

Hello again from OTS South Africa!



**Organization for
Tropical Studies**

Finally, the wait is over! Here it is, the much anticipated second newsletter documenting our OTS Fall 2014 adventures! We hope you enjoyed the first newsletter as much as we enjoyed preparing it and that this next installment doesn't disappoint...

Over the last four weeks the OTS group has successfully transected the country and in doing so has been exposed to so much diversity, not only in landscapes, flora and fauna, but also in culture and exciting new experiences. To quote some of the students: "South Africa has EVERYTHING!", and it's true! The group has been thrown into so many different situations it's become almost difficult to keep count. From the deeply rural cultural experience in HaMakuya, to the big city life of Johannesburg and Cape Town, in turn contrasted by the wonders of the Cape ecosystems both terrestrial and marine. With so many adventures to regale, we better get started!



Above: Lily, Nate, Hannah and Blair enjoying one of the many travel days.



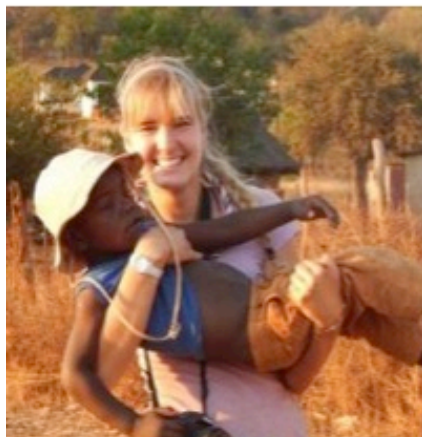
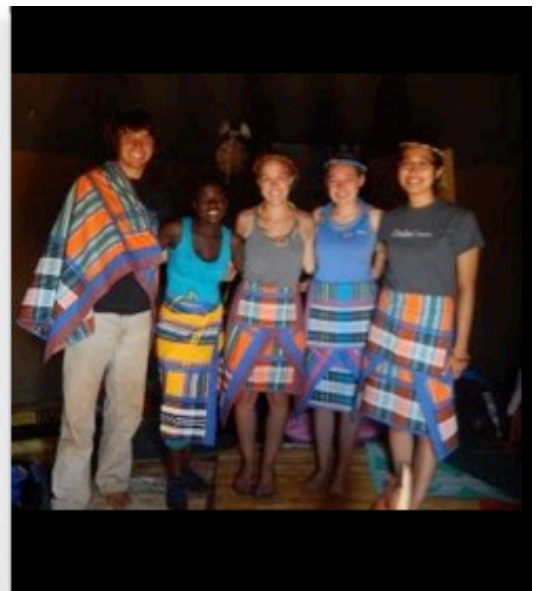
Right: Leigh, Kelly, Jess, Allison, Jaina, Caroline, Deana, Matt and Kyle on a walk to the river by Tshulu Camp.



You last heard from us when we were in the north of Kruger National Park at Shingwedzi Rest Camp; from there we packed up shop and headed north towards the Zimbabwean border. We travelled through some of the more arid areas of the park, where Mopani trees are a plenty but animals are scarce. On our route up to Pafuri Gate, we took a quick detour via "Crook's corner", a view point where, standing in South Africa, you can gaze upon both Mozambique and Zimbabwe across the wide banks of the Limpopo River. We truly were at the north-eastern tip of the country, and it was hard to believe that in a little over a week we would be standing in the opposite corner of South Africa - Cape Point. Our destination for this travel day was the rural settlement of HaMakuya, home to a distinct indigenous culture- the TshiVenda people. This rural community is comprised of several sub-villages and it was within these villages that the students were to immerse themselves and be exposed to the Venda way of life during their homestays. For the next week we were based at the picturesque Tshulu camp on the banks of the Mutale River, where you wake up to the sight of baobab trees soaking in the morning light and the sounds of cattle bells in the river bed.

