

Tanzania: An Experience of a Lifetime
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I remember that feeling explode inside my entire body. The feeling I got when I read the email that enabled me to participate in the Experiment in International Living program, Tanzania: Coastal and Maasai Cultures - joy, excitement and nervousness. Five weeks on a continent across the world, in a country I didn't know and with people I haven't met. Despite my anxiety about all the unknown adventures that awaited me, I could barely contain my anticipation for school to end and my journey to begin.

My trip was split into four main sections. The first week was spent in the capital of Tanzania, Dar Es Saalam. In Swahili it translates to, haven of peace-which I quickly learned was not the case. The city was bustling with people hastily crossing streets, sellers scavenging the roads for tourists and vehicles honking at each other. I stared outside my bus window, eyes wide, trying to take all I could in. Everything was alive and vibrant; it was a city that welcomed everyone with open arms. While in Dar, we took essential Swahili lessons, visited a secondary school, explored busy markets, went to beautiful beaches and tried delicious, authentic food. It was a great taste of the city and the more modern side of Tanzania. However, as this "orientation" part of the trip came to an end, I feared for the next week, the ominous homestay.

I can confidently say that almost everyone in my group was nervous for the homestay in Stahabu, a coastal village near Tanga. The thought of living with complete strangers for 10 days scared me. To help with my apprehension, right before we left Dar, I unfortunately got a fever and bad cough. Despite how sick I felt, somehow when I arrived in Stahabu, I started to feel better. It was such an endearing experience because I entered

Stahabu physically sick and homesick. I barely ate anything for days and desperately wanted to bathe in the luxury comforts of my own home. But living with my host family truly showed me the beauties of life. My mother would go out of her way to make me feel comfortable such as heating my shower water every morning and making special foods for me. Rather than missing home, I instead found a new home and family. I connected very well with my three siblings. I'd give my six-year-old sister piggyback rides and read books to her; I remember attempting to help my little brother cook fish. I also had a twenty-year-old brother who was fluent in English therefore I had a lot of mind-opening discussions with him about his life and aspirations. It was so humbling to be able to live with them and see life as they do. But along with my homestay in Stahabu, my group and I also aided in building the foundation of a nursery and teaching English at a local school. We'd play games with them and make skits to help engrain common English phrases. All the kids were so kind and would always offer to carry my bags for me. And that's a recurring trait I found in my travels in Tanzania; everyone is so welcoming and helpful no matter where you go. At the end of our stay, I was so sad to leave my newfound family in Stahabu but was even more excited for the adventures ahead of me.

The next part of my journey was in Arusha, Tanzania at the United African Alliance Community Center (UAACC). It is a hostel ran by Pete and Charlotte O'neal, prominent black panthers part of the civil rights movement back in the sixties. During my five days there, I was immersed in so much African American culture. My group was split into two different projects: one would make a song and the other would paint a mural. Due to my musical background, I opted to create a song in a professional studio. I had such a blast producing the music, writing lyrics and recording the song. The whole experience there

was truly unforgettable as we had deep discussions about black civil rights and a jam session with Momma Charlotte. It was a nice time to relax with beds and running water before we headed into Engikaret.

Each place we stayed was so different from each other. The Maasai community was probably the most different lifestyle compared to America. They are an indigenous group of people that depend heavily on land and livestock. They are one of the few groups in Tanzania to stay true to their traditions and resist government pressure to modernize. I remember a long line of Maasai women and men lined up, ready to greet my friends and I as we shyly climbed out of the car. They welcomed us into their community and even held a “dance party” for us that very night. To dance, all the men make a circle and sing by making low grunting hums and sounds. They heave their body to the beat and individuals run into the circle and jump a couple of times. It was so amazing to be part of such a cultural experience and attempt to jump in the circle. To fully welcome our program in the Maasai community, they also conducted a goat sacrifice that we participated in. We held the goat down as they suffocated him. After that, they skinned him, drank the blood and cooked the meat. Despite the bloody, vulgar sights, it was a very humane way to kill an animal and they used every part of the body; nothing was put to waste.

A typical day in the Maasai village would be waking up at six and spending three hours with our host family. During that time, I learned how to milk goats, make chai and carry water on my head with my twenty-year-old mother. Communicating with my family was definitely difficult but I found a great way to connect with them without words: taking pictures. All the Maasai are fascinated with cameras and pictures so they loved looking at all my photos as well as taking them. It made me so happy to see my siblings’ eyes light up

with fascination as I showed them my phone. The Maasai children were definitely a lot shyer than the kids in Stahabu, but on my last day with my family, I finally got my siblings to open up and “talk” to me. They would actually repeat the words I’d say in English, hold my hand and laugh when I didn’t know what they were saying. It warmed my heart to know that they were truly happy, you could just tell. Any stranger, who really doesn’t know much about the Maasai, would see them living a difficult life. Yet, in my entire stay there, it’s obvious that everyone is so proud of how they have held onto old traditions and lifestyles. The Maasai have earned such a high level of respect from me because of that.

Other than the homestay, we did community service for the locals such as prune acacia trees and help plaster houses. In Engikaret, almost every aspect of the Maasai lifestyle depends on acacia trees. They provide food for livestock and supplies to build their houses and boma. When we prune them, we cut off a few branches so the tree can continue to grow into a large tree. If not, they often become a small bush, which is not useful for the Maasai. To add to that, we also plastered houses with a mixture of mud, water and cow dung. It was definitely an interesting experience but it gives a real taste of what all Maasai women must do because once they marry, they are required to make their own house. I absolutely loved helping out and hope that it aids the Maasai community and makes a lasting difference.

There are no words I can put together or pictures I can show that will every fully express how culturally enriching and extraordinary my adventure was in Tanzania. It exceeded all my expectations and I was surprised at how much I learned about the world and myself. The whole experience would not have been possible without the support of the Naples Council of World Affairs. I cannot thank them enough for giving me such a life

changing experience that has impacted my life tremendously. I'm so grateful and fortunate to have such an amazing organization in my community. Tanzania will always have a special place in my heart and I will continue to expand my global perspectives to better understand the world around me.