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**Guilt Trips: a Personal Perspective on the Ethical Quandaries of
Travel in the Developing World**

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In the spring after my third year of university study I was confronted with a dilemma. The field study class, in which I was enrolled, scheduled to take place in East Africa, was cancelled. The aim of the class was to educate, raise awareness and expose students to very different cultures and geographies, some of which we might have studied, but had not yet personally encountered. It seemed to be the perfect way to experience another culture and witness the complex issues of the developing world. When the trip was cancelled, I knew I nevertheless wanted to travel in Africa, but I was no longer sure how to do so. As an international development student, currently learning about the various issues surrounding the exploitation of others' cultures, marginalization of the poor and paternalistic attitudes towards the Global South – all traits often attributed to forms of tourism in the developing world – I was left wondering if there was an “ethical” way of travelling through Africa. After hearing strong critiques of the exploitative nature of “mainstream tourism” in the developing world, as well as criticisms over the paternalistic nature and general ineffectiveness of volunteer tourism, I felt backpacking was the best possible way to see Africa, guilt free. However, upon reflection, it seems that even backpacking in developing countries presents ethical dilemmas. My travels revealed to me both the positive and negative aspects that accompany all forms of travel within developing countries. Upon academically exploring these aspects, and particularly the way youth travel in the Global South, still the question remains, do all trips to the developing world need to be “guilt trips”? This paper aims to layout the theoretical perspectives of travel in the Global South, particularly volunteer tourism and backpacking, and connect it to my own personal experience as a relevant case study. This investigation will illustrate the boundaries and dilemmas faced by travelers who hope to travel ethically and display “good human conduct” while abroad in the developing world.

When identifying the different ways I could travel to and explore Africa, it was impossible to ignore volunteer tourism as a possibility. Volunteer tourism is currently a popular and ever-growing trend, particularly among Canadian youth, and especially students like myself, travelling to the developing world. This proposed alternative to mainstream tourism has become a burgeoning global industry, with an estimated 65, 000 Canadians having gone overseas through the nation's chief volunteer-sending organizations since 1960, in addition to the many others who take part in church missions, corporate projects and government or university sponsored internships¹.

These numbers may grow even more, as recent data from a tourism researching firm suggests that the most significant growth in the volunteer tourism sector has occurred since 1990, with estimates that 1.6 million people around the world take part in volunteer tourism activities every year². Similarly, scholars Raymond & Hall have also noticed a boost in the volunteer tourism sector, noting a "rapid increase in the number of individuals taking part in short-term, organized volunteer tourism programmes"³. Yet, as Lee & Woosnam point out, volunteer tourism, and, perhaps more importantly, these volunteer tourists' personal "transformations" have, until recently, received, "relatively little attention from researchers in the field"⁴. This is an area that needs more attention, particularly in Canada, where many youth-based volunteer projects are funded by tax payers. As journalist Rachel Mendelson identifies, the Canadian

¹ Mendelson, Rachel. "Helping the World. And me. Is volunteering about saving the world or enhancing a resumé?". *Macleans*. September 17, 2008. Retrieved Oct. 16, 2010 from: http://www.macleans.ca/culture/lifestyle/article.jsp?content=20080917_60473_60473/.

² Guttentag, Daniel A. "The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism". *International Journal of Tourism Research*. 11. March 26, 2009. 538.

³ Raymond, E. M., & Hall, C. M. "The development of cross-cultural (mis)understanding through volunteer tourism". *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 16(5). 2008. 538.

⁴ Lee, Jung Yoon & Kyle M. Woosnam. "Voluntourist Transformation and the Theory of Integrative Cross-Cultural Adaptation". *Annals of Tourism Research*. Vol. 37, No. 4. 2010. 1186.

International Development Agency (CIDA) has funded more than 4,500 internships abroad in the last decade through the International Youth Internship Program⁵. Each of these placements costs between \$10,000 and \$15,000, in addition to the funding CIDA provides to other organizations such as the World University Service of Canada (WUSC)⁶. Due to such a large amount of money and participation in the volunteer tourism sector, it seems evident that more research and attention should be given to the area. As scholar Rebecca Tiessen states, of both volunteer and study abroad programs aimed at students and youth, “The excitement of these new programs, combined with increased funding for overseas learning, has overshadowed the need for analyses of the impact of these learning abroad opportunities. Ultimately, we know little about the pedagogical benefits of these experiences”⁷.

