

CELESTE SPINK 2019 GAP YEAR REPORT

Introduction

When planning my gap year, I knew that I wanted to mix the long-awaited travels with some volunteering or work abroad to make the most of this one-off period of time. India had been on the bucket list from the start based on the many positive accounts I'd received from family and friends; and as a future vet I also wanted to spend some time working with animals.

My travels in summary

Jan-Feb

I was lucky enough to be put in contact with a Kenyan family who run Offbeat Horse Safaris and occasionally take on gap year students to help with the horses and hosting at their family home near Nakuru in Kenya. This was the dream cocktail of Africa plus riding and so I was thrilled to be able to spend two months there at the start of my travels. The time flew by and before I knew it I was on my way to India.

March-April

I spent the next month or so travelling round Goa, Hampi and Rajasthan with two Marlborough friends before meeting up with a prep school friend and heading up North to explore Ladakh and the Himashal Pradesh.

May-June

After a quick trip to Nepal (to sort out visa issues) we completed our time in India with six weeks of volunteering at the Sambhali Trust, a non-profit organisation based in Jodhpur. Sambhali was set up in 2007 by a local family to support women in the city of Jodhpur and the surrounding villages. Many of these women are severely underprivileged, considered 'untouchable' by much of society. Sambhali Trust (meaning 'Rising of the deprived women') aims to empower through educational programs, vocational training and social services in nine different centres. The women are taught to sew along with basic maths and English, the end goal being greater 'self-esteem, unity and independence' (the Sambhali motto). To help with this process of empowerment, the women graduate after a year and are given a sewing machine. This allows them to maintain their independence by taking in sewing jobs, giving them the means to become more self-sufficient.

Kenya and Offbeat Safaris

There were 75 horses at Deloraine (the family home of the late Tristan and Cindy Voorspuy the founders of Offbeat Safaris), 50 of whom needed regular exercise especially when a safari was on the horizon. The day would begin with a 6.30am stable round, checking the horses and helping with the morning feeding. Riding began at 8am so we'd usually have time for a cup of tea and a biscuit before safari exercise and schooling began. When Cindy had guests staying this would often be replaced with a morning hack around the surrounding countryside; up in the hills or down in the gullies. One morning was spent

hopping on and off our horses, pushing and cutting our way through the thick undergrowth of the more heavily wooded hills trying (in vain) to find a lost crater. We did come across some stunning views though so it was all worth the blisters. Whatever the plan for the morning, you always felt you'd earned your breakfast by the time you sat down for the best meal of the day (I could rave about Deloraine breakfasts for paragraphs; sticky brown sugar in porridge, strong Kenyan coffee with marmalade toast made from bread baked that morning, fresh fruit and eggs made to order from the farm's chickens). The remainder of the day was spent doing odd jobs around the property. I perfected a number of skills during my time there including milking cows, counting sheep, gardening, tack fitting, tick removal, fence mending, wall painting, office work... And then we'd ride again at 4pm.

There were quite a few young horses who were being broken in by Megan (Cindy's no.2 and a great leader and role model for all things equestrian). I found it fascinating to witness the breaking in process from start to finish and even get involved with the slightly more experienced youngsters. The subtle ways in which the horses were introduced to the next step without even realising, and all in a firm yet gentle manner, built a trust and effortless relationship between horse and rider. I will particularly remember the sounds that Megan incorporated into her teachings – you knew if the horse you were riding had been a pupil of hers simply because they instinctively changed gear with a click (up) or a pigeon-like coo (down). “NOW you're riding” from Megan, confirmed to me that under her expert tuition my horsemanship significantly improved during my two months in Kenya.

Equally memorable was the fact that I gained six aunts in the gorgeous local women working in the kitchen. Jane in particular took it upon herself to teach me Swahili every morning, much to the amusement of the others as I bombarded them with “jambo jambo” and “asante sana”. Not only did they constantly brighten my day with their radiant smiles but I gradually got to know more about their lives beyond Deloraine. These were women who had been working there for up to 40 years (Wilfreda the main cook was around before the Voorspuys lived at Deloraine) and I will be forever grateful for their advice and kind words.

Deloraine also acts as an informal hotel to guests from all over the world. Clients would often spend a day or two in luxury before or after the adventure that was an Offbeat safari. Cindy was also the most generous of hosts which resulted in a near constant stream of visitors passing through, be it from England, Australia, Colombia, Canada, Uganda, Arizona, Germany and of course other parts of Kenya. All of these visitors, whether equine dentist or paying guest, were treated like royalty. Hosting was the other side of my job description (thankfully I do actually like people as much as horses) and through this I met a vast array of individuals including a horse acupuncturist (who also claimed to have a healing gift), two waddies (cowboys), a medicine farmer, a couple of felt-tip destroying toddlers, and 12 equine dentists. Interestingly it still took them two days and a LOT of sawing, filing and drilling to get through all the horses! Aware of my future veterinary plans, Cindy ensured that I was present whenever the vet was called out. As an active stud, castrations and pregnancy diagnosis of the horses were a regular occurrence.

