

# Volunteering in Africa

## Education, conservation and construction

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Volunteering in South Africa with VESA (Volunteer Eco Student Abroad) was wonderful and life changing. Going to the other side of the world without my parents was nerve wrecking and came with new anxieties and worries I had to overcome. Thankfully with the support of my friends and family I got there and had the best two weeks of my life filled with excitement, hard work and life lessons. I hope this article provides a good insight into what a volunteering trip might entail and may encourage others to do something similar.

I had been considering going travelling in the summer. I thought a good place to start would be volunteering trips as most of the trip is already organised by the company. I did research into volunteering abroad and peoples experiences, but could never come to a decision. However, one day a friend told me about a talk she had been to at University that was done by a company called VESA. After looking into VESA and finding brilliant reviews I felt comfortable to apply for one of the places on their Africa trip. Their quick responses to questions and knowledge of the trip made it hassle free. I would recommend them to anyone looking for an amazing experience volunteering.

My volunteering started with a few days at a local children's crèche, where I was introduced to an inspiring woman known as Mama Doris. Every day she looks after between 60 – 140 children of all ages, providing them with

food, shelter and a safe place to grow up and learn. One of the jobs was to help hand out food to the children that turned up at the crèche each day. This was when I witnessed first-hand the terrible poverty that these children face every day, as there was not enough food to go around. Luckily, we brought out food that was left over from our lunch and handed it to the children who had nothing. This was a hard-hitting wakeup call for us volunteers who had come from more developed countries. If it wasn't for the food we had left from our lunch, there would have been children who did not eat that day.

I spent time with the children and taught them some maths and English. This was incredibly rewarding to do, not only was I helping these children better understand their school work, it was giving them a chance of a better future. Whilst doing this, I became very aware that the chairs and tables were old and broken and books/school equipment were in short supply. This led to our volunteering group raising almost 7000 rand (£383) for the crèche to help them afford new school supplies for the kids, to make sure that our short time there would still make a difference months after we left.

**“I left the crèche with a new outlook on life, and a very heavy but full heart.”**

One of my favourite parts of my time doing education in Africa was free time with the children. You could not move without being swarmed by joyful kids all wanting you to play with them. The older children were having dance battles, some were playing football, others doing flips and tricks off of volunteers. The atmosphere was so full of joy and excitement and every child was so happy and grateful even when they had so little. It was during this moment that I was filled with gratitude, thinking back to moments in my life where I took things for granted, and how these children as young as 3 years old taught me, an 18-year-old, the lesson of being grateful for all that I have. There is never a day that goes by that I don't think about those children, who inspire me to work my hardest to make the world a better place for those who don't have the same opportunities as me. I left the crèche with a new outlook on life, and a very heavy but full heart.

The second part of my volunteering in South Africa led me to something I aim to do in the future, work with animals. I spent a day at the Emdoneni Cheetah project, where I got up close to cheetahs, servals, caracals and African wildcats. This project aims to breed and release these cats

back into protected areas as well as educating the visitors and local communities on the problems African cats face such as poaching and the pet trade. This led to discussions highlighting the importance of researching animal attractions and the role of social media and how it impacts these animals.

Meeting the cats was incredible, as I got to get close to beautiful creatures such as Cassidy, a serval (a medium sized African cat with stilt-like legs and large ears) hand reared after its mother died of pneumonia and Dusk, a cheetah with birth defects leading to an overbite and a kink in his tail. Seeing them up close was breath-taking and definitely a highlight of the trip. After marvelling at the cats, I helped clean out enclosures and do maintenance around the centre, giving me an insight into the hard work that goes on in the background.

