

Staff Dispatches

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From his semester in East Africa, December 2010

I have been reading all the GLM stuff and Pathfinder news and I have to admit, they have made me a little jealous that I wasn't around for all the good times this fall. But everything here is so amazing. Truthfully, it's nothing I expected, although that's not saying much because I came into the experience not knowing what to expect at all. It's really hard to describe all that I've seen, because it has been so much, but I have learned so, so much.

While here I have primarily been with the program through St. Lawrence that ended about a week ago. The program was great and it was the perfect combination of independent and supervised learning. It's set up so that there is a lot of supervision at first and then by the end you are basically on your own. My time here has been broken into about two parts, times when I am in Nairobi, taking classes in the city and staying at a compound owned by St. Lawrence, and then time where I have been traveling.

So far, my traveling has brought me to the rural agricultural area of central Kenya called Meru, to a hunting and gathering community in an area of Tanzania called the Yaeda Valley, to the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro to stay with the Maasai people, and to the coastal city of Mombasa. For lodging at each of these places, I did some sort of a home stay with the local people of the area. That in itself has been quite an experience.

Meru was cool because it was the second week I was in Kenya, I didn't know any Swahili (the national language here) or much about the culture, to say nothing of the general feel of Africa, and I was just thrown into a family for a week. Meru is a really rural area, where I was staying there was no electricity and the family grew all of the food that they ate. They also didn't speak any English so that was a huge hurdle to overcome. All this made the first week in Africa by myself quite interesting, and pretty hard at some points, but I learned so much in that little amount of time and it prepared me well for the future.

Being in Tanzania with the hunt and gather community was probably one of my favorite parts. This community was great and they have lived the way they do for millions of years. Today there are a lot of land issues these people are facing (the Tanzanian government has tried many times to get rid of the people), and they are not very well equipped to handle the issues by themselves, so a lot of NGO's have been helping them out. It was nice to learn these issues first hand. Either way, running through the forest and hunting giraffes with bows and arrows (I was

literally crouched next to a guy who was lining up a giraffe that was 15 feet away) is an experience that I will never forget.

Near Kilimanjaro, I stayed with the Maasai people, who are a pastoralist community that also have their own handful of land and government issues, the foremost being domestic vs. wild animal conflicts. The Maasai live in the area near Amboseli National Park, which hosts many lions and elephants and such. Because the government profits so much from these animals through tourism, it is illegal for the Maasai people to kill wildlife that leaves the parks and kills their livestock. This, combined with drought, has greatly affected the Maasai way of life. After sleeping in their smoky mud huts huddled next to the goats (it gets too cold outside for the baby goats at night so they stay in the huts with the people) I have respect for any person who pursues that style of living.

My last trip to Mombasa was pretty much just a vacation but I did learn a lot about the many Muslim communities there. I then finished the program by doing an independent study for a month in a small rural village on the coast called Gazi.

Gazi is a village of about 1,000 people (all fishermen and fishermen's wives) who all live in clay shacks with reed roofs and little electricity. Most of them are Muslim so its a really cool and completely different culture than the rest of Kenya. In Gazi, I worked with the Kenyan Marine and Fisheries Research Institute studying the extensive mangrove forests that grow here. Mangroves are very unique trees that grow in intertidal zones and create an even more unique ecosystem. They are highly over-utilized so research and conservation is imperative in these areas were they are still thriving. I mostly worked with PhD students and on community conservation projects, and the rest of the time I got to just hang out on the beach with my Muslim friends.

Since then I spent a week in Nairobi finishing up work and giving some presentations on my research in Gazi before the program ended. Then on the 11th we were set loose and a few friends and I traveled to central Kenya to climb Mt. Kenya , which was absolutely beautiful. It is the 2nd highest peak in Africa and the 2nd highest freestanding mountain in the world, topping out at about 16,000 feet. On our way up we literally went through a different ecosystem every other hour, it was real awesome. Also, the day we reached the summit, we got up at 2 in the morning to watch the sunrise from behind Kili. Hiking under the stars that morning reminded me a lot of paddling many nights under the twinkling Algonquin blanket.

After that we caught a plane to Cairo and right now we are bumming around in the city staying with a friend of a friend, basically seeing all we can before we travel back on Wednesday. Egypt is so crazy and amazing, a totally different story from East Africa but spectacular in its own regard. Right now I'm sitting in

an internet cafe with a local buddy enjoying huka and turkish coffee.

Anyways, that is a real brief overview of my time here, which unfortunately gives it not nearly the merit that it is worth, but I hope it gave you a taste.

Noonway,

Conor