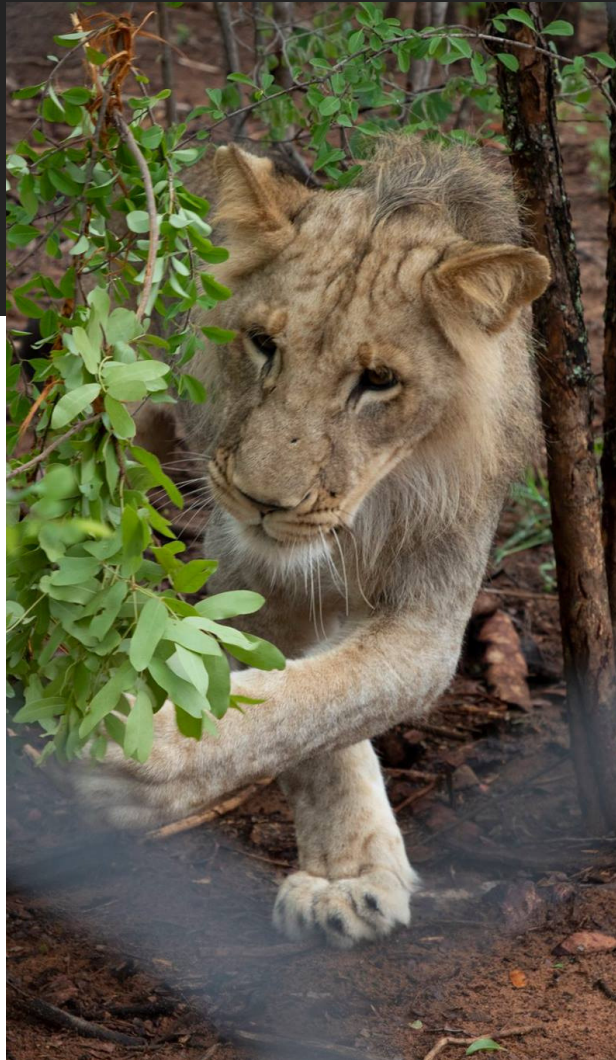


HELPING VICTORIA FALLS

BY JOSHUA OWENS



This is a photo journal of Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe and a story of the experiences I, Josh Owens, encountered while volunteering for an organization called African Impact/Lion Encounter. The purpose of this journal is to motivate and inspire others to volunteer for this important & amazing organization! I hope to prompt others who read my journey & gaze upon these photos, to take this awesome adventure someday so they too can take part in helping reintroduce some of the African wildlife who are endangered from becoming extinct. Volunteers also get the opportunity to help improve living conditions for not only the amazing animals but also people of Victoria Falls. This experience you could have will help you realize that you are capable of making such a great impact in this world.

Introduction

Just a day before arriving in Victoria Falls, I had no idea what to expect. A month before that, I had no idea what it would feel like to be traveling to a third world country to help out for a good cause. Don't get me wrong, I had done other volunteer projects prior to this one but nothing quite as involved or as far away from home. This whole idea of volunteering in Victoria Falls was introduced to me through my good friend Duncan who's cousin works for the African Impact organization that invites people from all around the world to volunteer. Duncan and I brought this information to the parents and they came up with the idea of letting my friend and I go alone. We found out, however, that it was necessary to bring someone at least eighteen years of age so my brother, Matt, was able to chaperone for us. At first, I thought this idea was crazy. I couldn't believe my parents were really letting me go all the way across the world to pick up lion poop for two weeks, with only my friend and my brother. However, as I learned more about what all we would be doing, and all the cool sights we would feast our eyes upon, the idea really started to excite me. I was hesitant of the traveling responsibilities, and everything seemed like such a big commitment, but I figured this unique experience would look quite nice on applications and resumes for the future. Little did I know, the experience itself would have the biggest impact of all.

Getting ready for the trip was a little difficult, both physically and emotionally, but the emotions didn't kick in until we were about to leave. We started ordering life straws, money belts, and much more to accommodate for what we might need. After months of planning the actual volunteer trip, we made plans to first travel up to Duncan's house in Vermont. After staying there for a few days we would travel to England and enjoy a week there with our friend Tim. Once the week in England was up, we would travel to our final destination: Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

