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What Family Travel Can Teach, Nine Important Lessons from South Africa

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By Lisa Miller

For those who are contemplating pulling the kids out of school for travel abroad.



Yes, there was the last minute rush trip to Stamford for flu, typhoid and HepA shots. Our tween/teens were anxious about missing so much school (while contracting a deadly disease), but also about heading into the unknown: AFRICA.

Multiple generations traveled together with their guide on a family trek in South Africa.

Carry-on bags were crammed with textbooks and laptops. Laden with bug spray, malaria pills, sore typhoid arms, safari worthy get-ups (and in my case a much needed cortisone shot to the knee) and we were off.

Naturally, there were a few speed bumps, like our 10-year-old being searched by London airport security. And the luggage “porter poser” incident in Johannesburg, South Africa, when the gentleman helping us with our bags was suddenly whisked away by airport police. Life lesson #1: Beware of who you trust.

Once we navigated our “legitimate taxi dilemma” at the airport, we found Cape Town visually stunning and a bit overwhelming in terms of what to do first. We chose to emphasize the educational. So we headed to the world heritage site of Robben Island to underscore South Africa's long struggle under Apartheid rule. And to understand more clearly why freedom is so celebrated and appreciated. Life lesson #2: Freedom is priceless. Never take it for granted.

There was a stillness and sense of reverence felt by all as we passed by Nelson Mandela's 18 year long prison cell. No one posed for a picture there. It felt wrong, like taking a picture in church. Life lesson #3: Great leaders who fight for freedom deserve our respect.

Against the backdrop of mountains that soar into the sky, we can easily see the current day divide of South Africa. It is not driven by color nowadays but by wealth. Single individuals in Cape Town own whole mountain ranges. Celebrities flock there to enjoy the Dutch civility and exotic landscape. And it seems movies are filmed there round the clock.

Yet the prime real estate section of District 6, smack in the middle of Cape Town, remains an empty field. It is a constant reminder to all of what the government took away during Apartheid.

The shanty towns known as “townships” are like enormous patchwork blankets made of tin covering the foothills. They are so extensive and upsetting to see. Africa is a place of extremes, especially in quality of life. We have known this, but to see it firsthand is different. Life lesson #4: Life is unfair and a struggle. Poverty is everywhere.



Townships dot the landscape like quilted blankets.

All that being said, we were hard-pressed to witness post-Apartheid resentment. But as our guide, Darrol, reminded us: "Nelson Mandela taught us that to be truly free we need to let go of resentment." Truly inspired. Life lesson #5: Harboring resentment will prevent you from true freedom and happiness."

Darrol gave us first-hand lessons on what it was like being a black man growing up in the Apartheid years. Seeing the entire Cape Peninsula with his help was our way of making our youngest daughter's 11th birthday unforgettable. We filled it with baboon, penguin, and ostrich sightings as well as stunning cliff side vistas, shark spotters and surfers at the famous Muizenberg beach, ending at the Cape of Good Hope. We took in Cape Point's breathtaking aerial view of the "meeting of two oceans" and ascended to the top of Table Mountain.

Darrol had given the birthday girl a rock he picked up as a birthday present: "It is a rock from the bottom of Africa for you to remember this day by," he said.

Our guides are like teachers. And this amazing continent is the classroom.

After a tour of the beautiful and tranquil South African wine region, our educational adventure continued with a Safari in Kruger National Park. Getting there was thrilling; on small planes with fixed wheels and a handful of passengers who were wondering just like me, why the guy in the pilot's seat looked 12 and why there was so much rust on the wings.

We arrived pleasantly disoriented. Our safari lodge was an oasis in the middle of the brutal African bush, just near the Mozambique border. There we were treated like royalty with amazing food, wine, and comforts from home. Meanwhile famine rages in the Sudan, so very nearby. Life lesson # 6: Africa is a place of injustices and extremes.

Some extremes were actually tangible for our kids. Take the 50-degree temperature change for example. We all felt the 107-degree heat on day three as if we were standing behind a bus exhaust on a hot August afternoon, only to wake up to 57 degrees on day four grabbing up coats and hats.

We saw many animals on our Game Drives. The whole experience of being out in the bush is so very *Lion King*. In fact, all the animals of the African bush are the real majesty. We were getting the royal treatment in our comfy lodge, but the true royalty were out in the bush,

fighting for survival in their natural habitat. Life lesson #7: As Darwin put it, "It's survival of the fittest." The good genes go on.

During one game drive, a young male lion came upon the scene, only to have a full knock down drag out fight with another young male over a bone. The fight was mesmerizing for us as we sat just a few feet away. The wind picked up suddenly and the lion got a whiff of an impala carcass and quickly ran over to attack it.



The wild animals became the greatest teachers.

This impala was now nourishment for so many. Not a bit was going to waste thanks to the lions, the vultures and the bone eating hyenas who would come by later on. Life lesson #8 is: Nothing is wasted in the wild.

Watching this scene without knowing what would come next was like being in a real life, real time classroom. And it was such a rush. Life lesson #9 is: Respect the animals and be open to what they can teach us. Fearing or harming them is wrong.

Darrol, Cedric, Jani and Daniel were our guides. They brought South Africa to life.

Jani imparted her wisdom and excitement, speaking Afrikaans and Shangaan and telling us tales of growing up in South Africa. She taught the kids Afrikaans sayings and handshakes and joined us for dinners and bonded with the kids over memories of Pokemon. Spitfire that she was, she even led us briefly into Mozambique.

Jani's love of the outdoors and for the animals was contagious. She is a true free spirit, but also a walking encyclopedia of wildlife knowledge. She had all of us transfixed and wanting to learn. What family bonding to experience this learning together.

Travel tends to do that, level the playing field and make us more open to adventure and exhilaration.

The Life lessons learned on this trip were worth much more than a few missed math classes. The kids definitely grew up on this trip (and as one child pointed out, never slept in once). They are more aware, informed and much less fearful of wild animals and of Africa in general. I could actually feel all our horizons widening.

Yes, it was a crazy decision to take the kids out of school to go to Africa, but sometimes the

craziest decisions turn out to be the best ones; the ones you don't regret and can't believe you ever questioned at all.

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