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## UGA Study Abroad to South Africa: Adventure of a Lifetime

By Ami Alese Flowers, Warnell School of Forestry and Natural

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*Ami Flowers, a senior in the Warnell School's wildlife program, spent a month in South Africa this past summer as a student in Dr. John Carroll's study abroad in South Africa International Wildlife Management class. After the class was over, she received the opportunity to extend her stay to complete both Field Guide (level one) and Trails Guide certification from the Field Guide Association of South Africa. Below is an account of her adventures in South Africa (originally published in the Fall 2007 edition of The Africanist, the newsletter for the UGA African Studies Institute).*

"I want to go home." That is all I could think about as I am lying in my sleeping bag the first night of my trip. "What in the world was I thinking, coming to South Africa?" I lie there, shaking, as strange and unfamiliar noises break the silence of the night. "Was that a lion? It sounds close. What if I fall asleep and it eats me? I want to go home." These thoughts echoed throughout my brain, but I eventually fell asleep and was not eaten by a lion—or any other creature for that matter. I did not go home, and because of this, I was rewarded with a grand adventure that changed my life.

Ever since I heard about the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources' study abroad to South Africa, I wanted to go. This past summer, my dream

came true and I flew off with eight of my fellow students to the untamed wilds of Kruger National Park. Our camp, located in the Makuleke Concession, consisted of stilted tents with thatched roofs. Although there was no electricity, we still enjoyed the comforts of home: beds with mattresses and sheets, along with the most important furnishing; a full bathroom with running-hot water.

Our days began at the brink of dawn with the drums beating at 5:30 am. We first ate a small breakfast of cereal or the local favorite, rusks, along with a cup of instant coffee or hot tea. Burning daylight, we set out on our morning walks, traversing the South African bushveld in search of those creatures that we had heard during the night. Each day, our trek on foot led us to new and diverse terrains, whether we were navigating through mopane thickets, scaling basalt ridges, walking through pan drop seed laden floodplains, climbing rocky gorges, or discovering hidden-natural springs. At every turn a scenic backdrop, a "Kodak moment," and disbelief that such a place, so beautiful and so natural, actually existed—undisturbed by human hands.

After our morning walks, we returned to camp at around 10:30 am to indulge ourselves upon a most spectacular breakfast—this trip had no shortage of food. Nine hungry students gorged themselves on eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes and cheese, beans, toast, and fresh fruit salad. Our feet rested and bellies full, the midday hour consisted of a lecture by our esteemed professor Dr. John Carroll, or our courageous South African field guide and master of birding, Mr. Bruce Lawson. Even our other South African instructor, Brett Greenaway, welding extraordinaire and field guide as well, would enlighten us during our lecture sessions. Topics ranged from basic survival-bush skills, rifle handling, orientation and navigation, conservation management, geology, astronomy, weather and climate, to more biology, ecology, and natural history based subjects on botany, arthropods, reptiles, amphibians, birds, fish, and mammals that resided in the Makuleke habitat. We also learned how field guides play an important role as interpreters between humans and the natural world.

After an hour of lecturing, students would usually disperse to their respected tents for a midday siesta or to take in some much needed study time—catching up on scientific names. Life at camp was always eventful, whether we were

enjoying a nice game of frisbee or sitting on our veranda watching an elephant (less than 5 meters from us) strolling along the firebreak munching on foliage from the nyala berry. We were guests in the animals' home, hence the camp had no fences, and a constant stream of creatures roamed in and out. The so called "terrorists," baboons and vervet monkeys, made their daily appearance in the tree tops, while impalas and nyalas fed on tasty grasses around our tents—there was always a vast array of colorful birds around the bird bath as well. Convening at 2:30pm for a light lunch of sandwiches and snacks, we headed back out to the field for either an afternoon walk or a ride in the Land Rover. Adventuring outside of camp, we were always fortunate to see numerous animal sightings as we drove to the far corners of the concession. A dazzle of zebras, a sounder of warthogs, herds of elephants and cape buffalo—I could not believe the abundance of wildlife! From hippopotamus and crocodiles swimming in the Luvuvhu River, to the graceful flights of racket-tailed rollers above the canopies of the fever tree forests—every bend in the road revealed a new and miraculous creature of nature.

Riding on the Land Rover was always a fun voyage into the great unknown, especially for one lucky person who sat on the front tracker seat. As afternoon turned into night, the tracker turned on the spotlight and cast the beam upon the roadsides, hoping the eye shine from a nocturnal creature would catch the light's rays. Bushbaby, after bushbaby, there must have been a hundred, but on moon-lit nights we were lucky enough to catch glimpses of African civets, small-spotted genets, and the sleek and solitary leopard—hunting for prey in the shadow of dark.

Back to camp, dinner was waiting for us, whether it was rice and stir fry, spaghetti, or a braai with succulent meats cooked over an open flame. Conversation was always lively at the table as we talked in the glow of lanterns. At the end of the day, we reminisced and told stories around the camp fire or sometimes enjoyed an evening watching David Attenborough. I have never seen so many stars in one night sky, or witnessed not one single glimmer of a street light on the horizon.

For 28 days I lived, breathed, studied, and became apart of South Africa. As I

laid there the last night of the UGA course, new thoughts ran through my head, "I don't want to go home. I don't want to leave this place. I like hearing the lions growling at night, the umbrella thorn pods raining down like snow flakes as the wind blows. I don't want to go home." I realized I had fallen in love—the landscape, the animals, the people, and the South African way of life.

Photo by Ami Flowers

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Last modified Mon, 19 Nov 2007 12:30:06 +0000

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