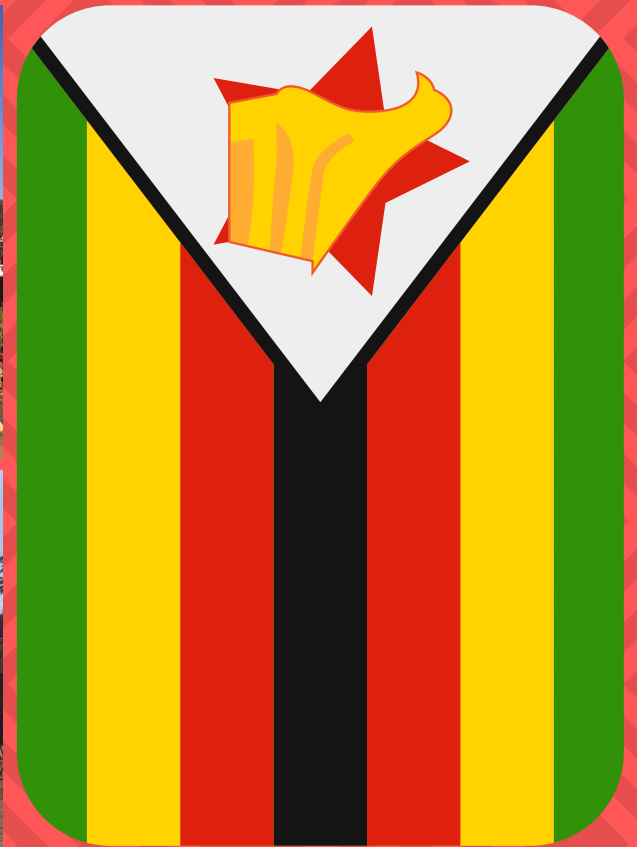


Before Duncan, Matt, and I walked out the Victoria Falls airport doors, we were greeted with a group of soulful African musicians singing in Ndebele. After that we went outside to meet a guy with the name Handsome who would transport us to the developing lodge we would stay at for the very first day. I was amazed by how different the atmosphere was in my mind versus what I was actually seeing. On the way to the lodge I spent the whole time gazing out the window to see people walking along side the roads for miles, flat and somewhat barren landscaping, and hardly any animals all while being engaged in a conversation with Handsome about some marathon he ran. The first three pictures are the very first pictures I took during this amazing experience. They are showing the lodge we first stayed in that was still being developed. The last picture is a photo of Duncan, Matt, and I all enjoying a night at the local Three Monkeys Restaurant before the night was over. In the morning we would be getting picked up by the volunteer organization to move into the lodge we would be staying at for the rest of our time there.



The morning of the second day at Victoria Falls, we got ready in about thirty minutes at the developing lodge and waited to be picked up by the volunteering organization. We would be brought to the lodge where we would stay for the rest of the time there. These are a couple of pictures I took when we first got there. There were not many volunteers there initially, because the old volunteers were leaving and the new-coming ones were on the way. We met a few people who had just arrived, like us, and some that were about to leave. We decided to all join in on a game of cards and I spent the time trying to learn what some of the volunteer projects and experiences were like. Each of the previous volunteers had nothing but great things to say about them.





After meeting all the newly-arrived volunteers, we headed out on safari busses to go and check out the whole town of Victoria Falls. The most vivid aspect of the town I can remember is seeing all the smiling, young faces of children we would pass by and the state of poverty this beautiful town was in. This eye-opening drive was when I first realized how important my presence was as a part of this volunteering organization. The picture in the top right corner is one of the only hospitals in the town.

After driving around for a couple of hours, we came to our first stop on the volunteer truck to meet and walk with the lion cubs we would be taking care of for the next couple of weeks. We all got off the truck and first had a lesson about what we were about to do with the lions, safety, and facts about how the lions of Africa are rapidly becoming extinct. I had never had such preconceived intimidation of an animal in my life. Luckily, when we walked off to see the lions we were accompanied by experienced lion handlers. I will never forget the first time I laid my eyes on these wonderful, intimidating, lazy creatures. What fascinated me most at the end of the day was how well we bonded with these creatures and how fast we were able to do so. We started off walking near the lions and by the end of our walk we were able to pat them on the back when they sat down for some shade. The middle and bottom pictures are of my brother Matt and my friend Duncan taking advantage of the laziness of the lions.





On our walk of the first day with the lion cubs, I learned more about these animals then than I had ever learned about them in my lifetime before that day. The names of the four lions we met were Kion, Kalunga, Kamalu, and Shaka which were always fun to say in order. Near the end of our day walk, the lions were getting tired and were ready to go to their enclosure, where they would be protected from poachers and predator lions. Seeing this enclosure opened my eyes entirely and made me realize that these lions needed help and the care we would give them over the next couple of weeks would ultimately lead to letting them go and having them continue to grow up and thrive on their own in the wild. Over the course of the next couple of weeks, we would walk with these lion cubs daily and become more comfortable with them. We would also make toys for them to practice their hunting, feed them vitamin-stuffed meat, and ultimately become a part of their pride.