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I got to spend time at a research centre and breeding facility for crocodiles in St Lucia. I helped build four new enclosures by mixing concrete by hand for making the pools; digging trenches for piping and securing fences and all whilst a very chilled crocodile watched from the other side of the pool. This was one of the hardest days for me physically as we worked tirelessly to try and get these enclosures finished before the end of the season. It was very rewarding to see that my hard work had paid off as the enclosures were almost completed by the time we left, allowing the centre to continue on rescuing and rehabilitating crocodiles. Another very rewarding aspect of the trip was the construction days, where I worked on building a new house for a family of seven in St Lucia who were at the time living in just two rooms. Working alongside builders, I mixed sand and cement, rendered and painted walls, moved bricks and shovelled concrete. This was another very physically challenging day, especially in midday African sun, but the outcome was worth it. Being able to see the progress of the house each day



**Figure 1.** One of the hand reared cheetahs with the keeper at the Emdoneni Cheetah project.

to its completion was amazing and I am incredibly thankful to have made a positive impact in the family's life.

I had the amazing opportunity to go on three safaris during my time in Africa. One was a sunset safari in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, just outside the town of St Lucia. Here I came face to face with a bull elephant, buffalos, zebra and even two rhinos, all whilst the sun set on the horizon. This was my first experience of seeing African animals in the wild, you cannot put into words just how incredible it is to see them with your own eyes. I went on another safari in Swaziland, home to a game drive famous for its population of roan antelope. Not only did I see the roan antelopes, which in itself was extremely amazing, I got to see wildebeest, warthogs, blue cranes, zebras and crocodiles, all while the knowledgeable driver told us about each one and how they impact on each other in the ecosystem. The biggest safari was a 6-hour drive through Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park, one of South Africa's biggest game reserves. The guides said we definitely had 'beginners' luck' as the animals we saw have extremely rare sightings. One of these was a huge herd of over 40 elephants with calves. This was breath-taking, and possibly my favourite sighting of my time in Africa. The whole forest seemed to come alive because of these gentle giants, moving freely across the land as little calves held onto their mothers' tails. Another extremely lucky sighting was a pack of lions with cubs. Arriving to the area where the lions were spotted, we noticed that the females were showing hunting behaviour, this got our guide very excited as he had never seen the lions hunt before. It wasn't until we saw what they were hunting that the mood changed from excitement to horror. On the floor lay the carcass of a female rhino, poached by humans a few days prior to our visit, and by its side, the rhino's calf, defending its lifeless mother from the incoming lion attack. We held our breaths as the lions tried to take down the young rhino, who was doing a very good job at defending itself and its mother. Eventually the lions retreated, leaving the rhino to mourn over its mother alone once again. Unfortunately, a few hours later, we came across another poached rhino being swarmed by vultures. These upsetting sights showed the devastating impact that poaching is having on Africa's wildlife, and brought on very



**Figure 2.** An African elephant eating a bush close to the jeep.



**Figure 3.** Zebras drinking at a watering hole at Mlilwane game reserve in Swaziland.



**Figure 4.** One wall of the house volunteers helped to build.

useful discussions of what we can do as individuals to help combat poaching. The biggest one being educating those who are less informed to raise awareness of poaching, as the more people who know and contribute to petitions and donations, the more chance we have of stopping it and saving thousands of animals lives all across the world.

**“The whole trip was extraordinary and went far beyond my expectations.”**

Arriving home after such a life changing experience was bittersweet, as I realised that my wonderful time in Africa was over (along with the beautiful sunny weather) but it was great to see my family and friends again and to relive the trip with them. I also made friends from all around the world and learnt about their lives and cultures which was really interesting, made even better by the confusion and explanations of various colloquialisms.

The whole trip was extraordinary and went far beyond my expectations. The accommodation in St Lucia and Swaziland were clean, safe and provided everything us as travellers needed and more (including some delicious meals). The VESA staff were friendly, approachable and made the trip smooth and free of stress from day one. I have definitely changed for the better as a result of my volunteering and experiences in Africa. I have become even more determined to make an impact in the world and try to improve the lives of those less fortunate than me, as well as raising awareness of the issues of poaching, pet trade and ecotourism. I have become much more confident in myself and I am looking forward to my next adventure, knowing that if I can do it once, I can do it again. Finally, I hope to encourage more people to volunteer, whether that is locally, or abroad, as one person really can make a difference and improve the lives of others. ■

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