

From a very young age I'd wanted to go to Africa for my gap year. Having been born to South African parents, the continent greatly interests me so from a very young age it was a dream to travel around there. My interest in Africa does not just stem from my family's history but having studied politics and economics at school, the topic of poverty and development has stood out to me as something I'd like to continue to study at university. For me there was no place more appealing to go and witness the struggles and hardship of poverty and the impact of politics on economic development in action. So starting in January 2015, I embarked on a trip around Eastern and Southern Africa spanning 8 countries in 123 days.

For Christmas holidays, I went to Plettenberg Bay, Western Cape, South Africa with my family. When my family left back to the UK, back to their everyday lives on 3 January, I stayed on in Cape Town where I would spend the next week. It was at one of Cape Town's most famous landmarks, the Rhodes Memorial, where I met my travel companion Nick, a friend from school. Fortunately for us, a family friend, Steph, very kindly lent us her flat in the suburb of Plumstead for the month as she wasn't using it. That week in Cape Town was spent doing lots of touristy things. One of my dad's friends from school, Eddie Scholz, lives in Cape Town and has a son our age, Jarryd, so he kindly agreed to show us around the city. The day after we arrived, Jarryd invited us to go up Lion's Head, a great 2 hour hike up the mountain which offers amazing views of the city. On the way down we met a Canadian girl called Tia who was also new here. We also spent one day watching the cricket test match at Newlands Stadium before meeting Tia and her friend Sophie at Clifton Beach. The next day, the four of us climbed up and down Table Mountain, one of the New 7 Natural Wonders of the World. This was a six hour hike and unfortunately when we got to the top, there was no visibility as the weather turned from a perfectly sunny warm day to a cold mist throughout our hike. However it was still a very fun, albeit tiring, experience and a good taster for what we would be in for in less than a month's time. On Saturday 10th January, the Scholz's took us to go and see Cape Point, another must-see attraction in Cape Town. We walked right up to the edge to the Cape of Good Hope before having a lovely seafood lunch.

The next day, Jarryd drove us to Stellenbosch, a university town 30 miles east of Cape Town, where Nick and I would begin the next stage of our adventure. For the next 10 days we would work on an internship for Distell, a marketing company for alcohol brands. They market for brands well known throughout South Africa, such as Nederberg, JC Le Roux, Klipdrift, Van Ruyn's, Two Oceans, Savannah and many more. This was a very interesting experience for me and highlighted marketing as a potential career path. We had chats with people from different departments, each in charge of a different brand, who gave us brief overviews of what they do for Distell. We had many tours of the different factories which gave us an insight into the production and bottling process of each brand – including a complimentary tasting! We also spent a couple of days with Gerhard, a wine buyer for Distell. His job was to go to the different factories and collect a sample of each wine, where he would take them back to the lab and test each of them, alongside of five other testers. Nick and I agreed it was the best job in the world! All in all, this was a very informative and interesting 10 days and I'm glad we were able to do something like this on our gap year.

The rest of January was spent mainly preparing for the rest of our trip into deeper, darker Africa. Cape Town really felt like 'Africa for Beginners', as it has the feel of a modern European city with its safe atmosphere. There were very few reminders of the dangers of Africa which we would come to experience later on in our trip...

On Sunday 1st February, we left Cape Town to Johannesburg. My cousin Xander, our new travel companion, and his dad Gary met us at the airport and we spent the night at their flat. We were up early the next morning and Gary took the three of us to back to the airport where we would fly to Kilimanjaro International Airport, Tanzania via Nairobi. The following week would be one of the most difficult but altogether rewarding weeks of our lives. We checked into L'Oasis Backpackers Lodge in Arusha where we would spend the night before beginning our attempted summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest point in Africa and the highest free standing mountain on Earth.

