

Accepting the Unfamiliar

It was a pivotal chapter at a time for experiences and for the new and unfamiliar. I was always told these were supposed to be the best four years of my life. But while most of my friends loved every aspect that college had to bring, I was miserably wishing for something profound to strike through my thoughts and tell me something different that I should be doing instead. Something that would put me in a true state of happiness and take my feelings of loneliness away. And as much as I wanted to listen to my loved ones telling me to push through the homesickness and freshman year unfamiliarity – I knew at my core that it wasn't the kind of environment that I was supposed to be in. So, I left.

At my breaking point, I decided to drop out of school, save up my money and make my 19-year-old self get on a plane and travel all around the world by myself to volunteer with a company called IVHQ. February 16, 2013 began my three-month journey of discovery, inspiration and complete admiration of the world around me.

But before I was really able to take in the experiences, there was a lot of letting go that needed to happen in order for me to be able to truly grow. I needed to let the anxiety and stress of the unknown fall off my shoulders, the fears of my path being the wrong one completely dissolve, and let myself finally learn to get to know and love myself.

With tears streaming down my face and panic flooding my thoughts, I landed in Uganda with the strangest feeling I've ever had in my whole life. I had to try and keep calm and pretend I knew what I was doing, but inside I was doing everything in my power to not let myself show my tears or any fear.

My plane was late getting in, and I didn't have a phone that was equipped to work out of the country so I could let whoever was picking me up know that I was running late. But finally after getting through customs and baggage claim, as I shuffled through the airport in a sweaty, frantic state dragging my bags behind me, a tall and thin Ugandan man greeted me holding a sign with my name on it. I was half terrified because he couldn't speak any English besides 'hello', 'yes', and 'no', and I

had no clue where he was taking me. The other half of me was relieved when I saw my name on that sheet of paper, as I would finally be able to shower and relax after my 36 hours of traveling.

After a dusty and bumpy car ride that reeked of bad body odor and spices as my driver listened to terrible re-makes of hit American songs, I arrived at my new home for the next six weeks. Unfamiliar, yet friendly faces greeted me as I held back my tears and tried to pretend like I was as excited as I thought I would have been coming to a country I had always dreamed of visiting. I always had a draw towards doing orphanage work in Africa and this was my chance, but yet, I was more fearful than ever before. It felt like change was the only thing I could actually recognize in that moment, and I began to question the great idea of this three-month trip. I was honestly scared, as much as I didn't want to admit it.

I called my mom off of another volunteers pre-paid phone to let her know that I got there safely, but she could only hear about every other word as I sniffled and gasped through my tears trying to make sense of myself. She said, "Alex, don't do this. You're there already, so be there." It shook me to my senses as I forced myself to get a grip on my emotions and go talk to the other volunteers. I also remembered what one of my friends from home had told me before I left. "The first three days will be the worst, but you will get through it," he says. "You just have to be strong." The rule of three he explained. And he was completely right.

With that first night being the absolute worst, I tossed and turned the whole night under my mosquito net, lying on my half-inch thick mattress on a wooden board, trying to fall asleep to the sound of crying babies, dogs barking and men yelling in the alley near by. I wasn't even sure as to how I could hear so much since our volunteer house was pretty enclosed. But I heard it all, and to even more of my surprise, my roommate, whom I had not met yet, woke me up the next morning asking if I was okay. "You were crying in your sleep like the entire night," she said. How embarrassing, I thought. Luckily, she was incredibly helpful and understanding, but it was not exactly the way I wanted to introduce myself. At that moment, I realized what a weak point in my life I was at. But for the first time, I was okay with it.

As the days went on, it all got easier. I met other volunteers from all around the world who took me under their wings like a little sister. We explored the Ugandan slums with one another and learned about the misuse and abuse of jet fuel within the local community. To my utter disbelief, I learned that kids as young as 8 years old were huffing jet fuel out of plastic water bottles in attempt to suppress their pains of hunger, sleeplessness and trying to stay warm at night. And yet, jet fuel or not, the kids in Uganda were some of the happiest people I had ever met.

Their smiles lit up my days and the joy they were consumed with by looking at themselves on my camera made me look at pictures way differently. Pictures are universally joyful and as much as most of us don't realize, they are still an incredible privilege in many parts of the world. But what amazed me the most was how the kids also don't really know what they look like either, since mirrors aren't exactly the most important item for them to own. They point and laugh at themselves in the most beautifully, goofy manner. And they don't look at themselves and say 'ew' or 'gross' like so many of us do when we look at pictures of ourselves.

