

African Dreaming

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The deep screech of the lonely baboon rouses the African dreamers from their sleep, as the sun slowly lifts from the jade mountains to reveal an unending landscape. Whilst seemingly empty at first, the subtle movements of a world often forgotten can no longer be ignored. The greater flamingo stretches its wings and takes flight, calling for the land to awaken, the lion roars in recognition, commanding his kingdom to life.

The increasingly audible groans and mutters of a different species now begins to fill the air, a species that believes itself to be greater than the mighty beasts, yet at this hour, one would suggest this species is far from regal. Unkempt manes, crumpled coats, tired groans and dragging feet - all tell tale signs of the newly awoken student.

The troops drowsily trudge astride their trusty fuel guzzling transporter, destination unknown. The windows are routinely lowered and morning air races into tired lungs, shocking them to consciousness and awakening their excited spirits. As the bus winds along streets, endless eyes stare in at us from the outside, separated only by glass yet worlds apart. We finally wheeze to a stop and find ourselves surrounded by dilapidated corrugated iron sheds. It is inconceivable to our western minds that people could live here, let alone approach us with immeasurable smiles. As we unload the truck curious hands lightly touch our arms and legs, trying to understand who and why we are here. The call is made, the word is spread, and slowly the people of the Soweto township bring forth their cats and dogs, tentatively awaiting the saving needle. We find time between animals, to succumb to the gentle pleas of the children, as they pose allowing us to capture them as a moment in time. Cameras are foreign here, and excitement abounds when a digital image is presented for inspection. Excited giggles and squeals escape plump lips encouraging us to continue shot after shot, until our trigger fingers tire, and the poses exhaust. The animals are vaccinated, the horn sounds, and thus we must continue on. Waving hands and shining eyes smile as we pull away from the township. A sense of accomplishment yet sadness washes over the bus, knowing how these people live when we have so much.

With our initiation into African culture achieved, our journey has now truly begun. We meander along roads once more, warm air procuring salty drop after drop from our wilting bodies. The African sun is unforgiving and insists on greeting us with her maximum efforts. We roll into the renowned De Wildt breeding centre, to be greeted by pacing cheetahs, protecting what is theirs. Tiny hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise as I feel inquisitive and intimidating eyes tracing my every step. We retreat to the safety of indoors before embarking on a tour of this incredible facility. A few hours pass and smiles are etched into our faces as we have been licked by young wild dogs, chased by cheetahs, awestruck by the tremendous wingspan of vultures and humbled by stroking the rare King leopard, but we must once again continue on our African adventure.

Boats await us, eagerly revving to speed us to our next destination, perhaps the most majestic yet. As we glide over the water, it splashes up to embrace our burning flesh, you can almost hear the thankful hiss of our skin as the cool liquid washes over. The narrow dam is walled by commanding mountains, painted green with African flora. We slowly approach the bank and what stands before us can only be described as a dream; a young rhino sucking from it's mother, a towering giraffe standing over a small herd of zebra and warthog, and the ever-present impala grazing and unmoved by our presence. There are no words spoken amongst travellers for nothing can describe this unimaginable scene, instead looks of awe are exchanged as eyes glisten with emotion. This is Africa at its most beautiful. These incredible animals are painted on a backdrop of rolling mountains and clear blue sky, words cannot do such a gift justice, our silence speaks volumes.

As the animals slowly move away to find new grazing pastures, the overwhelming heat strikes down the excited yet weary travellers, and we too must retreat to our local watering hole. We idle into the bay and Imbombala stands before us, a truly magical world nestled amongst the animals and trees. Our hosts ready the icy water as we retreat to prepare for dinner, and much to the delight of the dusty travellers running water greets us with lustre. Bodies are washed and a refreshed group now buzzes with the excitement of this new abode. A meal of the increasingly popular potjie by the campfire has all travellers content and blissfully full. After a hearty African dinner, and songs by the fire tired eyes begin to darken as heavy eyelids slowly win the battle. In pairs and groups the herd slowly moves to their dwelling to dream of all that was seen and all that is still to come.