Our hours of volunteering of Victoria Falls did not solely consist of feeding, playing with, and walking with lions although I could have done just that all day every day. Our schedules were packed with these activities, however we were often given some extra time during the days to either relax at the lodge, or go off and do something else before dinner. Early in the morning and later in the afternoon we would sometimes go on game drives. The objective was to spot as many different animals we could. Sometimes we would record data on what we saw, where we saw them, how many there were, and what time it was when they were spotted. I was told that this data is being used to create and update advanced demographic maps of animals all over Victoria Falls. The data we collected and observations also gave us volunteers a better understanding of the animals' behavior. We would drive all around the national park for hours spotting numerous amazing wild animals. I thoroughly remember enjoying these moments with my fellow volunteers.



Night times in Victoria Falls were some of the best times to have fun there. It was a great time to enjoy a day's hard work with my awesome fellow volunteers. Since the world cup was going on at the time, we would usually go to a local pub to watch, go night time game drive in search of hyenas. I remember one of my favorite nights was when we found a hyena on a night drive. We all hopped up onto the safari truck with bundles of blankets and rode for a couple of hours in hopes of finding some hyenas. We had to bring these red lights with us so we could search for hyenas without scaring them away, since they are nocturnal predators and fear bright lights. We drove around for about an hour before finally settling our eyes on one of these really cool animals. It was actually quite rare to find a hyena at anytime of the day, so we felt very rewarded when we saw it. Going out to find this animal and observing its behavior is also important because hyenas are one of the most common and abundant mammal predators in Africa, so observing where and when we saw this animal and also how it behaved helps gives us a much greater understanding of this amazing animal that plays such an important role in African wildlife. This is one night time event I will never forget.

Each and every day walking with the lions was a fascinating experience that I got more comfortable with as time went on. The lions became very comfortable around and we became more comfortable around them. However, it was sometimes hard to see just how much we were actually helping these lions because of how much I enjoyed interacting with them. The time I truly realized how much we helped these lions is when I saw a post on facebook of the volunteer organization announcing that Kion, Kalunga, Kamalu, and Shaka were all successfully grown up and being released into the wild. The fact that these lions who had been around us humans all their lives were being released to live on their own is truly fascinating and shows how the work that the volunteers put in at Lion Encounter really pays off in a most positive way. There are many problems and challenges that Victoria Falls has to face and the differences in culture is very apparent, but its hard to see all the problems when there is so much beauty to cover it up, even when you're a volunteer confronting them. This is part of what makes volunteering at Lion Encounter in Victoria Falls so amazing and enjoyable.





Victoria Falls' most famous attraction by far is its wonderful waterfalls that have made the list of the the top seven natural wonders of the world. At first, we went to go check the attraction out. For the first weekend of my stay at Victoria Falls, You could have found me, Duncan, and Matt gazing at the breathtaking water rushing into the deep abyss upon arrival. We tried walking to the other end of the falls only to turn back half-way since our shoes were soaked with water from the river crashing at the bottom of the gorge. I was also able to buy a day pass to this amazing attraction and it was worth every penny of the expense. We loved the falls so much that me, Matt, Duncan, and another volunteer named Savannah all decided to participate in some adrenaline activities in the falls a day later. We all took part in ziplining and the horrifying gorge swing featuring a forty-meter free fall at the start. Savannah, being the only adrenaline junkie of the group, was the most excited out of everyone. Everybody else was just scared and ready to get these activities over with despite the incredible views that went along with them. I have to say, despite being deathly afraid at first, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I crazily found to enjoy. So much so that I was jealous when Savannah said she was going to do it all over again next weekend. Overall, this was a perfect weekend well spent with great people at an amazing location after a week of volunteering.

This picture to the right embodies the enjoyment behind volunteering for such a great cause. After a long enjoyable weekend, the lion group was introduced to a new location that was in the process of being built. This was going to eventually be the new main location for the volunteer organization and months after we left it would be the place where all the volunteers stayed. Here we met new lion cubs and were tasked with new responsibilities to help develop this new enclosure site. We made signs and distributed food for wild animals in certain locations so they would stay away from the developing sleeping quarters. This is a picture of a toy giraffe that Duncan and I made for the lion cubs at this enclosure. The purpose for toys like these were to help the lion cubs get used to identifying and hunting wild animals for when they are released to go live on their own. We had a great time collecting the right sticks, leaves, and twine to build this horrendous replica of a giraffe for the lion cubs to play with and tear apart. It was very interesting to see how they interacted with the toys. Volunteering for this organization was fun in so many ways but everything we did was also very important for the reintroduction of the lion population in Zimbabwe.