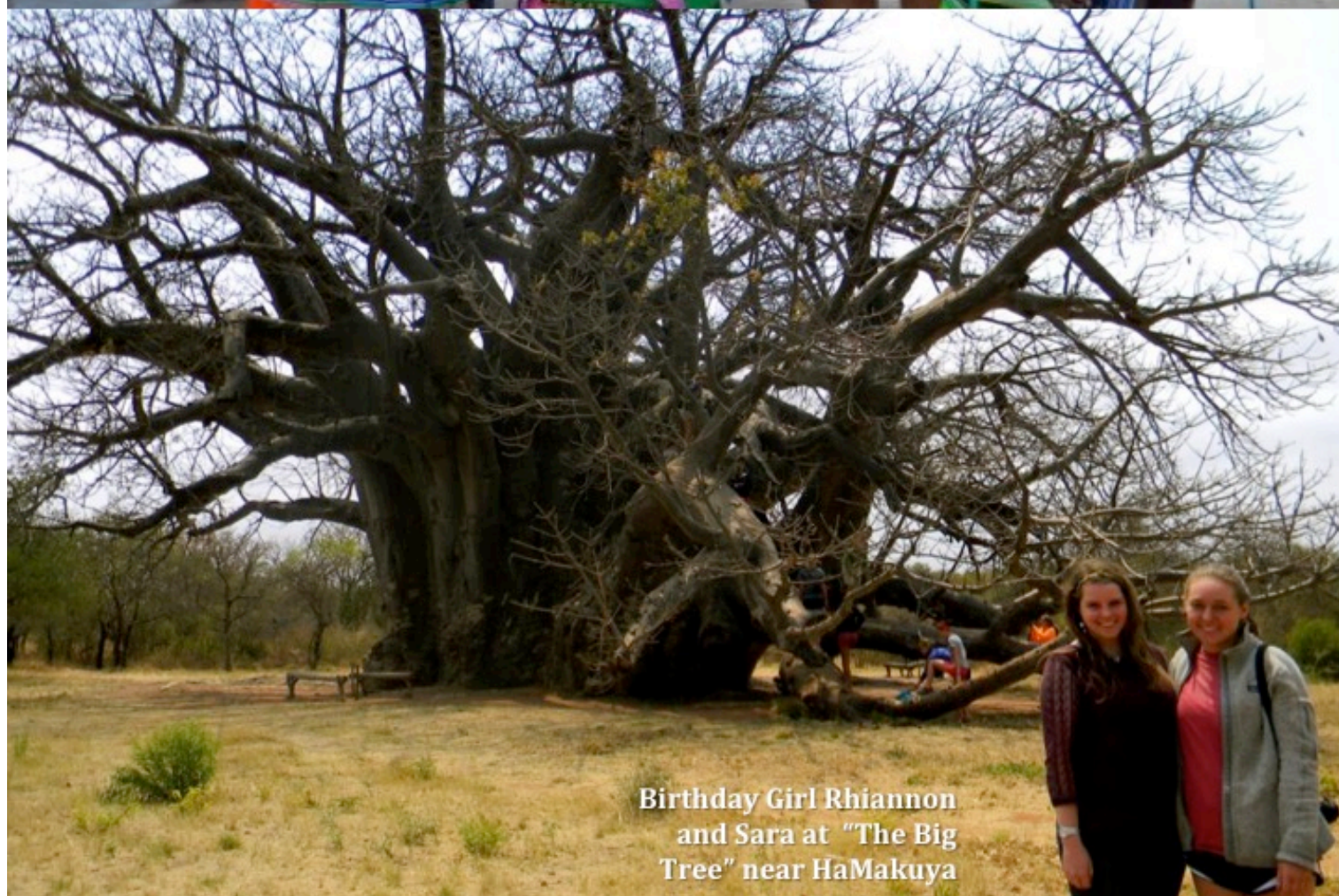
However relaxing Tshulu camp was, the students didn't have the chance to get comfortable as they were sorted into groups of four and five and, along with a competent English-Venda interpreter, were whisked away to their respective homestays. Each group was placed in their own village with a host family that was happy to share their daily lives with them over three days and nights. Although every homestay experience was unique, each group was exposed to a combination of typical rural activities such as collecting firewood, riding a donkey cart, helping with meal preparations, visiting schools and clinics and some students even visited the local *Sangoma* (shaman or traditional healer). While on their homestays the students also interviewed the residents in the villages about their perception on water quality and availability as this formed part of the fourth FFP (faculty field project). This FFP was run by our very own Colleen Cluett, who not only ensures the smooth running of the OTS semester programs, but also conducts her own research in a range of social and economic aspects of ecology and conservation in southern Africa. This northern region of the country is highly water stressed and, because water is a basic need essential to the development of our social systems, it is important to understand how the availability and quality of water impacts local communities. Conducting this research while living with Venda families deepened the students' understanding of this way of life and surely enriched their homestay experience. After three days living so closely with these new families, it was sad to say good bye but, at the same time, the concept of a hot shower and a soft bed was certainly welcomed. We spent another two nights in Tshulu camp which gave the students the opportunity to reflect upon their homestay experience and recuperate before hitting the big cities. During these days we visited the largest baobab tree in southern Africa, estimated to be over 1500 year old!

Clockwise from top: Ben, Allison, Sara and Ukyoung in traditional Venda dress with their homestay mother. Dusty donkey cart ride. Matt and a new friend. Adri and Jess learning a new a traditional dance. "We love Nate!". Caroline and a child from her village.





Kelly, Jaina and Bennett with their host family.