The sound of awakening Africa enlivens us once again, we don our boots to prepare for our early morning trail. The dusty red earth surrenders endless clues of animals which have graced its surface. Footprints, the enemy of the reticent animal. We follow our leaders with silence and soft footsteps, and our efforts are soon rewarded as a herd of buffalo are spied in the distance. The urge to quickly approach must be resisted as these animals flee with a mere breath on the wind. We sit and wait, watching, observing, wholly enthralled. A movement, a sudden thunderous rush, and the herd disappear into the horizon. Adrenaline constantly pumps as we track these wondrous animals. We lower our glance once more, and the earth reveals a hidden treasure, a leopard track. The track alone leaves all breathless, indicating this enigmatic animal has only recently passed by. The search continues, but to no avail, the elusive animal remains just that. Imbambala has treated us well, but Kruger awaits, beckoning us with its worldly authority.

The 'big 5', the star attraction of Kruger, yet this bus load of travellers needs only to spot one of these animals to be truly satisfied. The gates of Kruger roar open with authority, letting us pass and revealing the famous and beautiful park, before drumming closed behind us, sealing us into the animals' kingdom. We are early to bed and indeed early to rise. We awaken before the sun has opened her eyes, and ready ourselves in the hazily starlit sky. Eager bodies rush aboard the bus to begin our search, and the sun slowly peeks through her tired eyes allowing us a small amount of light. Little time passes before we glance casually outside and hold our breath as a herd of elephants stand just a whisper away. The size of these creatures cannot be described, only experienced. A truly humble feeling washes over us; to be in the presence of such a regal beast imparts a heavy humility. My eyes begin to fog as I glance through the matriarch's legs which reveal a calf not one month old. The trunk is untrained as the calf playfully swings it round and round, trying unsuccessfully to pluck grass from the unyielding earth. I am yet to discover a word which can truly capture what this moment meant to me. The remaining time in Kruger was a blur of coloured coats, as the animals seemed to willingly present themselves to us, with the 'big 5' and endless others spotted in the first day alone. Kruger retained its impeccable reputation, and all who experience this park will leave a piece of their soul embedded with the animals of Africa.

Perhaps the greatest part of this adventure is yet to come as we learn of our final activity...game capture. The mere suggestion of capturing one of these imperial beasts sends heart rates racing and eager glances shooting from traveller to traveller. Andre, our fearless leader enlightens us on the dangers and excitement of animal capture. His stories leave wide-eyed wanderers, with gaping mouths and jaws hovering just above the earth. Death is an all too common occurrence in this business, if one in the team shall fail, all will suffer. Our initiating capture is that of a young rhino requiring transport across parks. Andre marches aboard his helicopter and rises above us, a truly celestial being. The helicopter, a mere insect in the sky, hovers...waiting...watching, before striking as the dart leaves Andre's gun. We wait impatiently for the rhinos to show themselves, before a sudden rumble shakes the earth, and three rhinos break through trees directly on our course. A bright pink dart bounces furiously against a hardened rump as they rapidly approach. The frozen students stare at the oncoming brigade, not moving, not daring to breathe, and just as we consider this may be the last moment we share in Africa the rhinos abruptly change direction. An audible sigh of relief escapes lips of utterly relieved students. We gather ourselves and rush to the grounded rhino, abandoned by his family he lies alone. His eyes are quickly covered and ropes applied. We encourage him to his feet before leading him forward with the strategically placed ropes directing his horn. He is guided into the transporter and the door swiftly closed. The barrage of cars accompanying this project takes to the road, moving this traveller to his new destination. The cars enter the park and come to a tense stop. The door is finally tentatively raised, and the rhino bellows out, leaving onlookers in awe as he barges into the trees and disappears. Success. The next few days race past as we endeavour to capture hyena, rhino and more buffalo with exceeding success. Jaws ache with endless smiles imprinted on faces of jubilant students. These moments shall never be forgotten.

African dreaming has consumed the travellers for weeks, but the great Down Under whispers to them, beckoning the students to return to their sun-drenched homeland. Hesitant beings reluctantly pack their belongings knowing the African adventure must draw to a close. Regrettably the scholars go their separate ways. Three weeks ago we stood as strangers with a few nervous words exchanged, but today we parted as friends with warm embraces marking the end of an unforgettable journey. This incredible experience allowed us a small glimpse into the wonder that is Africa, yet I feel a lifetime would not be enough to discover all its secrets.

I shall forever be indebted to the beauty of Africa.