We met our two guides, Kelvin and Frank at 8.15AM and sorted through the remaining pieces of kit we still needed to hire before driving to the entrance of Kilimanjaro National Park where we paid our park fees and eventually began hiking at 14.30. For this first day's walking, we were entirely in forest on a slight gradual upwards slope. The walk took about six hours - one of the longest days on the whole climb and we climbed from a start of 1200m above sea level up to 3000m. However this was still nothing compared to what we were in for the following days. As well as Kelvin and Frank, there were 11 porters assigned for the three of us who would carry most of our things plus all our food for the week and our tents. They would also cook all our meals and take down our tents in the morning, overtake us during the day and pitch our tents by the time we arrived at the next campsite. On the mountain we were told to go "Pole Pole" (slowly) so to adjust to the altitude as well as possible. However for all the porters who had each climbed Kili dozens of times they would almost jog up, whilst carrying a heavier load. I was in envy of how easy it seemed for them. The next day's hike was shorter but at much more steep and tiring. The terrain was a lot rockier as well and the higher altitude began to affect us a little bit. We arrived at our next campsite, Shira Camp, at 3800m just before lunch. The third day was an acclimatisation day, meaning we walked up to a point called Lava Tower at 4600m where we stayed for about an hour to get our bodies used to the altitude. From there we had a pleasant downhill walk Barako Camp at 3900m. Because this campsite was a similar altitude to the previous one and we had been so much higher during the day, I managed one of my best night's sleeps of the week. The following day was by far the toughest day yet in my opinion. It started with us having to scale Barako Wall, an incredibly steep rocky ridge and the closest thing to actual climbing we would experience on the mountain. After that we walked 11km to our next campsite, Barafu Camp (4600m). As the altitude increased progress became slower and slower and breathing seemed to get more difficult with every step. By the time we reached camp morale was fairly low. I was starting to get tired of the food as well which was very repetitive. We had the same peppery soup as a starter for every single lunch and supper. We were told by Kelvin at supper of the plan for the next day – Summit Day! We were to get up at 5.30 to begin our final ascent, which is actually later than all other groups. From the camp, the top of Kilimanjaro looks very ominous and steep, almost unobtainable. We eventually got going at 6.00 just before sunrise. We made very slow progress up. Every breath and every step was a struggle. It didn't feel worth it to talk amongst each other as it required too much energy. This was far and away the hardest walking of the trip and probably my life! Eventually after 1 vertical kilometre and four hours of climbing we made it to Stella Point, which is on the edge of the crater and we could see Uhuru Peak, the highest point at 5895m above sea level, in the distance. We walked around the crater edge to the top which took about 45mins but felt like three hours. The feeling of reaching the top was surreal. Over the past five days the summit seemed so far away and to finally reach it was unbelievable. Suddenly all the hard work and months of preparation became worth it. We spent roughly 15 minutes on the summit congratulating each other and taking photos before heading down inside the crater. This

night was undoubtedly the worst night of sleep I've ever had. I never managed anything more than dozing and my water bottle froze inside our tent. Nick and Xander both couldn't hold down our supper from the previous night and when we woke up Nick felt terrible so Frank took him down early. Xander, Kelvin and I set off down the mountain after breakfast. Xander and I felt terrible but once we got going down, it became easier and easier. We passed lots of people who were making their ascent, with the same tired frustrated looks on their faces as had been on ours 24 hours earlier. We camped that night at a much lower altitude near to the entrance of the national park. It was amazing to look up at the mountain and just think: "I've done that!" On the seventh and final day, we slept in and had an easy and even leisurely walk down to the gate entrance where we were picked up and taken for lunch at ChrisBurger, a small local burger restaurant in Moshi, a town near to Kilimanjaro. The burgers were in truth nothing special, but to us after the week we'd been through, were heavenly! Afterwards we were taken back to l'Oasis Backpackers where we had a few drinks to celebrate and met a group of Indians who were planning on starting the trek the next day.

After a great night's rest, the next chapter of our adventure began. We were picked up at 2.00PM by Gasper. Gasper had formerly worked as a porter for Team Kilimanjaro, the company we had done our climb with, but has since set up a private school in his village of Midawe, on the foothills of Mount Meru, Ikirwa School. We were very fortunate to spend the next few days helping out around the school. It was lovely to teach the children (aged 4-9) and was a great experience. They were very interested to hear about life in the UK and it felt nice to teach them, although I never quite realised how hard it is for teachers to keep control of their classes! However in truth, I felt like our presence was more of a distraction to the kids and even the teachers than an aid. Every break time the kids would surround us and climb on us, and they were having so much fun that the teachers would extend their break time. However, Gasper showed us his plans to better incorporate volunteers in the future and with enough funding, Ikirwa could turn into a very good English medium school.

