

LUMOS Traveler Final Report

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My summer was a phenomenal experience. Lumos provided me the opportunity to enact a project I've been dreaming up for a long time. I first had the idea for my documentary during my third semester at Belmont in a class in the Honor's Program with Dr. Devon Boan and have been chipping away at the project ever since. When I heard about the Lumos grant, I knew it was the perfect opportunity to fund the bulk of the project. The subject matter of my film made it an expensive undertaking; I wanted to go to Africa and climb a bunch of mountains! Lumos was the only way I could pull it off.

In many ways, the summer proceeded as I expected, in that I climbed the mountains I intended to and I did everything I hoped to: explored the African highlands, got to know the culture that works and lives in and around them, and documented it all. Beyond this, however, my actual expectations were that the summer would be hard to predict, full of improvisation, and both physically and mentally strenuous. This all also turned out to be true.



I spent the first month and half in Kenya based in Nairobi and laying all the groundwork for the second half of the summer. My rhythm consisted of something like this: make a cold call to a contact I received from a friend or from my own research, arrange a meeting with said contact, get to know them and their story, eventually shoot an interview or visit their home or place of work, and then be directed by them to a new contact to start all over again. In this manner I went from a climbing gym in Nairobi to a ropes course outside in Ruiru to an adventure camp by the Tana River to a politician's estate in Karen to a guiding outfit in Naromoru and more. Each of these contacts was connected somehow with the mountains. They had worked either as a porter, guide, ranger, or outdoor instructor or were connected to those who did. One family had lost a son high on Mt. Kenya to high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE). All of them were kind enough to tell me their story. Not everyone wanted to be interviewed on camera, but I still got felt like got a comprehensive experience of the culture and learned how to ask the right questions. All of this work was essential to the second part of the trip: the mountains themselves. I also spent two days a week for 6 weeks working with a Swahili tutor, Bwana Evans. This was very helpful for getting my language skills back up to scratch.



I was supposed to go to Tanzania first, but because of complications with film permits and fees (which I wrote extensively about on my blog) we had to move that entire trip into August to reduce the superfluous charges (and still we had to pay an extra \$1000!). Because of this, Mt. Kenya came first. I was on the mountain for 14 days, filming, taking pictures, asking questions, exploring and climbing. My Kiswahili was useful but because almost all of the guides and porters on Mt. Kenya are from the same tribe they actually spent most of their time speaking Kikuyu instead, so I had to pick up some of that as well.

After Mt. Kenya I headed straight down to Tanzania with only a few days to recover (and shower!) in between. In Tanzania we were based in Arusha, the town at the bottom of Mt. Meru and also the headquarters of the Tanzanian National Park Authority (TANAPA), who turned out to be my worst enemy. We had several substantial roadblocks in terms of filming during the two and half weeks I was in Tanzania, but through some negotiation and some stealth we were still able to get a lot of footage on both Mt. Meru and Mt. Kilimanjaro. In Tanzania my Kiswahili was essential, as very few people speak English. If I wanted to speak to the porters at all I needed to fumble my way around their language.



My goal for this project was to immerse myself into this mountain culture in order to understand it, and I think I accomplished that as far as is possible in three months. I didn't expect the trip to be as immersive as it was due to the major tourist population on the mountains, but the reality was that I spent almost every hour of every day both on the mountains and also before those expeditions with Africans and only Africans. This was challenging in a strange way to me, because although I grew up in Kenya and have interacted with Africans my whole life, I had never really done it as an adult. For the first time, I had a project that was mine, that I cared about, that allowed me to work with African adults who had similar interests to me. This changed my whole experience. I suddenly realized that many of the differences I had always perceived between Kenyans and myself weren't cultural differences but differences of personality and pastime. This summer I got to work with African outdoorsmen, African mountaineers, African counter-culturalists, and I realized that I had found my people! It was still lonely and challenging sometimes simply because there *are* still cultural differences and a language barrier, but for the most part I felt I was working with kindred spirits.