Birthday Girl Rhiannon
and Sara at "The Big
Tree" near HaMakuya

And then the great transect began... The first leg of which was to get the team from the rural northern corner of the country to the bustling city of Johannesburg where the students were met once again by Dr. Lannie Birch. Over the next two days Lannie, along with Colleen, lead the already culture-shocked group through a historical and cultural tour of the "City of Gold". This began with a one-woman play performed at Wits University theatre in which the actress portrayed several contrasting cultural perspectives on life in Cape Town, an apt introduction to the city they were about to visit. The next day the students visited two places crucial to understanding South Africa's segregated, violent and unjust past; the Apartheid Museum and Liliesleaf House. The Apartheid Museum provides an in depth context of South Africa's political history through an extensive collection of artefacts and photographs. The gravity and reality of Apartheid really hit home when the students visited Liliesleaf, a house where anti-apartheid political activists would often meet and also the site of arrest for many prominent anti-apartheid activists of the time.

After two nights in Johannesburg it was time to fly to the Mother City, Cape Town, for the much anticipated mid-term break. The southernmost city in Africa is well known for its temperamental weather, but on this day the students were welcomed by blue skies, a warm sun and little wind (very rare). As a Capetonian, I felt like a proud mother showing off my well-behaved child to all these new friends I have made.

The students at Liliesleaf museum in Jo'burg



We settled at a beautiful backpackers in the city centre and the students started making grand plans for their five days off. It was almost impossible to keep track of what everyone got up to but there is no doubt that each student experienced a combination of quintessential Cape Town activities including hiking Table Mountain, surfing, shark cage diving, seal snorkeling, sky-diving, wine lands touring, and just soaking up the unique vibe the city has to offer. Unsurprisingly, Cape Town managed to live up to its reputation of erratic weather but this did not deter the group from making the most of what the city had to offer, and with no major incidences to report, at the end of the five days I felt like a proud parent to both my city and the students.



Although the mid-term break had to come to an end, it was not yet time to leave Cape Town because, apart from being a great place to have fun and relax, it also holds great cultural and natural heritage worth exploring. On a sunny Saturday morning the group set off on a ferry from the V and A Waterfront to the historical Robben Island where our former president, Nelson Mandela, as well as other freedom fighters, were imprisoned during the apartheid era. Walking through the prison where these great men spent so much of their lives is a sobering experience that one never forgets.



Adri, Caroline and Leigh on the ferry to Robben Island.

The next day, with the infamous South East wind—the “Cape Doctor” blowing in full force, we took the scenic route around the peninsula until we reached Cape Point, the southernmost portion of Table Mountain National Park. Here, we were met once again by course director and botanist, Dr Laurence Kruger, and who better to introduce the group to the wondrous world of Fynbos. Fynbos is a highly diverse vegetation type that exists only in the Cape region of South Africa. It is home to over 9000 plant species, some of which are confined entirely to very small areas in places like Cape Point. Learning about a whole new biome and the strategies that the native plants and animals adopt to thrive in these unique conditions was certainly exciting for the students especially from someone as passionate and knowledgeable as Laurence.



Allison follows the rest of the class on their tour of the prison



Laurence's Fynbos lecture at the picturesque Cape Point

Cape Point is a top tourist destination due to the dramatic escarpment that protrudes into the ocean and the panoramic views it offers. We spent the rest of the day soaking up these views, frolicking on pristine beaches and then ended off visiting the endangered and highly charismatic African Penguins at Boulders Beach. Cape point also yielded one of the more bizarre encounters of our trip, which involved Nate's backpack, an irate baboon, a flip-flop, three bananas, a dramatic dive over the dunes, and a broody ostrich. Try putting these together in any combination and the story you come up with is likely to be less ridiculous than the actual event. Anyway, I'll leave it to the students to fill you in on the details when they return...

A windswept class photo on Chapman's Peak drive



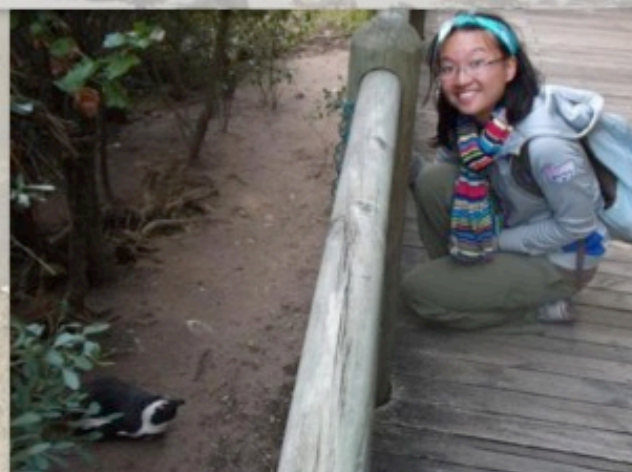
The backpackers in Cape Town treated us well but in true OTS style, it was time to move on. Although not too far. We spent the next three nights at the Sunbird Centre near to Noordhoek, a neighbourhood 20 km outside the city center but still within the greater Cape Town area. Its close proximity to the Table Mountain National Park made this site an ideal base from which to run our next FFP.



