

Q&A: Biomedical Engineering Student Shares Stories of Trip to Kenya

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Sam Whipple is from Evansville, Indiana, and is currently a senior biomedical engineering major at IUPUI. Whipple left for Kenya in early July to participate in a project called "Understanding Kenya Through Partnership and Service: Focus on Curriculum Development," which is funded by the Fulbright –Hays Group Projects Abroad Program grant. He is part of a small group of IUPUI faculty and students as well as several IPS teachers that participated in a month-long program of workshops and lectures taught by faculty at Moi University in Kenya, one of IUPUI's strategic partners. This particular program is intended to foster an understanding of Africa that comes from direct experience, dialogue with Africans and collaborative service projects.

"Throughout my life I have always loved to travel to new places and learn about and experience cultures different from my own. Since the Kenya Fulbright Program lasts an entire month, I will have the opportunity to truly experience the country and its culture. I can't wait," Whipple said before he left for his trip. Now Whipple has returned from Kenya and we've followed-up with him to learn more about his experience. Learn more about his trip by reading his responses to the questions below.



Q: What was your perspective on Africa before the trip? How has it changed?

A: Honestly, I wasn't really sure what to expect of Kenya before we visited. I knew it was a very poor country, which had just been through a horrific experience in the post-election violence of 2007. So, I half-expected to see a devastated country with a high level of tension. When we got there, though, I never would've known that the country had been through the troubles it had, if I hadn't been aware of it already. Although many of the people there are living under extremely difficult conditions, I found that they are quick to greet you with a smile and a handshake, and often want to tell you their story. I now think of Kenya and Kenyans as extremely resilient with a strong sense of pride.

Q: In what ways was your experience what you expected? In what ways did it surprise you?

A: I tried to go into this trip with as few expectations as possible. I expected to see a high level of poverty, and I did. However, I didn't realize that it would be so extensive. Outside of Nairobi, there was very little infrastructure in the places we visited, and many people lived in conditions that I could not believe. About half of the population lives on less than \$1 a day. There is very little industry in Kenya, and even less industry which provides goods/services back to Kenya. Two of its largest industries are tea and tourism. A majority of the tea produced in Kenya is exported to other countries such as the U.K.

Q: What did you learn from your time abroad?

A: From my trip to Kenya, I took away two major things. The first was learning to be patient. In Kenya, when someone says they will pick you up at 3:00, it could be 3:00 when they arrive, or it could be 5:00. They aren't in the same type of rush we are here when it comes to schedules and what not. Also, we spent long days traveling in the vans, sometimes 12 hours at a time. Although it was frustrating, I learned quickly that being angry wasn't going to get us there faster, and so I had to adjust and just stay patient.

The second thing I learned is that there are always multiple ways to look at things. I don't mean just between Kenyan and American viewpoints. Many of the lectures we attended had overlapping topics, and so we heard different opinions about the same things. It was interesting to compare the different viewpoints of the Kenyan professors, and I think it was beneficial to get these varying views so that we were presented a full picture of the topic.

Q: Can you share a special moment/story from your trip?

A: When we were at the Narok campus of Moi University, we were listening to a lecture which got onto the topic of gender issues in Kenya. At this particular campus, there were students from the college as well as members

of the community listening to the lectures along with our group. For most of our trip, the dialogue was basically between our group and the Kenyan professors. At this lecture, however, many of the Kenyans in the audience began to voice their opinions and debate with the lecturer, which allowed us to hear a wide range of opinions. It was a really cool experience, though, because it gave us the opportunity to witness a candid dialogue between Kenyans, about an issue that they really care about. Our group didn't really join the discussion at that point because we were all enjoying listening to the debate between the people there. We didn't get that same sort of dialogue anywhere else, so it was a great experience.



Q: What was your favorite part of the trip?

A: My favorite part of the trip was when we visited the Maasai Mara, which is a park reserve in southern Kenya. It is one of the best places in the world to see wild animals in their natural habitats. We got to go on three safaris while we were there and got to see all kinds of wildlife, including lions, zebras, elephants, cheetahs, hyenas, giraffes, wildebeest and buffalo.

Q: How has your trip impacted you or how do you think it will impact your future?

A: This trip has had a large impact on me, in ways that I probably don't even realize yet. Many of the topics we discussed had a human rights aspect, and we were able to view some of these things first-hand. I am planning on

going to law school next year, and I am now thinking about doing international law, with a focus on human rights. Beyond that, this trip has allowed me to make wonderful connections with people, both here at IUPUI and at Moi University in Kenya.

Q: Would you recommend this trip to others?

A: I would definitely recommend this trip to others. Hopefully, there will be a permanent study abroad trip to Kenya through Moi University in the near future. This trip is a great chance to see a part of the world that very few get to visit. There are so many interesting aspects of Kenya that everyone can find something to explore. Almost everyone speaks English, so you don't have to be afraid of a language barrier. It is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen, and the people are kind and welcoming. If you are interested in learning about a new culture, place, people, etc., I strongly recommend this trip.

Q: Why do you feel that travel abroad is important for students?

A: I think that students have a lot to gain from studying abroad. If nothing else, it gives them the chance to immerse themselves in a new culture. It allows students to look at the world through a different set of lens and helps broaden their perspective. For me, it is all about learning to look at things from a different angle and understanding that there is always another way to view things.

Q: Now that you're back – what are your plans?

A: Right now, I am getting ready for my senior year in biomedical engineering, and starting to apply to law schools. The other two IUPUI students who went on this trip with me will be working with the study abroad office this semester to help set up a study abroad program to Kenya for future students