trip over.

Fingers crossed for a 2026 reunion in Malawi!!

