



What Travel Can Teach

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By Lisa Miller

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

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

Carry-on bags were crammed with textbooks and laptops. The “I’m going to fail all my classes” theme song was sung. The parental response was: “This is a once-in-a-lifetime trip kids, it’s going to be great,” but yes, unspoken worries of “Are we totally insane to pull them out of school like this?” did dance in our heads.

Armed with bug spray, malaria pills, safari-worthy get-ups (and in my case a much-needed cortisone shot to the knee), we were off.

One of the many attractions of Cape Town, South Africa, is the mere six-hour time difference, but with 19 hours of flight time to sleep (and get homework done).

Naturally, there were still a few speed bumps, like our 10-year-old being searched by London airport security. Come on, does she really look that dangerous? Then there was the Luggage “Porter Poser” incident in Johannesburg when the gentleman helping us with our bags was suddenly whisked away by airport police. Life Lesson #1: Beware of whom you trust.

Once we navigated through the legitimate taxi dilemma at the airport, we found Cape Town visually stunning and a bit overwhelming in terms of what to do first. Our hotel offered a dizzying array of options: shark cage dives, walking on a beach with a cheetah, riding an ostrich, hiking Table Mountain, hot-air ballooning, helicopter rides, African drumming, San (bushmen) center tour, paragliding, whale watching... and that was just for starters.

We chose to emphasize the educational because, after all, our kids should have been in school! 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. ***Freedom is priceless. Never take it for granted.***

Our whole family was still and reverential as we passed by the prison cell Nelson Mandela occupied for 18 years. There was no posing for a picture there. ***Great leaders who fight for freedom deserve our respect.***



Against the backdrop of mountains that soar into the sky, we easily saw the current-day divide of South Africa. Nowadays, it is driven as much by wealth, not color. Single individuals in Cape Town own whole mountain ranges. Celebrities flock here to enjoy the Dutch civility and exotic landscape. Glamorous movies are made here round the clock.

Yet, the shantytowns known as “townships” are like enormous patchwork blankets made of tin covering the foothills. They are deeply upsetting to see. I deeply regret not going on a township tour to show our children this harsh reality firsthand. Africa is a place of extremes, especially in terms of quality of life. We have known this, but to see it firsthand is different. ***Life is unfair and a struggle. Poverty is everywhere.***

All that being said, we were hard-pressed to witness post-Apartheid resentment. As our guide, Darrol, reminded us: “Nelson Mandela taught us that to be truly free we need to let go of resentment.” Truly inspired. ***Harboring resentment will prevent you from true freedom and happiness.”***

Darrol gave us insight into what it was like for a black man growing up in the Apartheid years.

Celebrating our youngest daughter’s 11th birthday traveling the Cape Peninsula was an unforgettable experience. We filled it with baboon, penguin, and ostrich sightings, as well as stunning cliffside vistas, shark spotters, and surfers at the famous Muizenberg beach, and topped it all off with hitting the bottom of Africa (Cape of Good Hope) and Cape Point’s breathtaking aerial view of the “meeting of two oceans.” But no birthday celebration would be complete of course, without an ascent of one of the new seven wonders of nature, so up to the top of Table Mountain we all went, game grandparents included.

Darrol gave the birthday girl a rock he picked up as a present with the following note: “It is a rock from the bottom of Africa for you to remember this day by.” Lesson for the parents: Our guides are our teachers, and this amazing continent is the classroom.

I was worried that the wine country tour would be a big loser, but, surprisingly, it was a huge hit for both the tween/teen and septuagenarian sets. Grandparents, parents, and children bonded and relaxed in a spectacular setting.

Cedric, our wine country tour guide, was a fount of knowledge. Whether it was wine or politics or anything in between, he educated us on South African life, and gave us his perspective growing up white under Apartheid rule.

Despite of the lack of wine lovers in our group, this experience is not to be missed. The beauty and tranquility of the Stellenbosch and Franschhoek region alone are worth the trip... it even had a mellowing affect on our 14-year-old son. Hmm... perhaps he had been doing more wine tasting then we thought?