On Sunday 15th February, we took a shuttle, left Tanzania and crossed the border to Nairobi, Kenya. We arrived in the evening at our home for the next three weeks, Parklands Sports Club. As soon as we had unpacked, we met up with Will, a British physiotherapist living in Nairobi. Will had set up a charity, Shamas Rugby Foundation, which aims to provide rugby participation opportunities for disadvantaged children especially those living in Kenyan Urban towns and cities. We worked in three main slums: Kibera, Mathare and Muthaiga. Shamas works with various schools within these slums holding training sessions and making teams for children generally between the ages of 10 and 16. Ultimately the charity also aims to gain scholarships for some of its young players to high performing private schools, as well as instil fundamental life skills by running weekly programmes. Each year, Shamas is able to finance a tour for a group of the most talented players. In 2013, they had toured Cape Town, and just three months before we arrived, the squad had been to the UK. It was a very rewarding experience coaching these kids and I hope to be able to do something similar in the future.

We spent our last few days in Nairobi planning for our last adventure – a 56 day overland trip to Cape Town! This was organised through a British company, Oasis Overland. So on 6th March, we checked into Karen Camp a small backpacker's hostel where we met our home for the next two months – Twiga, a big yellow truck able to fit 24 passengers. The name comes from the Swahili word for Giraffe. We also met Pete, our driver, from Cumbria, and Tabby our Kenyan tour

leader/organiser, from Kenya. Throughout the day, other members of our tour group arrived. It was very exciting to meet the people we'd be spending the next 56 days with. There was Kristin and Ryan, a Canadian couple in their late 20's; Anita, a British-American living in Seattle; Zac from Colorado; Phil, a 25-year-old from Kansas; Sarah from Manchester who works as a tour leader for another similar company based in Europe; Sandrine and Benoit, a French couple in the middle of an awesome around the world trip; Andy, a man in his 40's living in Liverpool; and finally Jerrick another English 18-year-old on his gap year. All in all there were thirteen of us on this trip, plus Pete and Tabby. Due to the age similarity, Jerrick was the initially the easiest to befriend but it didn't take long before we all became very close. The first stop, after a long delay at the Tanzanian border, was back in Arusha, at the Meserani Snake Park. We spent the night here before we headed to the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, a large natural crater which is home to roughly 25,000 large animals. We did a game drive all morning. The concentration and abundance of wildlife inside the crater is astonishing. The highlight was undoubtedly seeing zebra, hippos, elephants, wildebeest and Thompson gazelles all around the same watering hole. We also managed to see four of the Big 5 (lion, black rhinoceros, buffalo and elephant). After lunch, we drove to the Serengeti National Park. Despite the different landscape, this was equally as stunning. We spent the rest of the day on another game drive where we were lucky enough to see a young cheetah climbing a tree, which is unheard of – it was the first time Benjamin, our guide had seen that. At dusk, we drove to our bush camp which was not enclosed, nothing separating us from the wildlife all around. It was a very nervy experience and I did not get that much sleep! The following morning we had another game drive before we headed back to Arusha. Just before we left the national park, we very fortunately completed our viewing of the Big Five as we spotted a leopard snoozing on top of a rock. All in all, it was an incredible two days of game viewing with some of the most beautiful landscapes and wildlife I have and probably will ever see.

From Arusha, we drove down towards Dar Es Salaam before heading to Zanzibar. It was a long drive, from one side of Tanzania to the other, and was our first taste of the long periods of driving we would come to experience throughout the trip. It took us three 'truck days' to get to Dar where we spent a night at a nice seaside campsite – where we swam in the sea which was so hot it felt like a bath. The next morning, we boarded a ferry to Zanzibar, a resort island two hours off the coast. We arrived in Stone Town, the biggest town on the island where we would spend three days. Stone Town is unlike what most people would consider Zanzibar to be like. There are no beaches and it gives off a city vibe almost comparable to Dar. It is also devoutly Muslim and as such the girls in our group had to adhere to their dressing customs. The huge number of mosques added to the atmosphere, in that it felt like such a wide variety of cultures had congregated in this one town. There is an intricate maze of narrow stone streets buzzing with local vendors selling everything a tourist may want. I would happily get lost in there for an hour or two. Among this maze stood the modest stone house in which rock legend Freddie Mercury was born. The other major attraction was the wonderful night market in Forodhani, overlooking the sea. We ate here all three of the nights. The 'Zanzibar Pizzas', whether savoury or sweet, were delightful and there was a huge selection of fish served by the many stalls, as well as the delicious sugar cane juice. I'd say that this was the best food I had on the whole trip and I would have happily spent more time in Stone Town simply because of the food. After our time there, we took an hour's minibus up to the Northern Beaches. We arrived at the resort village of Nungwi but you would think we were on a different island. We checked into our beachside huts and for the only time on the trip where I felt like we were on