I was given so many amazing opportunities through the Lion Encounter organization in Victoria Falls from volunteering. One of these opportunities was the chance to go on a day safari trip in Botswana, a country over the border of Zimbabwe. I spent a whole day in this dream land of animals with my friendly volunteers. I saw so many incredible animals and learned a great amount about each and every one of them I saw. The pictures above are pictures of the crocodiles, giraffes, and elephants we saw on top of hippopotamuses, buffalo, a leopard, and much more that I was not able to get a great picture of.



The worst day of the whole two weeks I spent volunteering at Victoria Falls was the day we had to leave. We got up early, got ready quickly, and ate a fast breakfast while waiting for the truck to take us to the airport and the other volunteers leaving with us. Despite being a little homesick, we weren't ready to leave our little lion cubs and the amazing Victoria Falls. We took a long time to say our goodbyes to the people we bonded with so closely over the amazing trip. One person in particular Matt, Duncan, and I bonded with on this trip was Zack the security guard. The group picture on the left is a picture of me, Zack, Duncan, and Matt right before we left. Zack was one of the friendliest and happiest people I met during the whole trip. He would always be smiling and appeared to be having a good time even though he had one of the most boring jobs in the world. Over the trip he sometimes taught us about the Zimbabwe culture, language, and more. This was the last picture I took in Victoria Falls and every time I see it it makes me want to go back. I may sound crazy when I say that volunteering at Victoria Falls felt more like a privileged vacation than a service trip, but that's because what I remember most is that I had one of the best two weeks in my life in a country I was completely unfamiliar with. That sounds like a great vacation to me.

For this photo journal, I was able to reach out to the volunteering organization I was volunteering for and they were able to give great and helpful answers to a number of different questions I asked them. I encourage you to take the following questions and answers into consideration. I can guarantee that you will not have the same experience as I did if you volunteer for this organization, however, I can guarantee you that the experience you can have with this organization will be truly amazing.

**1) Why should people travel across the world to help out with the Wildlife Encounter?
- what value would these volunteers bring?**

Volunteering abroad is one of the most popular ways to gain new life experiences and become a global citizen. This experience makes students more attractive to universities and make job-seekers more attractive to employers, particularly when they volunteer in their field of proposed work or study, such as education, healthcare or natural sciences. We believe that volunteering is a form of sustainable tourism. It minimises the negative impacts of touristic activities on the environment, by contributing to maintaining and enhancing conservation through the return of revenues to protected areas, and the physical contribution of man-hours where needed.

Whether altruistic or self-serving, volunteers contribute both time and money. The majority of their payments stays within the destination country and goes to support the affiliated non-profit organization on the ground, which in turn is able to keep its charitable operations running, provide employment and support local businesses through trade and services. Volunteers also physically contribute by giving a large proportion of their time to perform hands-on work to benefit the non-profit organizations, local government institutions, civil service institutes and local communities.

2) What is the ultimate goals of the organization in the area of Victoria Falls more specifically?

We run 4 different projects in the area of Victoria Falls: Lion Conservation & Game Park Management, Wildlife Research, Cultural Exchange and Photography Internship. Each of them has different project projects with it's own long and short term goals. As an example, find attached detailed project development plan which involves goals & objectives of our Human Wildlife Conflict Mitigation project. Volunteers across all 4 projects get involved into human wildlife mitigation once a week.

3) What needs the most help in the organization and who can help?

Anyone can help! We encourage volunteers of all ages and walks of life join one of our projects and offer their time and skills. We know it can be daunting with so many projects on offer but we encourage volunteers let us know their skills and interests so we can help advise on the most suitable project.

4) Has any of the research you have done contributed to any scientific breakthroughs?

Absolutely, as an example find attached Wildlife Research Projects 2017 Annual Report that was compiled by our Conservation Research Manager Angela Ferguson. The data collected in the Zambezi National Park are used by conservation organizations to make animal and reserve management decisions in the interest of both the animals and local communities.

Below are links to the annual report document from question 4 and the Lion Encounter website where you can get involved and possibly have an amazing unique experience that will make you want to come back in the future like I did!

[http://www.lionencounter.com/
volunteer](http://www.lionencounter.com/volunteer)

2017 Annual Report