

East and Southern Africa

– 3rd January to 4th May 2015

Countries Visited – *South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Zanzibar, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Namibia*

Having decided I would take a gap year by about age thirteen it was then just a matter of where to go and what to do while I was there. I looked at many trips around the world from the well trodden South East Asia routes to seeing the world by boat but found myself being continually drawn back to Africa. It is a continent I had some experience of before and the idea of spending a decent amount of time and experiencing it properly was just too irresistible.

Since Africa was the decided destination it was only a question of what to do there, where specifically to go and how to experience it fully. Due to political, health and practical reasons East and Southern Africa was the only real option. As I got further into my research I was quickly realising how much more expensive Africa was compared to some of the more typical gap year locations. The need for security, high taxes and secure transport all added to the challenge and cost. These all quickly played into the planning and unfortunately limited and prevented some of the more adventurous ideas. However, after hours of spread sheets and searching, lengthy e-mail exchanges and phone calls a plan was formed. I was particularly keen to get everything in line before applying for this grant. However, if there is one thing this trip has taught me is that no matter how well you've planned or how sure you are the 'i's' are dotted and the 't's' crossed life doesn't quite work out that way.

Landing in Cape Town the whole gap year travelling thing suddenly became very real. After having lunch at Table View I met Chris, fellow Malburian and my companion for the next four months, at Rhodes' Memorial and we set off to find our accommodation. The flat we had the use of for January was in the Southern suburbs of Cape Town in Plumstead, just next to the fairly shady suburb of Wynburg but it was secure and had everything we needed. The next week was our self proclaimed 'tourist' week, where we got to do all the things we hadn't done on our trips to Cape Town before. We hiked Lion's Head for the beautiful full moon, caught the end of an international cricket test and spent some time down Clifton beach discovering the hard way that big waves, sharp rocks and flesh don't make the best combination. One of the highlights was hiking Table Mountain. Both Chris and I had been up Table Mountain before but only ever by the cable car. We took the scenic route from Kirtenbosch gardens which is the far side of the mountain to the cable station, hiked across the plateau and then down Plattersklip Gorge down under the cable line. When one thinks of table mountain one tends to picture lovely scenic views over the Atlantic, Cape Town and stretching farm lands. Yet that particular day the weather decided to have an off day for the summer and heavy cloud set in over the mountain so our visibility was limited to around thirty feet which made navigating across a flat, rocky and featureless landscape somewhat more difficult. One of the amazing things with Cape Town is just how vibrant and welcoming it is. By the end of the week we had made a load of new friends from all around the globe as well as South Africa. One such person was a young sheep farmer from Vrystat who was about to start studying at Stellenbosch University which happened to be our next stop.

Entering Stellenbosch you could already feel a change in pace and culture from Cape Town and to this day remains one of my favourite places in the world. The reason for Stellenbosch was we had secured an internship with the marketing department for Distell, a large South African wines and spirit manufacturer. The brief internship was only ten days but gave a very interesting insight into the different techniques and where they succeed and fail. It was also eye opening to see how differently products are marketed and created (taste and size) depending on the location and target audience even going as far the differentiate ethnic background as a factor. We ended up staying in Stellenbosch for longer than we originally planned as for a small Afrikaans town there was a lot going on and to see all with the welcome change the bustle of the city. Back in Plumstead for our last week in South Africa we spent it learning the art of being self sufficient as well as prepping for Kilimanjaro.

Flying out from Cape Town to Johannesburg we met Chris' cousin Xander who would be travelling with us for the remainder of the trip. After one of the roughest flights of my life we eventually made it to the town of Arusha, Tanzania to begin our climb the next day. In true African fashion everything was running late and nothing was quite organised and after what seemed like hours of waiting and general faffing we reached Machame Gate and entered Kilimanjaro national park. After some more obligatory faffing and signing bits of paper we eventually started our ascent up the mountain. We started heading up through a rainforest in which our guides, Calvin and Frank were pointing out the two unique species of plant found on the mountain and nowhere else on Earth. The rainforest was relatively easy and despite the large initial ascent we weren't feeling the altitude that much and eventually cleared the trees into our first camp, Machame Hut.

