

Maria Johnson testimonial for VSA

The way that the cool April breeze hit me driving down the Durban highway the first night of my South African journey rekindled in me a feeling similar to that of being home. I'd been once before, and the longing to go back ever since had slowly eaten away at me. I knew this time I was piecing together my own adventure and was about to have the experience of my life, step-by-step, as I was creating it.

I had just met Nikki when she fetched me from the airport, and we were already getting on swimmingly in the car. She was to become the one to whom I confided all my fears, dreams, passions, and hardships throughout my month-long journey. As a result of this, she came to refer to me as "Princess," which I will take as a term of endearment.

I had signed up for the 30-Day-Journey where I would travel from Durban to Cape Town, sightseeing and volunteering along the way. I spent the first weekend bonding with Nikki in Durban, and then headed off to a project called School Trade in Pietermaritzburg. There I stayed with a lovely family—Colin, Vanessa, Emily, and Matthew McKay.

It was there that I had possibly one of the most moving and poignant moments of my trip. I was placed in a grade 7 classroom where I shortly realized how ecstatic the kids were to have simply my presence. Their appreciation for me gave me a new perspective on South Africa, its children, and its school system. It almost becomes every man for himself, and education is clearly not granted to everyone, though the effort is made. These kids made me feel like I had a purpose, far greater than I had had in my relatively narrow life so far. Even if that purpose was simply to show them that someone from America cares, and wants to spend time with them, in their classroom. For 2 days I was idolized, and made to feel extraordinarily more interesting than I had ever thought myself to be. My life intrigued them.

From Pietermaritzburg I began a 2-week road trip with Nikki, where I was both over-zealous tourist and baffled volunteer. I saw so much that was both parallel and perpendicular to everything I'd ever been accustomed to. We would drive through a city that, for a split second, would make me feel as though I wasn't thousands of miles from home. Then we'd witness an African frenzy of people, animals, and fully-packed cars to jar me from my homesick reverie. But it kept me in check. There were gorgeous, vastly unpopulated beaches that seemed like undiscovered treasures, rolling hills scattered with huts which have been inhabited for one can only guess how long, and multitudes of wild life. Elephants up close are magnificent. I truly did feel as though I was in the birthplace of humanity; the Earth's drawing board.

One of our first stops was at a project called CART where I braved my fear of sleeping in a hut. Being in such a remote location was both utterly terrifying and strangely soothing. It was on this project that I was lucky enough to witness a village meeting where over 100 people walked from the surrounding areas to voice their opinions. Solely in Xhosa, of course. Seeing as how I do not speak Xhosa, I understood nothing that was said, but just being able to take part in a gathering so pivotal and rare was certainly an experience I didn't take for granted. These village people seem like they could band together to improve their living conditions, they just need more motivation to mobilize and get the job done. In the long run, I have faith that Dave and Luke, the founders of CART, will enable these people to make changes for the better in their lives. It's all just a matter of time, and you have to start somewhere.

My last volunteer stop was in a place called Elgin. The project itself helps several of the surrounding impoverished schools, either by going to them or having the kids come learn things at their community college center. I did both, but my favorite was participating in a few marimba lessons. I've never played a musical instrument in my life, and trying to learn with elementary-age children, some of who were better than I, was nothing short of entertaining. Essentially I got to participate in a multi-cultural jam session, where the line between teacher and student was ambiguous given that I am not musically inclined. I had a blast. Meanwhile the school kids were probably laughing at the young white lady who has no musical talent. In fact I know they were, there was a lot of giggling.

When I finally arrived in Cape Town, I knew my adventure was almost over because this was our last stop. I spent a whirlwind 3 days there, trying to see as much as possible. I'd been 2 years prior and had done all the touristy things, so this time I wanted to see what it was really like for those who lived there. The city really is a dream destination with its vistas, vineyards, beaches, surfing, history, and culture. I think it's the one foreign city I could picture myself living in, since I got to experience life as a local.

Overall, this trip provided me with a chance to see South Africa through the eyes of a native, which, in turn, opened my eyes to the wealth the country has to offer. I also was able to make an impact, albeit a small one, by taking the volunteer route. I faced some fears, took a few risks, met some amazing new people (especially the lovely Nikki!), and felt like a true South African for a month. I now have a bit of a different take on South Africa, and I know that my life has changed because of it.