

Music and Memories: The Time of My Life

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The standard response to “How was your trip?” usually consists of “Fun! Awesome! Amazing!” But I’m not sure how to respond to the question, “How was your trip *to Africa*?” The standard answer suddenly feels too vague and unfitting for an experience that is still so real and tangible to me.

At first, when we look back, we think Africa meant: painfully long plane rides, bumpy bus rides, turbulent boat rides, dirty facilities, making sacrifices, eating bony chicken and rice for dinner every night, ice cold showers, being bitten to death by mosquitoes, toilets consisting of a hole in the ground which we fondly dubbed “squatty-potties,” and people living in dismal poverty.

But if I dug just a little deeper, Africa was also: warm and hospitable people, hopeful smiling faces, colorful natives, quaint straw huts, sweet mango juice and tart passion fruit juice, beautiful beaches, lush forests, playful monkeys, inside jokes, late night card games, family, and most of all, a home away from home. It’s amazing what squatting in the same dirty toilet, sharing the same precious bottled water, and sleeping on the same thin mattresses will do to bring a group of twenty kids together.



First of all, I can tell people what they expect to hear: that Africa is nothing like home. It’s also much more real than the pictures we see in National Geographic. I liked it there, though, and I didn’t miss home at all because I loved sharing such a new experience with all my TIYO peers. We never stayed in any one place for too long, but I can safely say that everywhere we went, we touched the hearts of the people there... just as they touched ours.

There were a few parts of the trip that I will remember most. The first was the concert in Zanzibar. My first impression of the island was so different from my impression of the dusty, bustling capital city, Dar es Salaam. Zanzibar was warm, serene, and naturally inviting. From our breakfast café, we could see colorful boats floating on crystal blue water, giant palm trees swaying with the breeze, and white houses with red roofs dotting the shoreline. Our concert took place at the Mtoni Palace, a dilapidated yet magnificently dignified stone structure. Within the cavernous walls, we set up wicker chairs, lit torches and incenses, and performed for an audience under the light from a full moon, twinkling stars, and of course, our faithful flashlights. Perhaps it was the glow from the fire, or the breeze that fluttered our sheet music and filled our nose with the smell of incense, or the bats that flew overhead while we played—but something about that concert was truly magical.

If there’s one thing I learned from all the TIYO trips I’ve taken, it’s that the cultural exchange with other students is always the best part. Whether it was China, Canada, Germany, or Poland, there was always new people to meet and friendships to forge. Africa was no exception. Each time I meet new people in new places, I am always surprised by their genuine warmth and excitement. Over four hundred kids had returned to the Toledo Secondary School during their summer break just to meet us. The school and TIYO planted a ceremonial mango tree together, which was a symbol of our blossoming friendship. The students greeted us with song and smiles, treating us all like celebrities. From there, two TIYO members were paired to speak for a classroom of African students. They asked us questions about our lives, our music, and took us on a tour of their campus. As we walked around their classrooms and courtyards,

they showed us the plants they had grown, the fields where they played soccer, and pointed in the direction of their tribal homes. All the girls crooned “We love you,” wanting to hold my hand, touch my hair, while the older boys explained their daily school schedule and asked me questions about how they could improve their country. I had handed out some pictures of myself with my name, address, and email on the back. By the end of the visit, students had circulated that picture around and everyone was pointing, waving, and trying to take more pictures with me. It was overwhelming and heartwarming to make so many new friends so quickly! I hope that I can stay in touch with my friends in Africa because I always cherish the friendships I have with people from all over the world. There’s so much to share and learn with them; though it was hard to leave them that day, I know that their hopeful faces will always resonate in my memory.

The last part of the trip was what we all expected to be the most fun. The safari. I mean, who wasn’t excited to see African animals up close and personal? It definitely went above and beyond our expectations. We loaded up in our jeeps and drove dangerously fast along a bumpy, dusty road. Our first close encounter ended up being the funniest. Brandi had left the door of our jeep open. Big mistake. In jumps a monkey and before any of us have time to react, it steals a whole bag of skittles and starburst from the seat pocket then jumps out! We didn’t know whether that was scary or simply hilarious as we watched the monkey and her baby cleverly rip off the paper packaging of our candy and taste “the colors of the rainbow.” The other jeep evidently had no candy, so a monkey peed right on their windshield for that. Personally, I think we got luckier. We saw elephants, baboons, zebras and wildebeests grazing, hippos bathing, giraffes, termite mounds, and once, a lion woke up just for us. After the two day tour, including one night of camping, I was tired and caked with red dust, but it was an experience I know I could not have gotten anywhere else.

Being one of the few students to visit the medical mission site, I feel extremely privileged. Though we only stayed a short time, I really learned to admire the dedication and kindheartedness of all the doctors who volunteered their time to help others. We went on the medical mission’s fifth and last day in the village. I expected maybe a slow trickle of patients as it was their last day after all. Instead, *five hundred* sick patients stood lined up in front of primary schools which had been transformed into makeshift clinics. It was saddening and frustrating for us all to think that hundreds of people would not receive treatment that day. I cannot even begin to express my admiration for all the doctors who worked so hard to help all those sick people.

This trip has impacted me profoundly in many ways, but most of all, it has helped me realize exactly what I want to do when I grow up. My sincerest hope is that twenty years from now, when I have become a medical doctor, and I have made further musical endeavors, that I can take a medical mission of my own, as well as a music group back to Tanzania so that we may heal not only the bodies, but also the souls of our Tanzanian friends.

On this trip, I have *touched* the hands of young street vendors and the ancient walls of the Mtoni Palace, *seen* the colorful Massai village and the crystal ocean waters, smelled the atrocious toilets as well as the fragrant tropical flowers, and *heard* voices singing African song. I have learned to love Africa. The friends, the memories, the fun, and the experience will always be a part of me. So when people ask me how my trip to Africa was, I can truly tell them, “It was... the time of my life.”