

**2019 Scholarship Recipient\* Essay: Abigail Francis  
Tanzania 2019**

“Safari”

“Did you go on a safari?” It shocked me coming back to the States that this question is the most common one I have been asked. Not anything about the schools I visited, the people I met, the wonderful culture I had the privilege of experiencing. Most people have such a single view of Africa even if they believe they do not. If you are white and go to Africa, I guess chances are you are going on a safari because that’s what most people thought I was doing. My trip, consisting of only one safari and much more (the safari was a piece of an ecological retreat with other Tanzanian students), was a life changing experience.



Safari is the Swahili word for “journey,” the answer to the question asked previously is technically yes. My journey in Tanzania had four major destinations: Dar Es Salaam, the nation’s largest city and largest traffic jam, the Miseni Retreat (the only place in the Pwani Region with Miseni Trees) which is very close to Saadani National Park, Kigoma, a small town about a two hour boat ride filled with sea sickness from Gombe Stream National Park, and Arusha, a place from where I thought I would see Mount Kilimanjaro but did not.

Dar Es Salaam was not the biggest city I have ever been to but it felt like it. There were people walking everywhere and the traffic was always unbearable. There were no traffic laws (or at least they were not followed) so driving always felt like a life or death situation. There were street dogs and cats everywhere and there is only one animal hospital and one animal shelter in the entire city of over four million people. I fed the cats and dogs when I could as I knew nobody else would.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> I got a lot of weird looks for this, it is not normal for people to care for the street animals.

In Dar, after meeting my Pen Pal<sup>2</sup> from 10th grade, Mike (pictured to the right), I visited two schools: Azania Boys Secondary School and Majani ya Chai Secondary School. At Azania, I took an accounting class and then had a meeting with their Roots and Shoots club. This meeting, led by the student leader of Azania (Nehemiah) and me, focused on cultural exchanges and improvements for the Pen Pal Project. The meeting went well and I made many new friends during the short time I had at the school afterwards. At Majani ya Chai I took a geology class and then had a meeting very similar to that at Azania (the meeting was led by Nice, a student at Majani ya Chai, and me). At both schools, I got a tour of their beautiful campuses filled with trees and plants that the Roots and Shoots clubs had planted there.

While in Dar, I also did many activities to plan for a future immersion trip to Tanzania such as visiting museums, going on a bike tour, and visiting local markets. The city as a whole was constantly busy but I enjoyed the people who resided there. The person I stayed with is a designer and he made my 6 skirts out of fabric we bought from a local merchant. I wear the skirts regularly.

The Miseni Retreat hosted the most meaningful experiences for me during the entire trip. Two of these experiences involved my friend Suleiman Suleysh, a student in form four (equivalent to the



U.S. grade 12) at Majani ya Chai Secondary School, who aspires to be a famous designer. One night after dinner, Suleiman shared a story with the group of participants in the retreat.<sup>3</sup> This story provided us with background on Suleiman's love of fashion starting from when he was young and used to pick out outfits for his mother. He also talked to us freely about how he has been called names (we made the assumption of 'gay' being the name he was referring to as to be gay in Tanzania is not legal), which was a big step as in schools in Tanzania, students are usually not encouraged to be vulnerable or talk about something when they aren't sure if what they are saying is correct. His story was so touching that it stuck with me the entire trip and is still something I think about now.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My school corresponds with 3 schools in Tanzania through a handwritten Pen Pal Project in association with the Global Compassion Nonprofit Organization

<sup>3</sup> This included the following: From the USA→Danlee Winegar, Peter Locascio, and myself. From Tanzania→Nehemiah (Azania Secondary School), Nice (Majani ya Chai), Yusuph Masanja (leader of The Pen Pal Project in TZ, and Hope and Warioba (the employees of Yusuph; Hope is at university for French and English and Warioba is working at a recycled art place called Africraft). From Burundi→Costantin Coucoulis (the owner of the retreat and founder of the nonprofit SANA, or Saving Africa's Nature).

<sup>4</sup> I currently run an Instagram account for Suleiman (@designersuleyshtz) as he cannot afford a smartphone but really wants his work to be shared with the world. I hope that next time Danlee Winegar or I go to Tanzania that we can bring him a phone (used/donated) so he can share his work himself.

The second experience involving Suleiman that stuck with me was the morning of the last day of our retreat. We woke up at 6:45 and were ready for Suleiman by 7:00. He came into Nice and I's cabin and got to work: he designed four outfits with kangas<sup>5</sup> for me that morning. His designs were phenomenal and next time I go to Tanzania, I hope that I can take home a dress such as the one pictured below.

