Walking Through Tanzania

Karla Walsh
Iowa State University
walking through Tanzania

Living in a different culture opens eyes to a larger world.

Story and photos by Karla Welsh
Design by Joel Scherling
“They spotted a bulging branch on the tree and before I could figure out what was going on, they found the perfect sticks and rubbed them together to make a fire. They had it down to an art. One boy handed us a burning stick that he blew out, so the smoke would keep the bees away while we watched. He took another smoking stick and stuck it into the hole of the tree that his friend had cut open with his axe. Fearlessly, he dug his hand into the bee hive and pulled out a handful of dripping, amber-colored honey with bees still attached. He acted like the bees were not even there as he devoured his find and shared it with his fellow hunters. A small boy stomped the fire out and within five minutes, the Hadzabe were off to find another hive.”
Someday in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean rests the old me. No, there was not a tragic plane crash on my trip to Africa. But I feel like my old perspective took a dive into the waves.

As a typical college student, my life seems to take place in a bubble. It sounds self-centered, but most things that I focus on either happen in Ames or involve my close family and friends. I like to consider myself as aware of world happenings, but often I get bogged down with daydreaming about my future and lose track of what is occurring in any part of the world that does not directly relate to me.

When my sister Amy decided last year to spend nine months in Tanzania, Africa, she was eager to experience new things. The beauty of the country (which includes the Serengeti and Mount Kilimanjaro), the outstanding scenery and people lured her. I have always been jealous of her uncanny ability to adapt to new situations and embrace adventures. To me, flying halfway across the world to volunteer with strangers for the Minnesota International Health Volunteers (MIHV) would be something I would never consider.

Amy wanted family and friends to visit, and when she proposed this idea, I immediately turned her down. Living in a world that speaks an unknown language with little-to-no Internet access and undrinkable tap water would push me too far outside my comfortable bubble. But, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, plus my parents were footing the bill, so I accepted the spring break trip offer.

After a few short flights and a couple of eight-hour ones, my mom, uncle and I finally arrived in the Karatu area of Tanzania, a land we had only seen in movies and news reports. Having family with me made the trip less scary, although this new country still made me slightly uneasy. The only time I had been out of the country before was on a cruise to Mexico.

During our stay, we went on multiple safaris, driving past chewing giraffes, scuffling monkeys and cheetahs on the prowl. While spending the night in a "wildlife camp" — which was basically nice tents in the middle of the Serengeti — we slept while hyenas yelped nearby. Our hosts even mentioned that wild animals come and steal their cooking food every day. To have these unique animals so near us was an incredible experience. "What is a girl from Iowa doing here in the middle of Africa?" I found myself wondering.

Once we returned to civilization, Amy introduced us to some of her friends at the market. Many women lined the sidewalks selling their fruits and vegetables. They joked with each other and us. Thankfully, my sister can translate with the Swahili she has picked up. These kind women loved the computer-printed pictures of themselves that my sister brought to market. A few weeks ago, she took photos of the women with her digital camera. Copies of these pictures that Amy gave them are often the only record they have of their current appearance, since many Tanzanians don’t own cameras, printers and other electronic devices.

Despite their seemingly impoverished state, these women impressed me with their joy and charity. Laughs echoed through the air and the women handed us free bananas and oranges, even though they knew that we could afford the few hundred Tanzanian shillings the fruits would cost.

Similar generosity appeared later when we visited a local orphanage. Energetic, adorable children swarmed around a dusty, bland concrete building. As soon as we arrived, children approached us eagerly, yearning only to be played with and held. The children had wonderful caretakers, but two adults cannot give all the attention for which dozens of children need. As we handed out the Hershey’s Kisses we brought along, many children came back for seconds and thirds. American treats are rare and kids worldwide can’t resist candy. After the large mob was satisfied, one young boy came up to me and asked for another piece of candy. While I was digging one out of the bag, he explained that this one was for the “dad” of the orphanage, who was right outside. The boy ran to the man to share the treat, which the child could have easily savored himself.

Now, Tanzania is not a world of only rainbows and unicorns. People struggle with transportation issues, souvenir salespeople try to rip off tourists, and townspeople can be seen digging through the dump scavenging for goods they cannot afford to buy.

We spent a day following a Hadzabe tribe, one of the last hunting and gathering groups in the world. It dawned on me during our three-hour woody, thorny and hilly trek that these people have a very difficult life. If I wanted, I could have been in America at that moment, eating at an Olive Garden. These people were scouring the land and trees for wildlife, fruits and berries to eat. After further consideration during the silence of our hunt, I realized that the Hadza people have difficulties in some areas of their lives, but they avoid many stresses that Americans face. I bet they never worry about job applications, e-mails they forgot to send or registering for classes. They don’t even have to worry about paying bills, since their heat comes from fire and their shelter is made from rocks and plants.

On my flight home from our big adventure, I came to the realization that walking in another person’s shoes for a day was more than just a saying. After living the life of hunters, meager saleswomen and orphaned children, my bubble had been burst. Never again will my perspective be the same. Now when I sit down to a nice meal, drive down a paved road or soak in a nice, hot shower, I will grasp how truly blessed we are as Americans. Walking a mile in the shoes of some Africans, even if they didn’t have shoes, taught me the lesson of a lifetime.