holiday and not travelling. The rooms were very nice – and even air conditioned! They looked right out over the sea. Almost immediately after dumping our bags we all rushed out to the beach and went for a swim. Unlike Dar, the water was very cool and refreshing. The deep blue colour and calmness of the water really highlighted that I had indeed reached paradise. After a while, Xander, Jerrick, Nick and I wandered along the coast wading through the water until we reached the other resort town on the Northern Beaches, Kendwa. It was nice to explore the island and we came across a nice bar to have dinner and watch the sun go down over the sea. Our whole four days in Nungwi was such a welcome unwind from the stress of the last two months. Most meals we ate at this great restaurant, which was a nice break from cooking for ourselves in the previous week. Most days, we played football on the beach until sunset with the locals. Other than that, it was an idyllic beach holiday. However, before we knew it, our brief escape was over and we headed back to Stone Town to take a ferry back to Dar Es Salaam.

After we'd spent a night in Dar at the same campsite, we had a few arduous driving days. The route took us west, all along the southern side of Tanzania, before crossing the border into Malawi. On our first day in Malawi, we stopped at a shopping mall where we had to buy a fancy dress costume for another member of the truck (I had Phil), like a secret santa. We kept hold of the costumes we bought, which were mostly just colourful cheap dresses until we were told when we would be using them... So a couple of days later, we arrived at Kande Beach, a campsite on the shores of Lake Malawi. The Lake is beautiful and we felt back on the coast if it wasn't for the fresh water. Kande Beach is a well-known campsite and so there were many other trucks on similar trips – so there was a nice community feel to the three nights we spent there. There were two trucks filled mainly with Australians and another with Germans. For the first time ever, Xander, Jerrick and I went scuba-diving in the Lake. I never had expected it to be even nearly as amazing as it was. After having half an hour safety briefing followed by practicing some basic techniques in the shallow end, we took a speedboat trip up to a small island where there was a set beginner's route. It felt as if we were transported into another world. I was fascinated by the underwater wildlife and vegetation (despite the murky conditions), although what really stood out for me was the feeling of zero-gravity. I very much enjoyed my first time scuba diving and will definitely do it again in the future. On our second full day at Kande Beach, some of us got up first thing in the morning to witness the slaughtering of the pig we would later be eating. It certainly makes you question your eating habits. Fortunately it was a quick death so the animal wasn't in pain for long. The pig was cooking all day on a spit. That night was the traditional hog roast, where every group on Oasis Overland would have a fancy dress hog supper (hence the secret santa) and a party. The night was awesome fun, as fun as any night on the trip. After we exchanged costumes with our secret santa (Jerrick gave me a nice bright grey waistcoat and short skirt), we went to the campsites bar for some drinks and ended up dancing on the bar itself. All in all it was a great bonding experience for all of the truck and the highlight of our time in Malawi.

We left Kande Beach the following day to Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. Here we picked up another passenger, Nessa, a police officer from Reading. We were only in Lilongwe for one night before hitting the road again to Mozambique. We were only there for one night before onwards into Zimbabwe. As a result we never really got to see much of the country however I would like to go back. The only thing that stood out was bush camping in the middle of nowhere. The following day we crossed the border into Zimbabwe, where my mum was born. We spent a night in Harare before driving to Gweru where we stayed at the Antelope Park, a game reserve and one of Zimbabwe's