Volunteer tourism or voluntourism, is defined by the industry itself, on VolunTourism.Org, as, “a seamlessly integrated combination of voluntary service to a destination along with the best, traditional elements of travel – arts, culture, geography, and history – in that destination”⁸. While definitions of voluntourism differ, most definitions proposed by scholars (including Lee & Woosnam, Guttentag, McIntosh & Zahra⁹) involve the idea of people using their vacation or holiday time to travel to another location and engage in work that helps others, or as McGehee & Andereck define it, “utilizing discretionary time and income

⁵ Mendelson.

⁶ Mendelson.

⁷ Tiessen, R. “Educating global citizens? Canadian foreign policy and youth Study/volunteer abroad programs”. *Canadian Foreign Policy*. 14(1). 77.

⁸ McGehee, N. G., & Andereck, K. “Volunteer tourism and the ‘voluntoured’: The case of Tijuana, Mexico”. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 17(1). 2009. 39.

⁹ McGehee & Andereck, 39; Lee & Woosnam, 1186; Guttentag, Daniel A. 538; McIntosh, A. J., & Zahra. “A cultural encounter through volunteer tourism: Towards the ideals of sustainable tourism?”. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 15(5), 543.

to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need”¹⁰. The type of volunteer work undertaken abroad (frequently in developing areas of the world) is often either environmental/conservation-based (involving projects that may measure environmental impacts or educate about conservation), or more socio-culturally or economically focused (such as improving or building schools, public buildings, or new homes)¹¹. Another very popular area is childcare, particularly working with orphaned or poverty-stricken children¹². While volunteer tourist projects may vary in duration, many scholars including Ellis, Callanan & Thomas and Fitzpatrick, observe that, in most cases, volunteers participate for less than one month on any given project¹³.

Canada has a long history sending youth abroad to volunteer, either through religious missions or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly starting in 1964 when Canada helped to fund the volunteer-sending organization Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO)¹⁴ and in 1966 when CIDA expanded Canada’s mandate to aid in financial support for the growth of international voluntary work, including core funding for volunteer-sending

¹⁰ McGehee & Andereck, 39.

¹¹ McGehee & Andereck, 39.

¹² Birrel, Ian. “Before you pay to volunteer abroad, think of the harm you might do”. *The Observer*. November 14 2010. Retrieved December 1 2010 from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/14/orphans-cambodia-aids-holidays-madonna>.

¹³ Ellis C. “Participatory environmental research in tourism: a global view”. *Tourism Recreation Research*. 2003. 28(3): 45–55; Callanan M. & Thomas S. “Volunteer tourism: deconstructing volunteer activities within a dynamic environment”. *Niche Tourism: Contemporary Issues and Trends*, Novelli M (ed.) 2005. Elsevier:New York; 183–200; Fitzpatrick L. “Vacationing like Brangelina.” *Time*. July 26 2007. Retrieved November 12 2010 from: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1647457,00.html>.

¹⁴ Tiessen, 78.

organizations¹⁵. Now NGOs and such organizations are “actively marketing their programs toward students” and youth in general¹⁶.

Much of the research conducted on volunteer tourism has proposed it as a positive alternative to mainstream tourism, which itself has been the subject of much study and criticism, often cited as causing social upheaval and exploiting the natural resources of host countries¹⁷. Many scholars claim that volunteer tourists, by engaging in work to aid residents, undergo a cultural exchange, experiencing and learning about different cultures and creating a sincere mutual understanding between participants and residents that is rarely gained through conventional tourism¹⁸. A number of academics in the early twenty-first century all hailed volunteer tourism as a promising industry that benefits *both* tourists and host communities¹⁹.

McGehee states that while currently there is little empirical research published on the effectiveness of volunteer tourism, there is a fair amount of anecdotal evidence claiming such tourism is advantageous to the communities that are “voluntoured”²⁰. McIntosh & Zahra, in one particular study, claim that the experience of volunteers, in comparison with mainstream tourists, was more, “authentic, genuine, reflexive, of contemporary cultural content” and overall a,

¹⁵ Tiessen, 78.

¹⁶ Tiessen, 78.