Day two on the mountain began early but also finished surprisingly early which was nice, however, just when we were settling down Calvin took us on a short acclimatisation walk which also included some quite spectacular views. By camp two the forest had fully given way to rocky almost savannah-like terrain with sparse plant life at best and at night the temperature was rapidly falling.

Day three was the so called acclimatisation day as we would climb up to 4600m but camp at the same height as we slept the previous night. This was a good day and the decent after lunch was very welcome! The fourth day started very well. The begin we had to climb the Baranco Wall which was the closest we came to actual climbing and the top offered some absolutely amazing views of the neighbouring Mt. Meru. However due to the fact we had elected to sleep in the crater we had to push on from the midday stop, where most climbers stopped, to the staging camp at Barafu. Towards the end of the day I was beginning to get a headache, caused by the altitude and the rapid ascent needed for Kilimanjaro. However, despite feeling like hell I made it all the way to camp.

Due to our crater sleeping we luckily did not need to go for the midnight ascent so thankfully got a "lie in" until 06:00. By the time we began we were by far the last to leave camp and begin our assault on the crater up what was basically volcanic ash. We reached Stella Point travelling at a blistering 1kmph and the joy of seeing the crater eased off the headache. We then began the short march to Uhuru Point, the summit of the mountain. I don't think I've ever experienced tunnel vision quite like when I saw the summit and just went for it, step by step until eventually I slapped the sign explaining I had finally reached the single highest point on the African continent. We summited around 13:00 which means that although we missed

the sunrise we had the entire peak to ourselves which in its own way was amazing. After the obligatory photo shoot we made our way down to the crater. The high spirits were about the only thing keeping the mild AMS at bay and eventually Xander and I threw up in the crater camp. We made the call to stay the night in the crater which led to possibly one of the worse nights sleep I have ever had in my life! Having had enough of bad sleep I got up at 05:00 threw up and then said to the guides I think I need to go down to which Frank obliged and us two headed for the crater rim. This did, however, work in my favour as I crossed Stella Point again at about 06:00 which meant I got to see the sunrise we missed on the previous day and some of the people we had left behind when we carried on to Barafu on day four. With my headache and nausea gradually improving but being absolutely physically fine, Frank and I rocketed down the hill to our lunch stop at Millennium Hut. After several hours the rest caught up and we proceeded down to our last night on the Mountain in Mweke Camp.

The next day we were back through the forest and in no time at all signing out of the park and back on the transport to Arusha. Climbing Kilimanjaro was, in short, an amazing experience and one that I am so pleased I've done. One of the biggest questions I get about it is "how hard is it?". My response is two part; if you were to take away the altitude the physical element of the climb is not strenuous at all, especially considering how short you walk each day but as soon as you bring in the altitude it becomes a whole lot harder and is a difficulty I've never experienced doing any other physical events before or since.

Back in Arusha we had ourselves some well earned beers and set about sorting out the next part of the trip which had been up in the air up well into the trip due to various complications with our original plan. We ended up staying with Gasper, the founder of Ikirwa School in a village near Arusha. He worked as a bush guide for a safari company as well as running his school which is English medium and aims to give its pupils a fighting chance given the state schools are Swahili medium and generally awful in all respects. It's well known in Tanzania that to do well one must speak English otherwise many of the "well paying" jobs like guides or waiters at Western hotels and restaurants are completely out of reach. Yet the Tanzanian government still won't teach in English like its Swahili speaking neighbour Kenya, so it's up to people like Gasper to set up private charity schools which teach in English. Gasper was keen to set up a volunteering program at Ikirwa and so we along with another volunteer, Mark a mature Canadian biker, we in effect testers to see what it was like. The experience was amazing seeing so many kids so pleased to just see someone new and gave us a real insight into their lives, especially living with Gasper in his own home. Despite crashing a motorcycle the whole week was great and a real eye opener into what life in Tanzania was like for the vast majority of the population.