most popular tourist attractions. We spent three nights here over Easter weekend so the park was very busy. As soon as we arrived we went to see a video which gave a run-down of all the activities that the Park offered. Afterwards we decided which ones we would choose – I chose ‘Elephant Interaction’ and the ‘Lion Walk’. First was the Elephant Interaction. The Antelope Park is home to four African Elephants which were rescued in the early 1990s. We spent half an hour with the elephants as they did their daily ‘training sessions’. We fed them, petted them and rode on their backs. The thing that stood out to me was just how intelligent these animals are. Secondly was the Lion Walk. This was truly incredible. Because the forecast in the afternoon was rain, everyone else on our group opted for the morning session, except for Xander and I. This meant, come the afternoon, we went for a 45 minute walk just with two older lion cubs and two guides. It was unlike anything I had ever done. We trekked through the bush and got closer to the animals than I thought possible. Gweru was very enjoyable but before we knew it, we were back on the road.

We left to Bulawayo, the second-largest city in Zimbabwe, where that evening, we would get on an overnight train up north to Victoria Falls. This was a very unique experience, unlike anything I’d ever done. The train was very old and dirty, from the days of British colonial rule. However, we had a great time listening to music long into the night, although none of us slept very well at all. The next afternoon, after about 15 hours on the train, we arrived at the town of Victoria Falls, named after the world-famous waterfall. After checking in at our campsite, one of the nicest ones we had stayed at, we went to meet Joyce, who had worked with Oasis for many years. She showed us a video of all the activities that Vic Falls offered. There was a massive amount of things to do! Unfortunately, I had neither the time nor budget to do everything I wanted, but in the end I settled for white water rafting down the Zambezi and the gorge swing. Before we did our activities however, at camp we met three new additions to our truck family. There was Maud, a recent graduate from Scotland who was to start teaching primary school in London in September; Gyles, a Welsh backpacker in his 20s; and Ryan, also a backpacker, from Australia and in his 30s. In total this brought the group up to seventeen. Most of our group did the white water rafting so we had two big rafts. It was a good workout paddling so hard to negotiate through the rapids, and so much fun! We went during high water season so the water wasn’t as choppy as it is in August – December, but nevertheless, it was still exhilarating. The views were also stunning, albeit very intimidating. The banks were at times very rocky and we saw a lot of crocodiles! We went over about fifteen rapids in total, all of which were very unique. The next day, I attempted the gorge swing, a 95m long swing suspended over the gorge 120m above the Zambezi, starting with a 70 meter free fall. It was as terrifying as it sounds! On the platform I was told about all the different ways of jumping off, some of which seemed very frightening but in the end I settled for making a push up position facing the edge and have the guides lift my legs and hurl my body over feet first. The worst part about this was being disorientated as I went over but at least I didn’t have to take the leap. And then, while I was falling down, thankfully I felt the catch as I started accelerating to the other side of the gorge about twenty metres above the water. This was an extraordinary feeling, swinging back and forth! I am very glad I chose these two activities to do whilst in Victoria Falls, but the highlight was yet to come. On our last full day, we went to see the actual falls themselves which were breath-taking! Regrettably I only saw them on the Zimbabwean side because we didn’t have time to get into Zambia. However I’m confident this won’t be the last time I go so next time I’ll definitely go onto that side. The sheer volume of water cannoning over the edge down to the bottom is magnificent and the water crashing down to the end creates an eerie but almighty rumble. Also, the water can

crash on the bottom with such force that even from 100m above, some drops still splattered on us – it felt like it was raining! All in all I greatly enjoyed our time in Victoria Falls. I fell in love with the place and would highly recommend it to anyone.

Now, with seventeen of us now aboard, we crossed the border into Botswana. Our first stop was Chobe National Park. Here we did a river cruise game safari. Chobe has one of the largest concentrations of game in Africa and is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Botswana. Over a three hour period we saw lots of elephants, hippos and crocodiles, and the setting was simply stunning. Even when we weren't viewing game the atmosphere was so beautiful. As the deep orange sunset introduced itself, we began back to the port. Africa gave us some beautiful sunsets but I don't think any were as awe-inspiring as this one. But as quickly as it showed its colours, we were left with a growing darkness. From Chobe, we headed further west to the Okavango Delta, a massive swamplands, brimming with wildlife. Some opted to do a two day guided hike through the swamps, and had I budgeted more money, I would have definitely gone along. However, Xander, Kristin, Ryan, Ryan and I did go for a plane ride over the delta, and I'm very glad we did. Whilst we did see some wildlife from all the way up in our tiny 6-seater aircraft, what really stood out was the vastness of the delta and the intricate network of rivers that make it up. We spent about twenty minutes flying in total. It was great to see the delta in such a unique way, although part of me wishes I got to go and see what it's like on the ground. This signalled the end of our time in Botswana, and whilst we weren't there for very long, I saw enough to make me want to go back there in the future.