¹⁷ McGehee & Andereck, 40. And Wearing, Stephen. “VolunTourism & Community Development”. *The Voluntourist*. December 2005. Retrieved November 25, 2010 from: <http://www.voluntourism.org/news-studyandresearch1205.htm>.

¹⁸ Lee & Woosnam, 1186.

¹⁹ Brown & Morrison. “Expanding volunteer vacation participation: an exploratory study of the mini-mission concept”. *Tourism Recreation Research*. 2003. 28(3): 73–82; Clifton J & Benson A. “Planning for sustainable ecotourism: the case for research ecotourism in developing country destinations”. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 2006. 14(3): 238–254; Conant E. “Having fun doing good”. *Newsweek*. October 16 2007. Retrieved November 12 from: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/49470>; Ellis C., 45–55; Lepp A. “Discovering self and discovering others through the Taita Discovery Centre Volunteer Tourism Programme, Kenya”. In *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism*. 2008; Lyon K, Wearing S (eds). CABI Publishing: Cambridge, MA; 86–100; Wearing S. *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference*. CABI Publishing: New York, 2001; Uriely N, Reichel A, and A, Ron. “Volunteering in tourism: additional thinking”. *Tourism Recreation Research*. 2003. 28(3): 57–62.

²⁰ McGehee & Andereck, 42.

“meaningful interpersonal experience”²¹. Volunteer tourism has been proposed not merely as an alternative form of tourism, but also a more environmentally and financially sustainable one. McGehee indeed argues this and is a champion of the benefits of volunteer tourism, which she thinks contributes significantly to recipient communities, especially those which are economically distressed²². She views the infusion of money into communities via volunteer spending (on locally-made souvenirs, locally-grown food, accommodation and transportation) as equally beneficial as the actual volunteer work itself²³. Higgins-Desboilles, Singh and Broad have all studied positive cultural exchanges between voluntourists and residents in different areas all over the world²⁴. McIntosh & Zahra cite that the prominent role the host plays in volunteer tourism, as opposed to mainstream tourism, creates “the potential to foster creative, alternative and more sustainable forms of tourism activity”²⁵. Overall, the idea of both people and particularly youth, spending their holiday time helping those less fortunate than themselves, evokes very positive images and uplifting philanthropic notions in our Western perspective. In this way, many see volunteer tourism as an example of “good human conduct”, and an altruistic way to see the world.

However, a significant academic backlash has occurred countering the idea of volunteer tourism as positive global do-gooding, while arguing that such volunteer work is merely glorified tourism²⁶. Guttentag summarizes some of the main critiques of volunteer tourism, which

²¹ McIntosh, A. J., & Zahra, A., 554.

²² McGehee & Andereck, 42.

²³ McGehee & Andereck, 42.

²⁴ Broad, S. “Living the Thai life – a case study of volunteer tourism at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, Thailand”. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 2003. 28(3), 63–72; Higgins-Desboilles, F. “Reconciliation tourism: Tourism healing divided societies!” *Tourism Recreation Research*, 2003 28(3), 35–44; Singh, T.V. “Altruistic tourism: Another shade of sustainable tourism. The case of Kanda Community”. *Tourism (Zagreb)* 2002, 50(4), 361–370.

²⁵ McIntosh & Zahra, 554.

²⁶ Mendelson

includes a neglect of local people's wishes and opinions, lack of skill and completion of unsatisfactory or unfinished work, decreased labour demand, conceptualizations of the "other" and rationalizations of poverty²⁷. He also notes incidents of cultural change, including the influence of religion or Western materialism, that is sometimes viewed negatively by residents²⁸. Guttentag identifies many important and problematic areas of voluntourism, citing scholars like Simpson, Callan, and Thomas who challenge the possible benefits delivered by unskilled volunteers who may be unfamiliar with local culture and only working on the ground for a short duration²⁹. This is reiterated in Tiessen's work, in which many young Canadians travelling abroad to volunteer expressed, "concern about their inability to make a difference in the lives of others in a short six-week to four-month placement"³⁰.