At the end of the week we said our goodbyes to Gasper and Mark and took the shuttle from Arusha to Nairobi, Kenya. After going through what has to be the least secure border in the world we found our way to our accommodation in Nairobi. This was another part which we had some issues with. The charity we were going to be with, Shamas Rugby Foundation, were based in Westlands and Muthare which is nowhere near the closest thing to backpacker hostels which are all the way over in Karen a 6 hour drive at any time near rush hour. With Nairobi's reputation we decided to spend a little extra on our accommodation here and given Will's, the

person who runs Shamas, best attempts we couldn't secure a discount but we were all pleased to be sleeping safely in one of the world's most dangerous cities. The next two weeks were spent in the Muthare slums with kids there coaching them rugby and important life skills in speaking and leadership. It was amazing to see kids with so little making the most out of every opportunity given to them. We even got to do some refereeing at a Shamas tournament with the Kenyan IAPS team who ended victorious. It was an interesting two weeks with ups and downs, namely when a group of Kenyans attempted to rob us on one of the cities mutatus, minibus public transport, failing to realise we were travelling with a semi-professional Kenyan rugby player who stands at 6'4 and 16.5 stone! As ever we were shortly on the move again and after a brief rest bite in Karen we met up with the Overland truck for the next saga of the African adventure.

From the planning stages we were always keen to do an overland trip as I still maintain the best way to see a country is on its road network. After looking at doing it under our own steam it quickly transpired that it would be too expensive, complicated and dangerous and the only feasible way was with a company. The company we chose, Oasis Overland, are in my mind the best compromise between doing a package tour and an old school adventure. The unique route would see us spending 56 days travelling over 12,800km through nine countries. Starting in Nairobi we headed down to Arusha and then swiftly to the coast staying in Dar Es Salaam for a night before going over the Zanzibar. Zanzibar was an amazing island with the vibrant Stone Town and the peaceful Northern Beaches it really had it all. We spent a total of five days on the island and just as quickly as we had arrived we left Dar at 04:00 to avoid the traffic and begin a mammoth 13hr drive day which ended in the lodge in the Tanzanian hinterland with Amarula hot chocolate and delicious homemade brownies; it's amazing what you can find off the beaten track.

Leaving Tanzania through a relatively painless border crossing we entered Malawi and soon had views of the mighty Lake Malawi which can only be described as a beautiful inland sea. Our first stop here allowed me to take a wood working lesson from one of the local carvers which was interesting to see just how much skill went into the little trinkets you see for sale all over the place in Africa. Kande Beach was our next stop which allowed for some scuba diving. While there wasn't the largest amount of life to see the dramatic rock formation of the lake bed and eerie atmosphere made it one of the most interesting dives I've done and in my opinion made it better than the drive in Zanzibar. Kande Beach has a bit of an overlander's tradition of having a fairly mental costume party and hog roast. With two overland trucks it certainly turned out to be as good a party as promised! The next day was spent with weary heads but soon we were pushing on through Lilongwe, the capital and then to the Mozambique border.

Mozambique has a growing tourist industry after the troubles its been having. However, all of that was well away from where we were. To cross into Zimbabwe we had to go through the Tete corridor, famous for its gun running and being a generally violent place. Due to this we only spent one night in a secluded bush camp away from anything like population and was the only place our guide and driver told us we were not to get out of the truck and we didn't stop at a town.

After the Mozambique gauntlet and a painfully longer border crossing we were in Zimbabwe's capital Harare, which in architectural terms might as well have been Bracknell with art deco housing and red brick flat blocks. As with all other major cities they were little more than a stop off to recharge and resupply before heading off into the bush again. The next bit of Zimbabwe we went to was Mutare and Chimanimani near the border with Mozambique. This was very mixed with highs and lows. Chimanimani had some of the most fantastic and dramatic landscape I've ever seen despite me nearly breaking my knee on it. However, Mutare was a different matter. When we stopped to buy some food before the hikes in Chimanimani we were aggressively harassed on the street for being white, although being a strong Mugabe supporting area it was hardly surprising. However, this racism did seem to persist in varying levels around Zimbabwe, something that didn't happen in any other country. While there are many Zimbabweans who are keen to make something of themselves and bring their country back to how it used to be but there still a good number who would prefer to blame white tourists and farmers for their problems and continually follow Mugabe.

