

Introduction

In early 2024, I travelled to Uganda to volunteer with the NGO ACTADE (African Centre for Trade and Development) as part of my gap year. It was my first time living alone at all and then directly in a place entirely unfamiliar in language, culture, and rhythm. I arrived in Kampala without knowing a single person. Six months later, I left with unforgettable memories, unexpected lessons, and a different way of seeing the world.

My name is Jonathan, I'm 23 years old and currently studying Business Economics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. I joined the EUCI programme because I wanted to take a step back and truly reflect on my experience. Not just what I did, but what I felt, what I struggled with, and how Uganda changed the way I relate to global inequality and intercultural understanding.

In this portfolio, I reflect on my time in Uganda through the two core EUCI learning outcomes which are reflective development and intercultural awareness. Rather than focusing on tasks, I focus on moments like encounters with difference, feelings of doubt and discovery, and the many quiet lessons learned far beyond the workplace.

Living in Uganda: Between Curiosity and Uncertainty

When I landed in Kampala, everything felt unfamiliar, the language, the air, the streets. I was suddenly on my own in a country I had never visited, where I didn't know whom to trust and what to expect. I had never lived alone before. Doing so for the first time, thousands of kilometres from home, was equally exciting and intimidating.

The first weeks were shaped by deep uncertainty. The neighbourhood felt noisy, chaotic, and sometimes unsafe. Frequent power cuts disrupted both work and comfort. The roads were broken, traffic was wild, and I quickly realised that most of the rules I knew, especially from Germany, about punctuality, about structure, even about trust...didn't apply here.



“The street I was going to live in for the next 6 months.”

Over time, I developed routines which included going to the gym, buying food at local markets and finding cafés with stable Wi-Fi. These little anchors helped me find calm in a landscape of unfamiliarity. I also learned to set my own structure. I often worked only two days a week in the office and the rest from home. I had few formal tasks, so I had to actively seek out purpose. That's when I started shaping the idea for “August Voyage Safaris” - a project born from both inspiration and boredom.

What began as a spontaneous idea quickly evolved into something much bigger. I had met August, a local Ugandan with a strikingly open mindset and a passion for new ideas. Unlike many others, he wasn't just focused on day-to-day survival he wasn't as anybody I had met before. He was thinking long-term. We started talking, brainstorming, and eventually decided to build something together: August Voyage Safaris.

For me, August Voyage Safaris became more than just a side project. It gave structure to my otherwise slow weeks, but also a greater sense of purpose. It allowed me to apply creativity, take initiative, and step into unfamiliar territory like business development in a foreign country. For August, it was a chance to build something sustainable and meaningful. It was something which he was passionate about.

We worked very closely together. We were meeting with lawyers, shaping the brand, and reaching out to potential partners. Thanks to my connections with international volunteers, AVS soon became known among NGOs and expats as a trusted local provider.

Looking back, AVS was one of the most formative parts of my time in Uganda. It reminded me that impact doesn't always come from a white-collar job. Sometimes it grows from shared vision, trust, and a willingness to start small.

Even as daily life became manageable, the emotional situation remained complex. I often felt watched, not with hostility, but with curiosity. People would shout "Mzungu!" on the street or approach me just because of the colour of my skin. It made me uncomfortably aware of the symbolism I carried, not just as a visitor, but as a European, a "Westerner", someone with perceived money and privilege.

Intercultural Encounters: The Surface and the Depth

What surprised me most about culture was how much of it is invisible. In the EUCI seminars, we discussed the "Cultural Iceberg" the idea that what we see, like language, food, dress is only a small part of a much larger structure as values, norms and communication styles. Uganda made that visible for me in never expected ways.

One early challenge was language but not in terms of vocabulary, it was more the accent and the way they talked. Even though people spoke English I often struggled to understand. I found myself constantly asking, "Sorry, could you repeat that?" At first, I felt embarrassed. But later I realised: "listening is not just about words, but patience, humility, and a willingness to learn."



“A local friend and I in a restaurant, having a good conversation.”

Another deep moment came when I got seriously ill. One morning I woke up and didn't feel so well. I was vomiting all day alone in my apartment (I know, it's not a nice picture). A neighbour which I had never met before heard me through the wall, came in without asking, and carried me to a hospital. The diagnosis: typhoid. When I later thanked him, he simply replied, “Thank God, not me.” In this moment his action, his faith, his humility stuck with me. It reflected a depth of community spirit and religiosity that I had never encountered in Europe.

That experience also opened a door to something I hadn't expected to encounter so strongly. I realized that religion was a living force in daily life. Uganda is deeply spiritual not just in formal institutions, but in everyday language, actions, and values. People speak of God not only in prayer, but in greetings, in gratitude, and in decision-making. “God will provide” or “We thank God” were phrases I heard daily everywhere. They were in and on taxis, markets, and even professional settings.

As someone who didn't grow up in a particularly religious environment, I was both surprised and moved by this collective sense of faith. What struck me was not dogma, but the role that belief played a major role in building resilience, connection, and hope. Faith seemed to give people strength in sickness, in poverty, in uncertainty.