Dr Kristi Maciejewski, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Cape Town (and soon-to-be a full time member of the OTS staff) led this project that looked at the human aspect of national parks. Part of justifying the placement of nature reserves in a space-limited area like Cape Town is to evaluate the human perception of these parks in terms of recreational, cultural and spiritual value. To do this the students were stationed at four sites within the greater Table Mountain National Park including Cape Point, Boulders Beach, Silvermine and Table Mountain itself where they conducted interviews with any and all cooperative tourists they could find. These questionnaires were cleverly designed to gather demographic information and to establish the reasons why people visit parks and what their perceptions of these parks are. This was a great way for the students to spend more time enjoying Cape Town but also to gain a better understanding of the human component of conservation. After now spending a full ten days in Cape Town it was well and truly time to move on.



Clockwise from top: Blair and Deana interviewing tourists. Kelly meets an African Penguin. Jess gives a thumbs up to an Ostrich family. Ceci and Leigh at Cape Point



I am writing this newsletter from the Potberg Environmental Education centre within the De Hoop Nature Reserve, a few hundred kilometers up the east coast from Cape Town, where we have been based for the past ten days. We took a slow and relaxing drive from Cape Town and made sure to stop in the quaint seaside town of Hermanus, a world famous whale watching destination. Southern Right Whales migrate to these waters to breed from September to November and we were lucky enough to see several of these majestic beasts performing in the bay. De Hoop Nature Reserve encompasses both terrestrial and marine ecosystems which made it the perfect place to concurrently conduct our final two FFPs. Early in the course Alexa, Cristina, Nicole and Kyle (amongst others), had expressed a keen interest in marine biology and we hope this desire was satisfied by having Cape Town-based marine biologist Dr Maya Pfaff lead an FFP on the ecology of the intertidal rocky shores. For three consecutive mornings unsuspecting beach goers could be surprised by the sight of wetsuit-clad students submerged in rock pools counting every piece of algae and each urchin they could see whilst occasionally fondling an unfortunate octopus or starfish.



From top: Nate found a crab! Deanna with a very clever mollusk. Maya directs the team on their first day of marine fieldwork



Top: Karen helps Allison and Audra set up their bat meters in windy fynbos. Right: Corrie handles a bat while the students inspect



If our mornings were spent engulfed in the underwater world, our evenings were spent imagining a nocturnal life of flight. We were led by bat scientists Dr Corrie Schoeman and Dr Samantha Hockey in an experimental project looking at how light pollution might affect the emergence of bats out of a cave. Bat echolocation recording technology was used to monitor bat activity non-invasively but they also caught bats using mist-nets which allowed the students to get up close and personal with these truly incredible creatures. After three days of exciting field work interspersed by fascinating lectures on marine and bat ecology we unfortunately had to say good bye to these visiting faculty members and get working on the next academic deliverable...

OTS students never cease to impress when it comes to presentations and public speaking and this was certainly true for the talks presented at the OTS Fall 2014 Conservation Seminar Series. Each student selected an issue or topic related to the field of conservation biology and was given a ten minute slot to educate their peers, as they could now be considered experts on the matter. Over two days we covered topics ranging from the ethics of bringing extinct species back to life to what the roles of policy makers are in controlling the trade of exotic pets. Needless to say, we all walked away from the talks having acquired a lot more knowledge on the world of conservation biology.



The class working on their history and culture essays



Hannah presents her talk on bush meat trade

From here we will get back on a green jet plane and fly out of Cape Town and back north to Johannesburg before re-entering the Kruger National Park- it feels like ages since we've seen a lion! Once there the students will hit the ground running with exams, biodiversity collections and the grande finale- independent projects. So to hear more about what the last leg of this adventure reveals, stay tuned for the final installment of the OTS newsletter for Fall 2014!

**Thank you
The OTS crew;
Jordan, Karen, Don, Jason, Mdu, Philip, Colleen and Laurence**



Southmost OTS students in Africa!

With the field work and seminars out of the way the students have been given a few days to catch up with their other academic deliverables including their history and culture essay set by Lannie Birch at the beginning of the course. Although it seems like a long time since this essay was set, it's been good for the students to mull over their topics as they move through the different cultures of South Africa and become exposed to more of the diverse aspects that make this country what it is. On their day off we pried the students away from their laptops for a drive to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost point of Africa and the supposed convergence of the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Regardless of whether this oceanographic claim is strictly true, it's still a great place for fun photos and novelty of being the southernmost person in Africa never gets old.