

Experience of a Lifetime

Teen Service Trip Experience - Blog Post by Audrey Pocrass
Teen Trip Alumnus, Summer 2023

I was the girl who couldn't handle sleep away camp, unless you count the one week I went to my grandma's house and called my parents hysterically crying every single night. So when the opportunity arose to fly halfway across the world to spend 3 weeks with no one I knew, obviously I had to say yes. The idea of stepping so far out of my comfort zone was extremely daunting at first. For one, I despise flying and the total flight time from DC to Uganda is a little over 20 hours. Two, I don't love being too far away from home, and Uganda is halfway across the world. Three, taking this trip would mean missing the last half of my softball season. Despite all of this, I knew this trip had the opportunity to be an experience of a lifetime. While I was incredibly nervous, I knew I had to do it, and boy am I glad I did!

Stepping out of my comfort zone like this doesn't come naturally, but because I was willing to push myself, I had the opportunity to create new relationships, immerse myself in a new culture, and expose myself to the beauty of the world around me.

Whether you are an introvert, extrovert or a little bit of both, creating new relationships can be awkward. Most friendships don't start by going up to someone and asking to be friends, but rather through common interests or shared experiences. Prior to the trip, I decided not to tell any of my friends about it. Not because I wanted to deny them the experience, but because I wanted to do it on my own. I knew if I went with a good friend, it would be too easy to attach myself to that person rather than creating new friendships. Being thrown into a situation away from everything I knew allowed these relationships to form almost automatically. On the first day of travel I had already learned so much about other people that would typically take months to learn. I ended up making some great friends within the first few days and we spent the rest of the trip together!



Culture and pride go hand and hand. Culture is extremely valued in Uganda. There were many examples of this, but one special event hosted by the school was Mother-Daughter day. During this event, we teens dressed in traditional Ugandan attire. The students and teachers at the school were so incredibly excited to be able to share a part of their culture with us. The joy on the students' faces when we walked out of the dressing room wearing the beautiful Ugandan dresses was priceless. They all said, "You look very smart," which means very pretty or handsome. During the Mother-Daughter day celebration we were brought up on stage to dance in front of the whole school and all of the parents. Now, I am not a dancer. Never have been and probably never will be! But joining the dance was something that I needed to do to get the full cultural experience, even if it meant embarrassing myself. Believe it or not, it was so much fun! I loved dancing with the students and having them show us their cool moves. I learned early on in the trip that dancing is one of their favorite cultural expressions and, despite my initial discomfort, I was so happy to be able to share that part of their culture with them.

Of the many amazing experiences during my time in Uganda, one of the most rewarding was the 12 hour hike to Mount Nusu. I know what you're probably wondering: are you crazy?! To answer your question, only kinda! We were warned in advance how difficult it would be, but a few of us decided we were up for the challenge. The hike was the most physically demanding thing I have ever done in my entire life, and mind you I am a high level athlete. It felt like walking up a Stairmaster with no off button. There was also no path, so at some points we had to crawl on our hands and knees to make it to the next spot. It was grueling. There were a couple times I wondered if we would make it. But I kept thinking about how amazing the view was going to be, and I kept going. When we finally reached the top, the view was the most spectacular thing I have ever seen. It went on for miles, and we were even able to see the house that we were staying at from the top of the mountain. It was breathtaking.



Through this experience, I forced myself to do things that I never thought I could do, such as traveling with new people, immersing myself in a new culture, and exposing myself to the beauty of the world around me through hiking. I proved to myself that not only could I do it but also enjoy it. More importantly, I now have the confidence to continue pushing myself beyond these fake boundaries that I have in my mind. Instead of being the kid that couldn't even go to sleep away camp, I am now the kid who seeks new opportunities and has the confidence to try hard things.



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