

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...

Two weeks in Africa was all it took to hook line and sink me. Well that's not fair, it's not like I was the most unwilling of candidates to fall in love with the untamed beauty of the African Continent. I have to admit that my relationship with Africa had begun well before stepping foot on the toasty continent. Whether it began in my eighth grade geography class while picturing Africa as an untouchable land of adventure or in my more recent frenzy of internet research, I do not know. But by the time I realized that I was actually going to be locked on a plane for 18 hours and transported to Africa did it feel like more of a dream than ever. The idea seemed so fantastical that as I spread the news of my upcoming adventure, I felt more like a folklore story teller than an African traveler to-be. And honestly, now that I have returned I am just as convinced as my audience that my stories are purely myth and legend. Any account of what I experienced in Africa would not even do the tip of the iceberg justice, but I will do my best to outline my trip with the same amount of radiance and glow that Africa has so graciously shown me.

The first stop after one night in Johannesburg and nine hours of a rollercoaster 'taxi' ride was TCT concession, a sustainable timber concession. Although we were all anxious to "walk like an African" and get our hands dirty, the concession acted as a perfect buffer between our culture and theirs that helped ease us into the Mozambican culture and accommodations. Our munificent and informative Zimbabwean tour guide, James, narrated a makeshift (yet incredibly prepared) tour regarding sustainable forestry and the timber processing facilities on his property. Thanks to James's love for teaching, we got the opportunity to experience a timber felt and to see the complete process from tree to chair. Mozambique as a whole was unique in highlighting the advantages of simplistic living: from timber processing and furniture assemblance to marketing transactions and residential housing. The next stop was Enviro Trade, which was located just kilometers from the entrance to Gorongosa National Park. This stop was definitely a step down as far as luxury goes, but served rather as a looking glass into the "real" Africa (we weren't here to be pampered!). We got a chance to plant tree seedlings alongside of the locals which was a nice way to step out of our comfort zones and into the shoes (or rather bare feet) of a Mozambican for an hour or so. While in Mozambique, we visited a fair amount of communities and cultural awareness "events" that enhanced the trips' character and allowed us the opportunity to see a more circular view of the country. This was a necessary aspect when learning how different community values and beliefs impact forestry, wildlife and the environment. Then, we followed our noses to Gorongosa National Park which was in arms reach of our tents at Enviro trade. Since Gorongosa and Kruger national park (which we visited later in South Africa) were so drastically different, the trip to Gorongosa was extremely impactful not only for a wildlife and environmental comparison, but also to put the devastation of the recent civil war into perspective. Throughout our time in Mozambique, we were overwhelmed by the mere quantity of biotic life along with the attitude of the people which shook the country with a liveliness that almost seemed surreal. After all our experiences there, we were able to assess not only the extreme benefits of sustainable resource harvesting, but also the socioeconomic reasons that continue to deter sustainable forestry from spreading. Over the four days on Mozambican time, we watched a clip of the "circle of life" in fast motion: a 50+ year old tree falling to our feet and the planting three seedlings two days after made us feel as though the Mozambican jungle was more than ready for a lion king sequel.

In South Africa we had much more of a hands-on experience which made it extraordinarily memorable. There was quite a lot of traveling throughout our time in Africa, which filled the trip with

surprises and ultimately made it void of a dull moment. Our tour guides, Cori and Mario, really were cherries to our trip's sundae. These two African teachers who accompanied us throughout the trip were an absolute pleasure to be around, not only on a personal level but intellectually as well. They topped off the adventure in every aspect with their friendly and fun personalities and thought provoking comments. We really could not have asked for a better set of tour guides and makeshift mentors.

All of the accommodations in South Africa were extremely welcoming. The timber processing company Hunter Merensky, in particular, treated all of us as royalty and with extreme generosity in providing a complete forest plantation experience. We also enjoyed an avocado factory tour, which helped break up the forestry learning bit and made me, for one, an addict to the fruit. The three days spent on a continuous safari in Kruger National Park were such a blast and at the same time, Kruger gave us all the opportunity to catch our breath (and do laundry!!). No one can put a price on the connection we felt with the natural world in Kruger, not only in a wildlife fanatic way (I am a wildlife biology major), but also in a way that not-so-subtly hinted at the benefit of sustainability and that helped remind all of us of the true majesty of the untamed world. As far as tourist traps go, we visited the elegant MacMac falls, which was the perfect excuse to put on our African tourism gear for the day, equipped with safari hats and khaki clothes.

The waning end of the trip in Stellenbosch was nothing less than stellar. We all got the chance to pack away our nomadic shoes for a couple days and get a taste of a seemingly parallel state college life in Africa. The college town, packed full of large German men and shanty markets, was the perfect end to the trip. Just when we felt right at home with the university, small town and nightlife aspects of Stellenbosch, Africa would throw a curveball full of breathtaking views and unforgettable wine just to remind us that we were indeed on a different continent.

If riding over pot holed roads, dodging tree branches and having a face caked with dust didn't sound appealing while learning about Africa in an air conditioned classroom, I can undoubtedly say that my appetite for Africa has now rendered insatiable. The culture shock that threw my circadian rhythm just slightly off balance sent me soaring to near oblivion of my internet tied roots and overexploiting culture. I began to appreciate and further understand the value of body language and the connection that is arguably easier to spark without the commonality of language. So, overall, as I sew the memories of my adventure into a beautiful tapestry, I know that it will keep me as warm as I felt while I was there for years to come.

...and they lived happily ever after (knowing a long distance relationship will have to suffice for now...)