My third meaningful experience during the Miseni Retreat was in Gongo, a nearby rural farming village. There I met two people who have stuck with me: a man in a purple shirt and a 5 year old girl named Vio, or Violet. The man in the purple shirt had previously killed 11 elephants and burned down the Miseni Retreat. Instead of Costantin getting law enforcement involved, he sat down with this man and they talked about conservation for hours. The man has not killed another elephant since and works closely with SANA. Violet was one of the many children I met in Gongo. She was the one I remember because she tried to hold my hand and I didn't know what was happening so I pulled my hand away and then I realized what she was trying to do so she held my hand for the rest of my time in the village. She tried to tell me about her home and community, but as she spoke no English it was difficult for me to understand what she was saying, even with Hope translating for me. She is pictured to the right.



After a packed three days at Miseni, I went back to Dar to catch a plane to Kigoma, a city of 135,000 on the coast of Lake Tanganyika. As I was flying in, I looked out my window and saw a sea of red. All of the land was covered in red sand, and that is all I remember of Kigoma as the next thing I knew I was in a small wooden boat with a big orange bucket in my lap on my way to Gombe Stream National Park. The boat ride, despite being the most motion sick I have been in my entire life, was beautiful. I could barely make out the coast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo across the lake and I saw overcrowded boats to the right picking up villagers from small fishing villages on the Tanzanian coastline. After two hours, I got off the boat and lay in the sand for about 15 minutes, trying to relax after the boat ride I had just endured. We<sup>6</sup> checked in and were soon after informed that the chimpanzees were about a 10 minute walk from where we

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<sup>5</sup> Kangas, according to Suleiman, are “a rectangle of pure cotton cloth with a border around it, printed in bold designs and bright colors. They originated on the coast of East Africa in the mid 19th century.”

<sup>6</sup> Danlee, Peter, and Jackie. Jackie is in university in Arusha and she and I made up a language. It is Swahili except at the end of every word we add “uuuuuu.”

were staying so we quickly made our way into the bush<sup>7</sup>. In less than 10 minutes, we ran into the chimps near a small metal house. Pictured below is one of the chimpanzees drinking water with about five other chimpanzees licking the ground in the background searching for salt.<sup>8</sup>



The next morning, we woke up very early to our guide knocking on our door telling us that the chimps were about 30 minutes away. The chimpanzees can be as much as 5 hours away, so this was a perfect distance for a morning trek. After sliding down a steep slope to the chimpanzees, we sat and listened to them speak to each other for about an hour. A pregnant mother and her child were cleaning each other about 5 feet away from me.

After the morning trek, we headed back to the boat and I somehow felt much better on that boat trip than the previous one. The next day, we got on the plane to Dar and then on another plane to Arusha.

The three schools I visited in the Arusha Region made that portion of my safari meaningful. The first two schools I visited were Le Ray Primary and Le Ray Secondary School, two rural Maasai schools. I learned about the Maasai culture and they told me about how each of the students at the schools has a specific tree they take care of every day. They bring it water and they have created an array of trees in what used to be a desert. I also was told about a donkey project where the Maasai are shown how to take good care of their livestock to ensure a longer lifespan and happier animals.



The next school I visited was another school involved in the Pen Pal Project, Iriksongo Girls Secondary School. About a 45 minute drive from Arusha, Iriksongo was the prettiest campus I visited the entire trip. The women I met there were the happiest people I have ever met and their campus was dotted with trees and lots of shady areas which kept the area cool all day. I was given a tour of the campus and we also traveled to a local Maasai market where there were

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<sup>7</sup> While planning my trip to Gombe, Danlee told me she could not ensure me seeing the chimps even once

<sup>8</sup> This photo was taken with my film camera: Nikon FM2

people everywhere selling goods from faulty kangas to shoes made from tires. We also passed a butchery where sheep were tied up waiting for their throats to be slit and then for them to be skinned and carried to a stake by a fire. It was a really uncomfortable experience and since that point I am now vegetarian. It had a huge impact on my thinking: if these people are raising these animals humanely for slaughter and I cannot deal with that, how can I deal with the inhumane slaughter of animals?

My safari ended with two days in Dar before my friends Suleiman and Mike met me at the airport at 9:00pm to say goodbye. I flew to Amsterdam where I left the airport to go to a Starbucks to write letters as well as to a post office, the rubber duck store, and the royal palace. This experience was definitely the biggest culture shock for me the entire trip as I had been in a developing country for more than two weeks and was then entering a continent I had never been to. I did enjoy it, but not as much as I did the 17 days I spent in Tanzania.



The 17 days in Tanzania has influenced my college choices, my voting decisions, and what I want to do with my life. I have decided now instead of law that I want to study international relations. I want to make a big impact on the world, and I believe that studying and experiencing the world is the best way to do so.

\*Ms. Francis received a partial scholarship, separate from the endowed fund, directly from the Beutler/Conway family due to the quality of her application and scope of her project.