Out of curiosity, I once visited a local church service. It was nothing like what I had known. It was loud, joyful, emotional, full of music and community. I didn't understand everything, but I felt welcome.



“Visiting a Sunday church service. Not as a believer, but as a learner.”

This encounter reminded me that understanding culture also means understanding its spiritual dimension even if you don't share it yourself.

Friendships, Distance, and the Question of Trust

Socially, Uganda was both rich and confusing. I met international volunteers from all over the world, and we quickly bonded over our shared strangeness, over frustrations, over late-night talks. But relationships with local Ugandans were more complex. Some connections felt genuine, others left me wondering whether I was being liked as a person or approached as a symbol of money, of whiteness, of opportunity.



*“Early friendships with fellow volunteers and locals.
My support system in a new world.”*

Over time, this tension faded. I began to build friendships with locals who challenged my ideas, laughed with me, and invited me into their world. Still, I never stopped questioning the power dynamics at play. These reflections became part of my daily thinking: Who am I here? What is my role? What does it mean to be a European in postcolonial Africa?

Moments of Exposure: From the Mountains to the Mud Huts

Some of the most powerful moments happened outside the city. I went hiking in the Rwenzori Mountains five days without signal, comfort, or certainty. I remember standing on a ridge, soaked by mist, realising how small and fragile I was, not just physically, but globally. I wasn't there to teach or help or lead. I was there to learn, to witness, to listen.



“In the Rwenzori Mountains, disconnected, exhausted, awake.”

Another very important changing moment burned itself into my memory: visiting a rural village where families slept in mud huts, five children on the floor, cooking over open fire inside the room. I remember feeling stunned. How could this exist alongside the luxury compounds in central Kampala and even more to the western world? The contrast between wealth and poverty, asphalt and mud, was brutal. It made me angry, overwhelmed and gave me the feeling of being helpless.



“A visit that changed how I understood inequality. Not as numbers, but as daily life.”

Environmental Shock and Ethical Frustration

What shook me most, day by day, was the environmental destruction. It wasn't just present, it was inescapable. Plastic lay scattered along nearly every road, in gutters, on fields, in streams. The acrid smell of burning waste, especially plastic, lingered in the air, often coming from gardens, roadside piles, or even near homes and schools. I saw children walking barefoot through broken glass and piles of trash, and entire neighbourhoods surrounded by toxic smoke. As someone who deeply cares about the environment, it wasn't just upsetting, it was heartbreaking.

At first, I kept wondering: *"Don't people know how harmful this is. Why is plastic burned so casually? Why does nobody seem to notice, or care?"* But soon, I realised that it's not a lack of care, but a lack of choice. There are no public trash bins. No municipal collection system. Waste simply piles up and burning it is often the only perceived option.

I even tried to propose a small-scale solution within my NGO: a project to install public waste bins in key areas. But the idea was rejected. I was told it had been tried before but failed. The bins apparently blocked the sidewalks, which are often used by Boda drivers (the small motorbike taxis), since the main roads are congested. Some accidents had even occurred. I understood the reasoning, but I also felt that the deeper issue was a lack of urgency and awareness. Environmental concerns seemed like a distant luxury not something most people felt they could afford to think about.

That realisation hit me hard. I began to see the bigger picture the injustice behind the pollution. These people weren't careless. They were surviving. When you're busy figuring out how to feed your family, environmental sustainability doesn't top your list. I stopped blaming individuals and started questioning structures.



"The heart of Kampala drowning in trash."

And the contrast was stark. In central Kampala, I saw rooftop bars, luxury malls, and air-conditioned banks. A few kilometres further: families cooking over open fire next to open sewage. The visual disparity was surreal. It felt like two worlds coexisting one in marble, the other in mud.

This experience changed how I view environmental responsibility. In Europe, we often talk about recycling, CO₂, or sustainable consumption but in Uganda, I realised that these are not universally shared priorities. Not because they don't matter but because the foundation needed to address them simply doesn't exist.

Reflection and Change

Looking back, Uganda changed me not through work, but through perspective. It taught me to be quiet. To observe. To unlearn. I realised how easy it is to enter a space and assume you're helping when in fact, you're still learning how to see.

My idea of “development” shifted. It's not just about aid, or structure, or strategy. It's about context. About humility. About the tension between wanting to help and knowing when to step back.

This experience also sparked something long-term. Feeling the limits of my role made me want to do more but differently. That's when I started thinking about August Voyage Safaris. A project that would bring people closer to Africa with honesty, responsibility, and respect.

Conclusion

Participating in the EUCI programme gave me the language and the tools to process this experience more consciously. Through this portfolio, I've reflected not just on what I did in Uganda, but on who I became. A more patient, aware, and self-questioning person.

I've confronted privilege, loneliness, inequality, and complexity. And in doing so, I've begun a journey that I know will continue in future travels, in friendships, in every intercultural moment still to come.



“Not an ending, but a beginning of reflection, growth, and responsibility.”