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A TRIP TO THE KINGDOM OF SWAZILAND TO TEST MY LIMITS – HOW I TOLD MY FAMILY THE BIGGEST LIE IN MY LIFE

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How many middle class 19 years old Georgian girls who have never been abroad can say that they celebrated their 20th birthday in Africa?

The real one, the continent called Africa, in a little kingdom SWAZILAND ? Well, I am one of those lucky ones. And the story of how I got there and what happened there is unbelievable and even crazy...

Going to Africa has always been my dream, but I would never imagine that I'd have to lie to make my dream come true. I lied to my parents in order to go to Africa and spent 9 months there. I told them that I was going to work for the United Nations while being there, that my flight ticket and accommodation was sponsored and this trip would be a great experience for me.

In reality, I worked for 4 months after graduating my college in Wales, in order to earn enough money to travel to Africa and survive in one of the villages there, working in an orphanage.

I grew up in a family with a disabled aunt. In a Post Soviet country like Georgia, she really suffered and my family members did not really know what to do with her and her "special" abilities. My precious aunt was the one who inspired me to care about creating a better, more colourful world for underprivileged and disabled people. That's how "Paint the World" NGO was born. The main aim of the organisation, that I started in Tbilisi at the age of 15, was to inspire teenagers to bring colours and happiness to people in need. Youth would gather and visit orphanages and hospitals, bringing sweets and balloons, performing activities that could cheer up the residents and make them smile. Sometimes the members would dress up like clowns or princesses, and bring face paints and guitars along. It started with a group of 15 year-old teenagers, but in 5 years time it became an international organisation with branches in Malaysia, Oman, Qatar and now Swaziland!

After becoming a young Imedi Hero I got a 100% scholarship to continue my studies in UWC Atlantic College in Wales, and I headed off to the biggest adventure of my life- my first trip abroad, to the real world.

While studying in Atlantic College, I met an extraordinary Math teacher, whose name was Lindsey Dunseith. She used to teach at the same UWC college, in Swaziland. That's when I first heard about the Kingdom of Swaziland, and this thought of going there crossed my mind. How amazing it would be to volunteer in Africa and gain the experience, and fulfil my main mission: paint the world, paint more, a bigger portion of this globe? expand my horizons and see more. Meet amazing people. Save lives! I was in love. In Love with this idea- to spend some time travelling in Africa and learning more about life.

Lindsey said she knew someone called Ann, who runs an orphanage in Mhtlanya, one of the villages in the Kingdom. Ann agreed to hire me as a volunteer, if I would manage to get myself to Swaziland and back. I said yes.

Earning 2.000 pounds for a ticket to Africa from Tbilisi was not easy. Applying for a Swazi visa if you are a Georgian citizen is also extremely difficult. But nothing is easy in life, right?

I was given 2 jobs on campus of my college. In May, the class of 2016 graduated from UWC Atlantic College. Everyone went on a Euro Trip, to celebrate graduation. I had to stay on campus and work, trying to sponsor my gap year.

For the next 3 months, I was a waitress and a gardener. But my jobs were very glamorous: I was a gardener and a waiter in a real castle!

I don't think I will ever have the courage to tell my parents that I spent the entire 3.000 pounds salary that I earned that month on a ticket to Swaziland, and my visa.

I did buy the ticket, and I even came up with the biggest lie I have ever told to my parents.



I said that I would work for the UN youth project in Africa for 9 month. I also said that my ticket, housing, meals and transportation would be all covered by the UN, and I would not have to pay anything at all. This would sound more glamorous for my Georgian family, who would panic if I would say the truth- I am going to an unknown continent, knowing no one except one person who owns the orphanage where I will work, I am going as a volunteer meaning that I won't earn anything, and this trip is extremely dangerous..I am going leaving my comfort zone...