After Mutare we stayed several days at the Antelope Park in Gweru where they are trying a revolutionary technique for introducing predators, into his case lions, into the wild which has never been successfully done before. While at the park I did a horseback safari which is the best way to see game as they let the horses get so close and don't run like they do from the jeeps. After Gweru we left for Bulawayo and the Matapos National Park where we did a walking Rhino trek getting yards away from the Rhinos which showed, in awesome perspective, just how impressive these animals are. Our guide also showed us San Bushmen paintings in and around the rocks while explaining how they lived. At the end I opted to go to World's View, the burial place of Cecil Rhodes. As the only one who decided to pay the extra ten US to go up I had the place to myself which made it even more magical and offered some of the greatest views stretching for mile after mile into the distance.

For some unknown reason we decided the best way to get up to Victoria Falls was to temporarily leave the truck and take the sleeper train and see the truck the next day. The train was an interesting experience as the carriages themselves were in a state of complete disrepair and probably hadn't been cleaned since it was Rhodesia, but as they say its all about the experience.

Reaching Vic Falls was the first proper touristy area we had been since Zanzibar nearly a month prior. The Falls themselves were a complete wonder of nature and we were able to see the mist from several miles away and the sound of rushing water filled the air. Apart from geological spectaculars the falls offered loads to do, including throwing myself off a cliff attached to a bungee and heading over to Zambia for a swim in Angel's pool right on the edge of the sheer drop. It was truly surreal!

Leaving Zimbabwe we entered Botswana and after a river cruise on the Chobe River we headed for Maun and then the Okavango Delta. About half of the truck stayed in the Delta on an island for a couple nights and we took walking safaris around the delta and trips in the dugout Makoro canoes. At night there was nothing between our tents and the wildlife so could hear

hippos and hyenas walking past very clearly. Being so isolated also offered terrific views of the night sky which was illuminated with the number of stars.

After our brief time in Botswana we moved into Namibia. Our first stop was in Etosha National Park which had some amazing wildlife including the infamous honey badger. We were then off to the sparse Skelton Coast with abandoned oil derricks and shipwrecks only adding to the harsh nature of this landscape. After several days of driving through the desert we reach Swakopmund which can only be described as little Germany in a big desert. Swakopmund was a brilliant town with German beer and enough activities you'd never get bored. I opted for some sandboarding quad biking and horse riding. However, the absolute highlight was skydiving from 10,00ft. It blew the gorge swing in Vic Falls out of the water and was the most amazing sensation I've ever experienced. Leaving Swakopmund meant our overland journey was coming to an end. We visited Dune 45 and Deadvlei in the classically sandy Namib Desert before reaching Fish River Canyon which was as impressive, geologically, as Victoria Falls. It was a shame we didn't have more time to do the hike through the canyon. Fish River Canyon was also a little sad as it marked the last thing before we motored on down to Cape Town to end the overland.

After a short weekend back in Stellenbosch with Michael the African adventure ended just as unbelievably as it started. What had started out as alien became normal and the idea of going back to home to my nine to five was just as strange as sleeping in a desert had been just a couple months before. Spending time in the most war torn continent on Earth, while in a safer area, is an experience which would be invaluable to my course at KCL on War Studies as I have got to experience the continent on a human level.

To the cliché of have I changed as a person. After spending so long away it'd be impossible to say no. However, the real things that have changed, the bits that will actually effect me when I came home, are the little but important things; getting along with people, being more confident and self assured and possibly the most important is to relax, don't try and control every little detail and accept that no matter how hard you plan, something will go wrong. Accept it and work with it, after all, TIA – This is Africa.