Furthermore, concerns have been expressed about the motivations of people, particularly youth and students, to volunteer in developing countries. While assumptions have been made about the altruistic intentions of voluntourists, some academics have doubts. Studies by Wearing, McIntosh & Zahra, Broad & Jenkins and Soderman & Snead have all revealed that voluntourists have been motivated by personal reasons as well as altruism, which could become problematic if tourists' desires began to take precedence over that of the local communities³¹. Similarly, in the 30 pre-departure interviews Tiessen held with young Canadians about their motivations for volunteering abroad, "career" or "skills development" was the most frequent

²⁷ Guttentag, 357.

²⁸ Guttentag, 357.

²⁹ Guttentag 543.

³⁰ Tiessen, 81.

³¹ Wearing, 86-100; McIntosh & Zahra, 542-556; Broad S. & Jenkins J. "Gibbons in their midst? Conservation volunteers' motivations at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, Phuket, Thailand". In *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism*, 2008. Lyon K, Wearing S (eds). CABI Publishing: Cambridge, MA; 72-85; Söderman N. & Snead S. "Opening the gap: the motivation of gap year travellers to volunteer in Latin America". In *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism*, 2008. Lyon K, Wearing S (eds). CABI Publishing: Cambridge, MA; 118-129.

response, referenced 40 times³². Tiessen highlights the importance of questioning volunteers' motivations, particularly the underlying paternalistic logic, while Barbara Heron attributes much of the developed North's imperative to help to a colonial superiority that revolves around notions of a bourgeois identity – a decidedly negative view of volunteer work in the developing world³³.

In addition, the aforementioned benefits of cultural exchange between voluntourists and hosts are also challenged by academics. Tiessen states: "Some students return to Canada with experiences confirming their pre-departure perceptions and stereotypes of other countries and peoples", which may be negative and simplistic³⁴. Tiessen even questions the altruism of the Canadian government in funding such volunteer-sending programs. Rather, she views the projects more as tools of foreign policy, instruments with which to spread Canadian values abroad and create a kind and gentle image of the nation, as opposed to more substantive commitments to development and humanitarianism³⁵. Many of these critical scholars question whether volunteer tourism is really such a positive alternative to mainstream tourism. Josh Ruxin, an assistant public health professor at Columbia University, who also runs development projects in Rwanda, perhaps exemplifies this attitude when he recommends to the well-intentioned youth, "If you've got two or three weeks and you want to make a difference, come to Rwanda, go on tours, go spend money, and don't feel bad about it"³⁶.

Despite the fact that many of these popular volunteer tourist programs are aimed specifically at someone like myself – a middle class university student interested in the

³² Mendelson.

³³ Heron, B. *Desire for development : Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. 6.

³⁴ Tiessen, 82.

³⁵ Tiessen, 83.

³⁶ Ruxin, Josh, as quoted by Mendelson.

developing world, with a month to fill and some extra money – the criticisms of such tourism concerned me. Particularly, the arguments that Guttentag discusses, such as taking a job away from a local person or staying in a community for too short a duration to make any meaningful difference, bothered me. I did not want to represent myself as a naïve and paternalistic young person from the West who thought I could create huge change in a short time with my limited skills. I had spent three years studying issues of the developing world, and Africa in particular, but I had never *seen* Africa, I did not actually know anything about day-to-day life there.

Overall, at this particular juncture, I felt uncomfortable seeing Africa as anything more than an observer. I really just wanted to learn and see as much as I could before connecting myself to any of the values or mandates of particular organizations, as positive or effective as they may (or may not) be. However, I also did not want the trip to merely be a holiday, a backpacking adventure based around tourist attractions and recreational activities. I wanted an experience similar to the one I would have had on an organized field study, as the description of the IDS African Field Study defined it, “the opportunity to investigate the theory and practice of development through experiential learning while providing a unique opportunity to learn in a crosscultural context”³⁷. I wanted to focus on development, on the issues and ideas I had been studying, while also directly experiencing the cultural aspects of the countries.

So, my travel companions and I decided to go ourselves, as merely neutral observers (as neutral as we could be approaching developing countries with our obvious Western biases and inherently slanted perspectives), attached to no particular organization or group, but willing to tour and learn about any that would allow us. Essentially, we were just tourists. We sought advice from a professor who was knowledgeable about the area and began to plan our route

³⁷ IDS 3203.06 field study poster, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. 2010.

through East Africa, beginning in Rwanda and finishing in Zanzibar, travelling through Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. It was our hope to keep a development focus throughout the trip, and with our professor's assistance we contacted some NGOs and aid projects beforehand to request tours. We mapped out our plans as best we could, knowing that many decisions we would have to make on the ground once we had arrived.