An experience that will be with me forever was a ten day riding safari in the Masai Mara; one of the most incredible experiences I could have hoped to get from a year off. The safari was mobile one which means the whole camp is packed up and pitched again at a new site every two or three days. On moving days we would ride for up to seven hours to cover the distance between camps and this also meant that every flat plain we came across had to be

covered in a gallop. Siestas were a sticky but necessary affair in the heat of the day and game drives using the jeeps on non-moving days allowed guests to have a break from the saddle and get close to wildlife in a mildly safer manner. Every day brought new escapades and so I can't recount every tale but here are some highlights:

Tuesday 19th Feb

Leopard sighting! The stunning creature was lounging in a tree without a care in the world. We gazed upon this elusive beast until it had had enough of posing and slinked away into the undergrowth. The big cat count continued as we came across a mother cheetah and her three cubs snoozing under a tree. As if putting on a show she then decided to give her children a stalking lesson (fortunately we were not the targets).

Thursday 21st Feb

The evening ride included a canter amongst zebra and giraffe. Giraffe move both their right legs at the same time and then their left, creating the graceful illusion that they are running in slow-motion. What an experience.

Saturday 23rd Feb

At the end of a long moving day we were stalked by three lionesses on our way up to the Escarpment. Nerves were stretched as we were forced to walk a short distance and then turn to face them, to repeatedly stop them in their tracks. This continued up through a wooded area (with the threat of elephants channelling us away from the lower ground) until we finally made it into open bush and the last of the lionesses gave up. Our guide, Simon, announced that it was safe to have a gallop now and with a "race you to that tree" we set off to release the tension. Unfortunately Anamaria, one of our Columbian guests, either did not hear or did not understand... As we reached the top of the hill and slowed to a halt I turned to find her white as a sheet. "Are you ok Anamaria?" I asked. "Are the lions still chasing us?!" she stuttered. It seems she was under the impression that the lioness had made chase and we were fleeing for our lives. For me, it was quite something to feel the fluttering of my horse's heartbeat as it strained against its instinct to flee, mirroring my own realisation of vulnerability. We did not carry guns on safari, only a stock whip that when cracked had the same effect as a gunshot. Its effectiveness was demonstrated when we suddenly came across a hippo blocking our path having crossed the crocodile infested Mara river.

Sunday 24th Feb

This morning we watched the sun rise from the incredible vantage point of the Escarpment. Looking out over the mist shrouded plains Megan pointed out the trees that give the Masai Mara its name – land of spots. The flat topped acacia trees, when seen from above, create a spotted effect on the vast plains. Hot air balloons float amongst the clouds as others discover this for themselves whilst dark swirls of buffalo and wildebeest far below hint at the abundance of life that makes the Mara such a special place.

My time in Kenya - Final Thoughts

Seeing so much wildlife in its natural habitat gave me a heightened awareness of the diversity and beauty of our planet, and the importance of conservation to preserve the few pockets of nature that are left. I'm not sure where my veterinary career will take me in the

end but I have a newfound desire to contribute to the conservation of our wildlife in whatever way I can.

Jodhpur (India) and The Sambhali Trust

By the time we started our volunteering in Jodhpur the temperatures in Rajasthan were soaring into the high forties. This took some getting used to. All the Sambhali volunteers stayed at Durag Niwas guesthouse, just outside the old city, which is run by Govind, the founder of Sambhali. It was also home to his family including his wife Mukta who acted as mother to all of us and provided much advice and support over the coming weeks.

On our first day Theo (an old prep school buddy) and I were assigned to one of the nine empowerment centres. As it was a Friday, we were told we didn't need to prepare a lesson but simply introduce ourselves. It didn't work out this way as we were immediately overridden by the eager group of girls that met us at the Abhivyakti centre (the Hindu word for 'expression'). Our introductions soon turned into a lesson on the phonetics of my name; "C as in circle" as well as "what is your favourite hobby" to which many replied "studying". No pressure then.

In addition to Abhivyakti I ended up taking another class on my own in the mornings at Fatima centre before joining Theo at Abhivyakti. Fresh out of school and with no teaching experience there were times when I felt completely inadequate as 15 girls sat looking expectantly up at me. There were also moments of frustration when the language barrier compromised the effectiveness of our lessons. However I slowly came to realise that you were helping provide so much more than an English lesson. These girls came to the centres to learn but they also found friendship, community and fun, especially on Wednesdays when we gave workshops that aim to broaden their knowledge of the world around them and also gave them a chance to relax and be creative. As another volunteer so eloquently put it: "The sisterhood these women create through messing around in class, joking, laughing, interacting with one another is, I have learnt to be the essence of the Sambhali Trust. As they sit embroidering, these women are stitching a sisterhood."

