

Jessica Monk's Story



Arriving in South Africa

Having been given the opportunity to travel to South Africa I arrived full of dreams and expectations. The Game Park where I was to live and work for the next three weeks had approximately 13 hectares of land to its name and housed Giraffe, Wildebeest, Blesbuck, Caraculs, Meercats, Crocodiles, Zebra, Bush-pig, Tigers and of-course Lions.

When I arrived there were around 20 other international volunteers also working on the same programme which was great as this meant I had plenty of people from different backgrounds and cultures to interact with; there were people from Israel, Norway, Austria, Holland, Australia, Canada, USA and of-course paid employees from South Africa.

The day would begin at 5:30 feeding the babies. This involved preparing their mixture into bottles and hand-feeding them, cleaning their sleeping pen and using cloths to imitate their mother's tongue to help them urinate and defecate (they can't do this by themselves for at least a month). Then it would be time to feed and walk the Cubs and Tots.

One of my main aims of the project was to be able to overcome my shyness in terms of leading others and being the focus of the public's attention. By being thrown in at the deep end and with no-where to hide I was able to lead a school group and talk for ages with random people about the Lions and about the volunteer programme. At the end of the day (usually between 17:30 and 19:30) the cubs and tots would be walked again, the tot's would be given their supper (more rib meat) and the Caraculs and Meercats would have been fed and cuddled.

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Daily Tasks

As a volunteer my day started between 5:30 and 7:00 depending which set of lion cubs I was in charge of that day. During my stay there were three sets of cubs to take care of; 4 two-week olds (Babies) (including 1 rare white cub name Cliff – the name is unfortunate I know but he was named by a sponsor who was a fan of Cliff Richard.), 4 2-months olds (Cubs) and 5 8-month olds (Tots). As you can imagine they were all a handful.

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Then it would be time to feed and walk the Cubs and Tots. As the Cubs were still very small it would be a matter of mixing tiny pieces of meat into porridge to encourage them to try and chew and for the Tots, they would be hand fed rib meat (horse or cow usually). Now it would be 9:00am and the Game Park would be open to paying tourists. Therefore, in between feeding and cleaning the rest of the animals and repeating the mornings feeding duties every 3 hours for the babies and cubs it would be my responsibility to look after the public.

Upliftment Projects

As well as being involved in the Game Parks conservation duties I also had the opportunity to help the owners of the Game Park at the local township school which they sponsored. This meant each week I went to the local school which educated disadvantaged children between the ages of 2-6. Sharlee was the teacher of the 60 children that went to the school.

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Upon arrival we sat down together and she explained to me about life in the township where all the children came from and about her plans for the school. Basically children in South Africa are supposed to pay to go to school however the majority of families in the township cannot afford to send their children to school, therefore, Sharlee allows those families that can pay to pay but those that cant she allows into the school for free. Whilst she realises this is unfair and pushes the school's capacity to the max she knows it is the only way these children will receive an education and keeps them away from the recruiting gangs.

Results

Overall, I accomplished my dreams and ambitions of learning more about the beautiful but rare species of animal native to Africa. Being able to feed and cuddle the white lion cubs was an amazing experience and one I'll never forget. Gaining an insight into Africa's Conservation activities has also inspired me to learn more and I am already planning more trips to Africa. Moreover, I have made special friends from all over the world, ones I'll cherish forever.

From a development point of view I have certainly improved my international employability simply by just being in the surroundings that I was. I had no-one to rely on but me which was a fantastic experience; I now know that I could easily set up home in a foreign country and work effectively as part of an international team. My public speaking has improved dramatically and my ability to lead a group is so much better.