What Travel Can Teach (The Safari edition)

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 about why the guy in the pilot’s seat looked 12 and why there was so much rust on the wings.

But never mind, we are all hearty adventurers who are living life to the fullest and exploring the far reaches of this crazy wonderful world, while hoping this plane stays in the air.

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. ***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 3 as if we were standing behind a bus exhaust on a hot August afternoon, only to wake up to 57 degrees on day 4, grabbing up coats and hats.

We saw so many animals on our “Game Drives” that I began to hallucinate them. We loved the plethora of impala which our guide Jani told us are nicknamed “Bush burgers,” because they are the McDonald’s/fast food of the bush. Towards the end, they seemed like pets, leaping around us.

The whole experience of being out on Game Drives in the bush is really so very “Lion King.” In fact, all the animals of the African bush are the real majesty, fighting for survival in their natural habitat. ***As Darwin put it: “It’s survival of the fittest.”*** The good genes go on. They are the real deal. They ARE the kings and queens. We were mere subjects grateful to share their space for a while.

And share we did: three generations of our family, in awe of the majesty. And best of all we had the best tracker (Daniel) and best guide (Jani) in all of South Africa. As our teachers, they kept the lesson plans flowing and kept us on the edge of our seats each day we went out into the bush.

Darrol, Cedric, then Jani and Daniel were our guides, but more than that they were our teachers and temporary ambassadors of South Africa. They were our link to our new surroundings and our personal connection. That feeling is what lingers, lasts and matters. The connectedness is what we bring home with us (along with a rock from the bottom of Africa and about 3,000 photos).

They made us feel connected and informed (and in the case of Jani and Daniel, safe and protected too), while they shared their love and enthusiasm with us. They brought South Africa to life.

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

A free spirit, but also a walking encyclopedia of wildlife knowledge, her love of the outdoors and the animals was contagious.

Her graphic description of what she would do if she got her hands on a rhino poacher had us all riveted. She described a “shooting in the shin, then stringing up from a tree, and a cheese grater to the nose” to re-create the exact injustice done to rhinos by poachers. In that moment, she won all of our hearts forever. Here was a true animal lover and protector.

She had all of us transfixed and wanting to learn. We were all students of hers, on a big learning curve together, willing and eager to learn together in this open-air classroom. How lovely for all — ages 11 to 74 — to be freshman again.

Travel tends to level the playing field and make us more open to adventure and exhilaration. What an amazing gift to share this with my husband, my parents, and my children. Yes, our kids missed school, but they were learning about the world in meaningful ways that will never be replicated.

The Life Lessons learned were worth way more than a few missed math classes. So our sixth grader was struggling and fretting over her Greatest Common Factor homework on safari day 2. But then on day 3 she witnessed the real greatest common factor as we off-roaded it across a river bed in our rough and tough safari vehicle to watch the circle of life unfold. Vultures were tearing into the carcass of an impala.

A young male lion then 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 sitting just a few feet away. The wind picked up suddenly and the lion got a whiff of the carcass and quickly ran over to attack it. Jani said, “Kids, you are watching real wildlife in action.” Meanwhile, I was having my Meryl Streep in an “Out of Africa” moment.

This impala, which Daniel said died of natural causes, was now nourishment for many and not a bit was going to waste thanks to the lions, the vultures, and the bone-eating hyenas who would come by later on. ***Nothing is wasted in the wild.***

Watching this scene without knowing what on earth would come next was like being in a real-life, real-time classroom. And it was such a rush. ***Respect the animals and be***

open to what they can teach us.

Daniel’s piercing perception astounded us. He learned his animal tracking skills from his grandfather, who hunted with a bow and arrow. And as he sat in the jump seat on the hood of the truck, he appeared to hover in front of us as he spied tracks and led us fearlessly to find the lions, rhinos, elephants, leopards, cheetahs, hippos, and even baby hyenas!

The kids definitely grew up on this trip, and, as Emily pointed out, never slept in once.

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