As we had decided we wanted to take a development studies focus on the trip and make it as relevant and educational as possible, we attempted to tour and visit NGOs, local organizations, schools and orphanages, as well as the usual historic and typical tourist attractions. In Rwanda we toured the Genocide Memorial and the famous hotel, the Mille Collines, where we were lucky enough to run into a large group of Canadian development workers. They worked for an NGO called the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) and explained to us their various projects in Rwanda and Uganda. Visiting both the Genocide Memorial and the Mille Collines was fascinating and gave a real location, as well as context, to an event I had written many essays about and studied at length. However, it felt innately wrong to view genocide sites as part of our tourist itinerary and even asking our taxi driver to take us to the Memorial felt insensitive. Nevertheless, visiting such places was more than encouraged by the local people we met and it seemed as if genocide memorabilia had become a tourist industry itself, providing information for the visitors, some income for the hosts and generally spreading awareness.

We took a local bus from Kigali into Uganda. Throughout our trip we travelled by local buses or matatus (smaller, van-like buses) and these rides were experiences in themselves. The shortest bus ride we took was only a few hours, the longest taking almost eleven. They were an incredible opportunity to see the landscapes, particularly the beautiful and lush mountainous terrain on the way to Uganda and to get a glimpse or quick visit of the many small towns the

highways passed through. Crossing borders on the buses was incredibly hectic and chaotic, with confusing routes and hidden immigration offices. The rides were also an opportunity to meet and talk with local people, to share snacks and stories. This aspect of the trip was definitely something we would not have been able to do on either a volunteer trip or with a university class. These bus rides were also a part of the trip that gave me the most insight about life in East Africa, particularly the matatus, which fit an impossible amount of people, packages and animals inside them and were part of a complex system of public transit that never ceased to amaze me.

Our first stop in Uganda was Lake Bunyonyi, one of the deepest lakes and surely one of the most picturesque destinations in Africa. In Lake Bunyonyi we visited the organization Edirisa, which focused on primary education, as well as selling local women's handicrafts. We also had the good fortune to meet a young local man who had started his own primary school and orphanage, called the Mwendo Needy Children and Orphan Project. It was very interesting to see a project that was still so grassroots, completely local and just beginning to grow. This project was also interesting in its complete division from government support or education systems, which Duncan, the founder, was very insistent upon. The lake itself was gorgeous, but we were told that very few people who lived in the surrounding towns and villages knew how to swim and many children had drowned in the lake. It seemed unbelievable that such a beautiful environment could be so threatening to its residents.

Carrying on to Kampala, we met with the Regional Director of Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR), who showed us the organization's headquarters and explained the several projects they had running in Uganda at the time, most of which were health and sanitation based. We visited several women's co-ops to buy souvenirs, as well as visiting the National Theatre. Also while in Kampala, we took part in a day of white water rafting on the

Nile. Other than perhaps the safari, this was the most “touristy” part of the trip, which I had mixed feelings about. The rafting company obviously provided many jobs for local people, but also monopolized a large part of the river which local people depended on and scaled their pay in comparison to “international” river guides. The day of rafting ended with a barbeque in which many local children, obviously impoverished, gathered to beg for food. It felt incredibly wrong to eat food and drink cold soda in front of all these children, and left me feeling a little uneasy about the experience.

In Eldoret, Kenya, we visited Phyllis Keino’s orphanage, the Leewa Children’s Home, which was very inspirational and quite different than the other schools and orphanages we had visited. Its facilities were new and extensive, housing orphaned and abandoned children of all ages. It had been locally founded and run, yet was fairly well-funded due to Phyllis’ ex-husband, Kip Keino, one of the greats of Kenyan athletics. Later on in Kericho, we toured the tea fields, which gave us some insight into the primary exports the country depended on and the living standards for tea field workers.