Beans, rice and cabbage quickly filled my diet, with the indulgence of chapattis every now and then, which are pretty much the best flour tortilla you'll ever have. Coffee, tea, bananas, and eggs if we were lucky, fueled our morning stomachs, as I would afterwards sit outside to journal and admire the lush hills, deep red sanded roads and different shades of tinned rooftops beyond me. I had to learn to be patient with a slow moving and leisurely concept called 'African Time.' "We'll be there at 9 am tomorrow," really means that they will pick us up by 11 am if we were lucky – most likely closer to noon. But for those six weeks, I spent a lot of time waiting, and thus, a lot of time reflecting.

I experienced an authentic safari, watching the elephants graze under the warm African sunrise. I knew for the first time what it felt like for families to walk miles and miles every day to get to school, church or get food. Maize and beans was the standard meal, with the occasional avocado sliced on top if they fell from the trees above. I learned how to hand-wash my clothing and get comfortable with riding on a sketchy scooter, called a boda boda, zooming in between the cars on the dirt roads and holding on to Ugandan strangers that somehow felt like family. And

even though three weeks into my trip someone broke into our hotel room while we were on safari and stole my laptop and cash, I realized that those are just things that can always be replaced and there was no reason to lose my happiness over a thing.

There were days that I wanted my trip to end and days that I never wanted it to end. I endured a lot of difficult growing experiences within myself and I realized that it is actually a pretty beautiful journey that we are able to have with ourselves. As my trip in Uganda was coming to an end, I was in awe at how fast time passed by. The kids and the people in Uganda taught me how the good things don't actually come out of things. The good parts of life come from the people, the memories and by simply doing actions much bigger than yourself.

To my luck, my adventuring and lessons weren't ending there yet. Six weeks went by and I had already grown so much, but seven more weeks were to come in Thailand and I was ready. Another 24 hours of flying, bus rides and tuk tuk's and there I was – sipping tea barefoot and cross-legged in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

The sleeping situation was pretty similar to Uganda with a wooden plank of a bed, but I was used to it. Now I was in one hostel styled room with 10 other women from all around the world. My diet however switched to a lot of curries, rice and noodles, which I was beyond thankful and excited for, although the amount of rice being consumed was definitely enhanced. Regular toilets and warm showers still were not a thing, and on our weekends off when we would stay at hostels in town and not at our volunteer house, warm showers and cozy beds genuinely excited me. To say the least, I got very used to cold showers and squat toilets.

I tasted a cricket for the first time, savored sticky rice and mango and cooked s'mores in banana leaves around our nightly bonfires. Our volunteer house felt like summer camp in the middle of a tropical dream where instead of a blob and archery, there were hammocks, 'OM' signs and prayer flags everywhere, and community bathrooms that had slits in the walls as windows, allowing all sorts of bugs to crawl in. We hand washed all of our own dishes, Thai pants became the most essential staple in the humid heat, and I learned to deal with the spiciness of the food.

There were other volunteers from the United States, England, Australia, Canada, and South Africa. I taught English to Thai children and hillside women, and

occasionally joined the working crew on the rice fields. We trekked to different villages and rode on elephants, sleeping on bamboo floors and felt refreshed when we could pick up a Chang beer from the local store.

My dreams were slowly unraveling, and for the first time in my life I felt so alive. I felt like everything I needed to know about life and my purpose here was rushing into me like all of the water being splashed onto us during the Thai New Year celebration while we were there. It is a pretty amazing concept actually – they spend a week dedicated to water – kids on the side of the road using squirt guns and hoses as the open cars go by. They quite literally wash away the past year and welcome in the new one with a fresh and clean slate, feeling revived and powerful. Although by the end of that week being completely soaked, we were all pretty ready for it to be over.

I was meeting people that were opening my eyes to so many wonders of the world and showing me that I am capable of so much, regardless of my age. The temples, the music, the clothing and culture – I felt like I was in an actual dream. I had no worries in the world. I had limited access to the Internet, no phone and no social media. It was incredible. I felt like I could do anything by myself, and I learned that you have to experience darkness to truly be able to appreciate the light in life. If I hadn't recognized my own personal suffering during my freshman in college without any clue as to who I was as a person, I would have no appreciation for the journey that I endured on my three-month adventure.

My list of traveling grew much more extensively during that first solo adventure of mine and I couldn't wait to get going on that bucket list. There was just one thing in the way – I had to finish college first like I had promised myself before I left. But the best part about it was that I was finally beginning to know myself, and I could not wait to create each new experience and adventure based off of this grand concept of traveling. Traveling by myself, out of the country and completely out of my comfort zone taught me more about myself in that three-month time span than my entire 19 years of experiences. They say travel is the only thing that makes you richer, and I could truly not agree more, as I realize how change is actually a good thing after all.