I showed fake UN invitations to my family, tied to act cool and lie as hard as I could. They believed me. The next thing I remember is boarding the cheapest plane to Dubai, shaking with fear. The next one was a 10 hours flight to Johannesburg, where I was thinking to myself, how will I survive in an unknown country knowing no one? But there was no way back. I was already on the African continent.

I realised how undeveloped Swaziland was: no buildings, no shops, no malls, I looked out of the tiny airplane and saw nothing at all! Expect tiny African huts and forests... I was very scared.

After meeting Ann, the owner of the orphanage where I was supposed to play with the children and teach them English, I realised that Africa is not what I thought it would be. And my 9 month would be very lonely and isolated, in a tiny village called Mhtlanya, where everything is dirty, muddy, poor and unbearably hot. The hut where I stayed was a little room with no sink, tiny bed, a toilet and a little room for taking showers. The place was near the bus stop, although there were no places to go.

Literally a road which led to the orphanage and high mountains around my little hut. No internet, no running water, no communication with the real world. Only local Africans around me, who were very hospitable and nice, but I still felt lonely. I was starting to think about going back home.

Looking back, I think those days were the most miserable and challenging. I could not tell my parents about my struggles. I could not Skype my friends properly. All I could do is get used to my new role as a teacher at the orphanage and try to fill my free time with activities, such as reading; writing a book about the African people I met on daily basis.

I would see the pain all around me: I would see people with no shoes walking on the road right next to my house, I would see kids with torn clothes on, hungry and very dirty. I would see mothers with 5-7 children, who were abandoned by their husbands who had to become prostitutes in order to feed the children.

So my life was waking up at 5 am, I would finish work at 4 and had nothing to do after that. The sun was hot and my hut was boiling, I had no friends.

The job definitely did not fit me, and Ann did not want to admit that. I was a bad teacher, kids did not listen to me. Secretly I dreamt about starting "paint the world" Swaziland, and doing community projects at local hospitals and orphanages. Project that would not be just about teaching, but also simply cheering sad people up and bringing some colours into their lives.



Then I met Judy Currie. Judy was a white South African lady, independent, confident, successful.

Judy introduced me to the people who worked at the local hospitals, who ran companies, who travelled and took me to travel with them, who introduced me to kids from local universities and schools, who sponsored my events and helped me to even get in touch with the Royal Family in Swaziland.

Soon Paint the World was born, and I tried to unite young Swazi teenagers to do the same activities as we used to do in Georgia: Visit places where people needed smiles and happiness, and bring lots of balloons and music and make everyone smile and dance.

Metropolitan Swaziland and Star Paint Swaziland became our main sponsors. African teenagers and myself would find a place in a village, ask for sponsorship of our transportation, sweets and presents.

When I told Judy about my living conditions, she said I have to move to her place.

Her house was beautiful, on the top of a mountain in Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. She always had very interesting visitors and they would all be amazed to hear that she "adopted me", a stranger from Georgia.

After some time, my Malaysian friend Aziza came over to Mbabane, after she heard that Paint the World Swaziland was a success. She was the founder of Paint the World Branch in Malaysia.

Together we met the Prince of Swaziland and the Princess Sibahle. It was amazing to go to their palace and see their lifestyle, fancy cars and posh furniture. I have never seen a place before, and this was an amazing but also sad experience- down the road from their place, kids were dying of hunger. And they did not bother about that.

I also had the honour to present my Paint the World Project to Mr. Beka Dvali, the Ambassador of Georgia to South Africa, when I visited Pretoria. He supported the project and said that he would be interested to see how it will grow in the future.



Lika Torikashvili

On 15th of June, when I celebrated my 20th birthday in Swaziland, I asked Star Paint company to sponsor enough paint to paint 20 African huts. Our team painted all the huts in the area where my own hut was, in that village in Mhtlanya. Now, whoever goes to that road, will see the colourful houses and the phrase "Paint the World" on them. I like to dream big, and my dream is to paint the entire world. I think that's my mission- to help create a better world with smiles, happiness and colours in it.

Article by Lika Torikashvili