Crossing the border into Tanzania, we took part in a two day safari out of Arusha, which truly revealed how important tourism is to Tanzania, and Arusha in particular. Our safari toured Lake Manyara National Park and the Ngorongoro Crater, both featuring incredible landscapes and wildlife, as well as a peek at the Maasai peoples living in that area. Perhaps one of the most astonishing parts of the trip was seeing an old Maasai man walking up a path in the Crater wearing traditional Masaai garb and chatting on a cell phone. We were immediately reminded of the wide reach of globalization.

Also while in Arusha, we explored some museums which focused on the country’s history and its struggle for, and transition into, self-rule and democracy. Taking place in Arusha

at the time we were visiting was the UN tribunals for Rwanda. However, disappointingly for us, the trials were not open to the public during our stay there.

Our time in Zanzibar revolved around more sightseeing, and visiting several museums, palaces and historic sites, including the Jozani Forest and its rare Red Colobus monkeys. We toured a local spice farm and learned much about the large role different spices play in local cooking, healing and even aesthetics. We had the great fortune of staying at a house in the small village of Bwejuu, outside of Stone Town, which was quite a bit less bustling and touristy than the city. While we knew the owners of the house, the village itself posed the largest language barrier for us and attempting to communicate with the Swahili staff and local peoples was quite a challenging, if at times frustrating, experience. However, our time in Bwejuu allowed us to immerse ourselves a little deeper in the local culture, more so I think than if we had stayed in Stone Town. We also had the opportunity to meet up with a former Dalhousie graduate who had been living in Zanzibar for a year, interning for the Aga Khan Foundation. It was fascinating to hear about her work with Aga Khan, but also to see how she had adapted to living in Stone Town and observe her comfort there. Overall, I found we had a fairly well-rounded itinerary and were able to see a wide variety of projects and attractions, both the more touristic sites and the more harshly realistic ones.

I had always had issues with tourism and frequently felt slightly exploitative as one (and this feeling would reoccur time-to-time while in Africa) but throughout the trip I began to see the benefits of tourism for the countries we were visiting, even just for the basic fact that we were taking part in an activity that their economies were so dependent on. This was extremely clear to us during our time in Arusha, Tanzania, where it seemed every local person had some connection to the tourist industry and the safaris that lured tourists there. As controversial as safaris and

tourism may be, it was evident that many, many jobs depended on this sector. It was also clear that such demand for safaris had led to careful conservation of threatened wildlife and land. Other benefits of being tourists were clear when I saw how much power we had in deciding where to spend our money abroad. Planning our own trip allowed us to choose restaurants, hotels, shops, and businesses that we felt most needed or deserved our business. We tried to buy all our souvenirs from fair trade co-ops we visited, or women's and orphan's co-ops, or just small local shops - such as Edirisa's local crafts project in Lake Bunyonyi. We displayed this type of strategic decision-making throughout the trip, and tried our best to support small local businesses and restaurants, where hopefully our money would stay within the communities. In this way we justified being tourists. I often wondered if our attempt to create our own version of an "ethical tourism" was futile or merely self-righteous, but I do truly believe that many of the places we visited benefitted a large amount from business interactions in general and our small support helped them work toward a sustainable source of income, the effects of which I believe would be felt longer than general charity or aid.

It should be investigated why we felt the need to "justify" being tourists at all. While we attempted to travel in what we felt was an ethical fashion, the dangers of tourism cannot be ignored. Particularly from a development perspective, mass tourism can be seen as a sort of imperialistic force, an exploitation of culture and/or natural resources by the Western elite. As Lauren Gula states, tourism can have the "tendency to marginalize the poor"³⁸. And while we were seeking an experience that was a little bit more authentic than that of the general mainstream tourist one, backpack tourism can also be problematic. Gula identifies that, "[A]lthough backpacking travel has the potential to benefit both the backpacker and host

³⁸ Gula, Lauren. "Backpacking Tourism: Morally Sound Travel Or Neo-Colonial Conquest?". *Dalhousie University International Development Studies Honours Thesis*. Advisor: Rebecca Tiessen. 2006. 2.

community, the construction of identities involved in backpacking tourism threatens to further perpetuate global stereotypes and inequalities³⁹. She even asserts that some backpacking tourism could be equated with neo-colonial conquest and states that backpackers often have the mentality of “conquering”, that once they have toured and “collected” a certain place, they will leave and rarely have the intention to return⁴⁰. Similarly, there are claims that backpackers’ “hunt for authenticity” leads them to travel in developing countries where, “conditions of poverty and hardship are idealized by the backpacker to constitute a reality, or authenticity, which is not available to them in the modern, developed world they come from”⁴¹. Similarly, just as Tiessen suggests of volunteer trips, backpackers’ pre-conceived notions of the exotic “Other” may be reinforced, and stereotypes confirmed in the minds of travelers⁴². While backpackers construct simplified identities of local peoples, they may also construct glamorized identities of themselves as adventurous, fearless travelers⁴³.