Since the Sambhali Trust was set up there has been a growing awareness of its role in improving the lives of women in Rajasthan. During my volunteering period the charity received huge recognition and endorsement from the Maharaja (king) of Jodhpur who attended the annual graduation ceremony as guest of honour. The fight for women's rights has also been taken up in other parts of the city. Bobby, a local woman who runs a henna parlour with her two sisters, strives to help local women by encouraging them to sew in their home and then helps them to sell the finished products. I spent many hours chatting to Bobby and her sister Pinkie discussing the opportunities and significant barriers for women around the world. They told us about their mission to empower women in India and the struggles they faced because of this. The lack of support they received was quite shocking; many of the locals would purposefully misdirect tourists away from their shop and if they hung any textiles outside they ran the risk of ruin by cow excrement. They felt so empowered by the education they had received and yet they were condemned for trying to stand up for women and their right to go to school and live independent lives. This became a familiar theme during our time in Jodhpur; one morning a 15 year old girl was suddenly

taken out of my class to meet her fiancé, whilst many that could still be considered children brought their own children along and had their lessons side by side.

Although most of the volunteers at Sambhali were female, male volunteers made an important contribution by demonstrating respect and equality between sexes. Our class found it very surprising that Theo and I were neither married nor in a relationship but simply good friends.

Jay, a young Indian man and volunteer who was a rare feminist, broke the mould. He wrote an inspirational post on Instagram, with his words, coming from an Indian man, making a real impression on me: "Something we always heard growing up: girls, boys mature a lot slower than you, just be patient. Something we never heard growing up: boys, girls mature a lot faster than you do, look at them as examples. Funny how maturing early is rarely used to give girls freedom or independence, but instead used as an excuse for boys' actions." To hear about the struggles of women from an Indian insider, and a male one at that, was a real eye-opener and I believe it is people like him that will make the real difference in a culture where people are so set in their ways.

My time in India – Final Thoughts

I feel that my time at Sambhali taught me an incredible amount. The majority of the girls and women at the centres are from low castes and some have backgrounds of physical and sexual abuse. I've come away with an understanding of real lives and society in India, and a far greater appreciation of how fortunate I've been to have had access to such an amazing education as well as the freedom and responsibility that comes with it. These women live in a world where their every move is dictated by men, and to break the mould by pursuing an education can be met with resistance and disgust. Back at home we are often culprits in treating education like a chore yet these women have to fight hard for the knowledge that we so take for granted.

Advice for future gap year travellers

I would thoroughly recommend trying to do a bit of travelling and work abroad on your own as it's a great way of meeting new people and taking yourself out of your comfort zone. There is always the element of safety to be considered but if you find the right environment and a job that provides purpose as well as roots and familiar faces then you really shouldn't have much to worry about.

Your concept of time changes completely having left school and the confines of a timetabled term. When I first heard about Sambhali I was told that the recommended volunteering stint was at least two months. I felt that this was a significant chunk of my gap year. However, as Sarah Harrington (a founding trustee) explained, it takes time to find your feet in any new environment, especially one such as Sambhali where you are slowly building relationships with the other people working there as well as your students. This couldn't be more true. It is not a 'voluntourism' experience. Looking back over my time away most of my favourite stories are about my time working in Kenya and volunteering in Jodhpur. Not only did I make some amazing friends during my time there, but I got to know another place well enough to accidentally call it home on occasion. So the biggest tip I can give anyone

planning their gap year now is don't be afraid to put down some roots for a while; the time will fly by (and I mean fly) and you will come back with far richer experiences having done more than skip through the main tourist attractions and snapped a few selfies with some locals. Whether you decide to volunteer for a charity, find a job, or just make a base to venture out from, it will be worth it. Even better if you can make this relevant to your future vocation; after all, your gap year is a rare chance to do something completely different.

Finally, remember to consider the climate when making your plans; remaining in India until mid-June probably wasn't the smartest move. You also have to be aware of cultural sensitivities. One of my worst blunders was accidentally teaching the topic of food during Ramadan when half my class had to listen to me describe adjectives such as 'saltly, crispy, juicy' when they were mid-fast. I realised (too late) the torture that I had been putting them through (they aren't allowed to eat or drink from sunrise to sunset) on Friday. "Whoops" doesn't cover it.

A FINAL WORD

Having a year off has definitely broadened my horizons and I know the exposure to different cultures, values and traditions, and the maturity gained from a year out, will be invaluable to my future veterinary studies at the Royal Vet College. The financial support I received from Kempson Rosedale played such an important part in enabling me to carry out these plans. Thank you.

[Scroll down for links and photos.]

Useful links

Offbeat website - <http://www.offbeatsafaris.com>

Sambhali website - <http://www.sambhali-trust.org/>

KENYA



INDIA