So what is this culture, then? It is a culture of simplicity, a bizarre synthesis of the deeply African and the deeply philosophical. It is the collision of economic hardship and the 'freedom of the hills.' These men and women are, for the most part, still part of a subsistence economy; they are farmers and drivers and laborers, but they also have found that they love the wilderness. They love to get lost in the beauty of the highlands, to sit and listen to birds, to drink pure alpine water. They can speak with a poetic fluency that we have learned to expect only from grizzled

European alpinists about the spiritual peace to be found in the mountains. Even more interesting to me is that there are many who can't even explain verbally why they like being there; the outdoors is such a fundamental part of their reality that it seems arbitrary to talk about it the way we Americans do. As one of my friends, Njenga, put it, Africans won't call themselves 'outdoorsy' because "Africa is the outdoors."



This trip was all about finding the grassroots outdoors culture in East Africa. I definitely found it, but it was not what I expected. It is often this way, I think, when you expect to find a parallel culture and actually find something completely different. Things only seem parallel when you're stuck looking at them from a particular angle. A guide by the name of Will explained it to me perfectly: "Even when Africans go to the mountains, they will still dance."



Thus their impact on me is clear: those Africans that work in the mountains have a freedom that we lack here in America. The freedom to live without images that suck us in and force us to conform or at least present our lives in a certain way. It made me realize that no one else's expectations matter as long as I am living the life I enjoy. These men and women work in some of the most beautiful places in the world, but their priority is not to show it off or put it on their Instagram. Their priority is to feed, clothe, and educate their children. Their priority is to send money home to their parents. The wilderness is not an escape or a separation. It is sewn into their daily lives.

Did I have an impact on them? It never feels like you have an effect on a culture that is so dramatically teaching you. I feel fortunate, however, that I chose to experience this culture by documenting it. I wasn't trying to give them anything or share my knowledge; that attitude can so easily become paternalistic. My only intention in the interaction was to hear their stories and then hopefully tell them, and in my experience, almost everyone wants to tell you their story.



This first took the form of just gaining trust: Africans are highly relational and typically don't like talking business until they feel like they know you. Thus, even when I just needed a quick interview, I realized it was important to just chat for several hours or even on several different occasions before they'd be willing to open up. Once the person I was with realized that my interest was genuine and my intentions were good, however, they could almost overwhelm me with information. Although there are many wonderful things about this mountain culture, such as those I listed above, it is *not* perfect, and the men were excited to share some of their grievances.

The main problem is that there is simply not enough work: working with tourists in any capacity, even being a porter, is considered good work because you can get tipped and you can make foreign contacts. Business, however, has been declining on both Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro for a number of years now. Anyone who is not a full-time guide must have a supplemental income or two, and even most of the guides at least keep a small *shamba* or farm. Life in East Africa is still hard for most people. The standard of living is rising, but slowly. These men want higher wages, better conditions, and more respect from both the local and global community.

I think I can help with these things. Firstly, I was able to show them firsthand that there *are* Americans and *wazungu* who respect and appreciate what they do. There was a special camaraderie I could build with porters when I told them about my own experience hauling 100

pound packs in Patagonia. Second, in creating my film I hope to highlight both the hardship and the beauty of this culture for a much wider audience. This should raise awareness of their situation but also, and just as importantly, foster a deep respect for the way they live their lives. I think that more than anything else I was surprised by the amount of joy and gratitude that was exuded from such a difficult life. I expected to document mistreated and downtrodden workers, but what I found was a ragtag group of adventurers making the best of life. They changed my perspective, taught me how to love life for what it is, and I hope that I in turn can change the rest of the world's understanding of them.



I would present this advice to future Lumos travelers: go abroad as a storyteller, and even more importantly, as a story-listener. You can do anything: be a nurse, give out loans, work with children, make a film. It doesn't matter *what* you are doing as long as the people you are with realize that *they* are your first priority. Their stories, their lives, their futures. I was very lucky to be able to do this explicitly, and I recognize that it can be difficult to propose such a project. It's hard to quantify the impact of a story, but that's because stories are *truth*.