There is value to the criticisms of backpack travel and it seems evident that travel, in general within the developing world, can involve some serious ethical issues. To be critical of our trip, it was clearly one of self-interest, completely selfish in intention and design. However, I do not think that witnessing the lifestyles of those in developing countries needs always to be considered a neocolonial conquest. In fact, instead of “collecting” passport stamps from the locations we travelled and moving on, our trip left me wanting to return to East Africa in a more permanent way. While we definitely attempted to seek some sort of “authenticity”, I do not believe this was part of constructing identities, but rather an attempt to see and meet those most

³⁹ Gula, 2.

⁴⁰ Gula, 15.

⁴¹ Gula, 17.

⁴² Gula, 19.

⁴³ Gula, 19.

affected by global inequities and hardship, in order to identify the greatest needs of these developing countries. Similarly, our efforts to support local businesses were a “hunt for authenticity” in order to ensure our money would stay within the community and not be channeled towards Western-controlled tourism. Lastly, I do not feel that the solution to the prevalence of stereotypes of people in developing countries is to *not* travel in these places. If meeting these people first hand, in their own communities, does not alter pre-conceived notions, than perhaps nothing will.

After taking our own trip through East Africa and reflecting upon it, in addition to exploring the various critiques of backpacking travel, it seems clear to me that while tourism is not without its problems, it also brings benefits, some of which we witnessed firsthand. I think the trip we took could well be criticized. We did not set out intending to directly help anyone, or to really change the system that created the great inequalities we witnessed. We could be criticized for visiting NGOs and schools, but not volunteering any of our time to help with their causes. We took part in such activities as safaris, which may save wildlife, but also have been accused of displacing local indigenous peoples and commercializing natural resources. We also spent only a month, a very short time, attempting to observe and understand four different countries and countless cultures. However, I do not regret the way we conducted our travels or the different experiences we had while abroad. Particularly, looking back at the trip, I see the value in tourism for all the communities we passed through. I also see the value in our choice to *not* volunteer, and in doing so, leaving behind any paternalistic attitudes we may have held, allowing the people we met to educate us and not the other way around.

The key to our travel experience was finding a balance – a balance between tourism and learning, attempting to see East Africa from several different perspectives instead of one. Our

attempt to make our travels ethical and contribute to businesses that both gave us the services we needed and wanted, as well as benefitting locals and disadvantaged groups was important to us. It may merely seem like a self-righteous justification for travelling in developing countries without being consumed by guilt, but I truly think it was a happy medium, a compromise between extremes that led to mutually beneficial travelling, for us and our host communities. In this way, I do not think I would do much differently if I were to go back and complete the trip again. In retrospect, I certainly feel we fulfilled our own goal of representing good human conduct in the areas we visited and through the design of our journey.

Overall, I feel that our trip accomplished many of the goals it was intended to achieve: we witnessed East African culture and life firsthand, we balanced tourist activity with learning and saw development through several different perspectives. It truly gave us an awareness about issues in developing countries and the many complexities they encompass, which is difficult, if not impossible, to capture in a classroom. In this way, should we choose to return to East Africa as volunteers or development professionals, we will be better equipped to address issues and work with communities. I think we also avoided many of the negative aspects involved in volunteer tourism and attempted to avoid those associated with backpacking tourism. Perhaps not all trips to the developing world need to be guilt trips, but rather “consciousness trips”, in which good human conduct is displayed all over the world. Tourists do not necessarily need to volunteer in the developing world to be good global citizens, but rather, conduct themselves as responsible travelers and human beings. Trips in which travelers attempt to remain conscious of their attitudes towards local people, conscious of where their money is going and conscious of how their own actions affect the communities they visit, have the potential to be positive experiences – for both hosts and visitors.

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