Onwards we went to Namibia. This country was the most different to all of the other ones due to the desert landscape and also the German influence we hadn't really seen anywhere else. Our first stop was Etosha National Park where we had a safari in our truck. But what we were really excited to see was the Atlantic Ocean. Oasis had labelled this trip as 'Coast to Coast' and it was very nice to complete the journey from the Indian Ocean in Dar Es Salaam all the way across to the Atlantic. It put into perspective for me the scale of the trip we were undertaking. The day after we reached the Ocean was my 19th birthday – April 21st. Unfortunately this was a driving day as we were heading south down the coastal road so it was fairly uneventful apart from a stop at a seal colony which was very interesting. There were seals absolutely everywhere and although the smell was dreadful, I enjoyed interacting with them. Nevertheless, we all had a few drinks together at a small bar in Henties Bay, a very Afrikaans town and our stop for that night. The next day we arrived in the town of Swakopmund, known for its many adrenaline-based activities. We stayed four days here in total, and we welcomed the fact that, for the first time in about a month, we had beds to sleep on. As well as sleeping well, Swakopmund was a great place to stay. It had a very German feel to the place with the architecture, and there were loads of German-style pubs, which felt a bit peculiar given the desert and sea which surround the town. We ate very well, and had lots of game dishes with a European twist. The first activity I had booked was skydiving! I had never been before and was understandably very nervous but also very excited. After we'd gotten changed and had a safety briefing, we got up in the tiny plane. With me on the plane were Phil and Xander as well as each of our instructors. The trip up was by far the worst part. With every metre in altitude gained the more the knots grew in my stomach. We got tied up to our instructors and when the pilot gave the signal, the plane door was opened. I was the first one to go. For a few seconds I sat on the edge waiting to get pushed out. This was a terrifying feeling looking out at the vast desert of Namibia. In total I spent about 30 seconds in freefall. The first few seconds I was completely disorientated as I realised we weren't in the plane anymore. Then whilst looking straight down, all I could do was scream and all I

could feel was the harsh unrelenting air smacking in my face and filling my mouth. I couldn't even think as I was so 'in-the-moment'. The one thought I did have was that the Earth was getting very much closer very quickly. Then before I knew it, I felt a violent tug back as the instructor pulled the parachute out. What followed was massive relief as I realised that I was tied properly in and the parachute had opened without issue. It was only here that I could take in how incredible the view was. The way the sea hit pure desert as far as the eye could see on both sides was nothing short of spectacular, and to see from such a different perspective in such a clear way was an incredibly interesting. Eventually five minutes after I'd flung myself out of the plane, I gratefully made landfall. It is without a doubt the most exhilarating thing I've ever done with the blend of fear, excitement and wonder. The other activity which pretty much everyone did was quad biking. We went on a long trail through sand dunes which was incredibly fun. The speed we got going up and down the dunes was immense. Most people opted for a manual gearbox but me and a few others decided on automatic as it was our first time quad biking. This made it very simple and still very enjoyable. In all we spent about two hours out on the dunes with a small break in the middle. Overall, Swakopmund was one of my favourite places we visited.

With the end of Namibia came the end of our trip. The truck dropped us off at a hostel in Cape Town where we spent a couple of days. It felt very right that we ended here, where four months ago I began my travels. It was truly the most eye-opening and all round incredible time of my young life, and to share it with some amazing people, I felt so lucky. Below is some links to the various companies/charities we used or worked with, all of which I would highly recommend to anyone thinking of making a similar trip. Finally, thank you very much to Kempson Rosedale Enterprise Trust for supporting me.

Team Kilimanjaro: <https://teamkilimanjaro.com/>

Ikirwa School: <http://www.ikirwaschool.org/>

Shamas Rugby Foundation: <http://www.shamasrugby.com/>

Oasis Overland: <http://www.oasisoverland.co.uk/>

By Chris Bester