

Dear Family and Friends,

When I first stepped off the ship in the waterfront area of Cape Town, I thought the ship had accidentally sailed the wrong direction and dropped us back in Southern California. Palm trees lined the nicely paved roads, sprawling mountains loomed in the distance, including the iconic Table Mountain, and modern high-end shopping malls were near by. With the beauty of Cape Town surrounding my ship it was very easy to forget that the majority of people in this country were living in poverty. 80% of the population is black and for some reason very few could be seen in the expensive waterfront area.

The history of South Africa is complicated and in some ways very similar to America. I would assume many of you have heard about the Apartheid (pronounces Apart-hate in Afrikaans). This was the governmental system of legal segregation of whites, blacks, and colored (mixed race) into different areas, education systems, and even work forces. Apartheid was upheld until Nelson Mandela became president in 1994. I wish I could write to you today and report that the attitudes of segregation are completely ridded from the streets of South Africa, unfortunately the past cannot yet be erased. Negative attitudes towards different races are still apparent today.

During my time in South Africa I had the amazing opportunity to spend three days in three different townships. Townships are areas 'given' to predominantly black or colored citizens. Most of the residents were displaced from their homes and forced to live in these small areas of unwanted land. Although this was done years ago the black communities continue to inhabit these areas. They have built their homes in the Townships and have cultivated some of the strongest, most supportive communities I have ever seen. As I walked through the Township of Blikkiesdorp with the kind old women I stayed with for a night in search of fresh spinach for our dinner, I was amazed at how everyone came out from their homes to greet us and shake my hand. Every person I met inquired where I was from and what I was doing as a 20-year-old white person in the middle of a 100% black neighborhood. I explained that I was from America and studying abroad. I often received responses of "Wow, you live in the greatest country in the world." I took these comments as compliments and as a reminder that I should be proud of the country I come from and the many freedoms given to me at birth. We often take for granted our inalienable rights and tend to forget that much of the world does not have the same opportunities of freedom.

Twenty percent of all my class grades are based on a 'field class', which is essentially a glorified field trip in a foreign country of the professor's choice. My first two days in South Africa were spent with my sociology and biological anthropology (global health) class in Townships. During this time I was able to volunteer at a home for disabled patients and play with children in an after school program called Happy Feet that promoted dance. For my global health class we spent the day with the NGO called HOPE, which provides health care to HIV patients. As we walked the halls of the clinic and watched the hundreds of people wait in a hot room from 5am-5pm for a doctor that they most likely would never see, I was overcome with a strong sense of confirmation in my choice to pursue a career in healthcare. I was struck with the realization that eradicating a disease is about so much more than drugs and treatment plans. A plethora of social problems accompany treating HIV in an area of great poverty. South Africa associates HIV with a negative social stigma, which is dumbfounding to me seeing as the disease plagues almost 43% of the population.

Now that I have bored you with the social problems of South Africa, I will share with you the amazing experiences I had while exploring the beautiful area of Cape Town. Here is a condensed version of my favorite parts of my too short of trip to South Africa.

1. Snorkeling with baby seals in the Atlantic Ocean.
2. Kayaking with seals and African Penguins that are almost extinct and only weigh about 5 pounds. These Penguins only live in South Africa.
3. Hiking Table Mountain at sunrise.

4. Visiting the District 6 museum and learning about how thousands of families were displaced by the government in order to make an 'all white area' in the 1960-90s. A resident of District 6 gave my tour.
5. Visiting a winery outside of Cape Town. While there we learned about the history of the workers on the vineyard and tried delicious wine and food.
6. Did a homestay with the most wonderful women and her 6-year-old granddaughter in a Township for one night. I stayed in her small home, learned how to cook a traditional African meal, and helped her granddaughter with English homework.
7. Attended an authentic South African church.
8. Volunteered at the HOPE community center and played with small children.

* I did not go but many of my classmates went skydiving, bungee jumping, and shark cage diving, which is very popular in South Africa.

I also included pictures from a trip that Sami and Sara took. Here is a description of Sara's experience:

We traveled to Zimbabwe and Botswana. In Zimbabwe is the world largest waterfall, Victoria Falls. The local area is surrounded by beauty and wildlife, from elephants that poop on the streets at night, to hippos that hide in the Zambezi River. The mist from the falls can be seen from miles away. Before you can see the falls, you can feel it. Rain jackets aren't even worth wearing because the mist is so heavy you become soaking wet instantly. On our way to Chobe National Park in Botswana we saw giraffes along side the road. Watching the wild game roam in Chobe reminded me of a scene in Jurassic park. From hippos to elephants, zebras to giraffes, impalas to kudu, and lions to water buffalo, I felt like I was watching a Planet Earth episode. My favorite experience was when a group of 20 impala were walking down to the Cuando River and we happened to stop our open jeep to watch a lioness jump out of the African bush scattering the impala. All in all, Botswana and Zimbabwe are two of the most unique and beautiful places I have ever been. WOW!

-Gabriella



