

Volunteering in Cape Town,
South Africa

Day One: I've Arrived

Arrived in Cape Town and was greeted by a man named Yacoob. Took about an hour to get from the airport to the place I'm staying. It's called Saltycrax. It's a place backpackers stop off at for \$40 USD a night and it also houses volunteers. You can imagine what it looks like. I met a lady named Nanda and a young man named Yanga. Yanga poured me a shot of Jager and I had a toast with about 4 strangers.

Was shown my room which consists of a filthy tile floor, an old wooden armoire, and 2 cots, one with bedding, one without. The stiffness is a close resemblance to that tile floor. My room is in a shared house on the other side of the block, about a 3-minute walk from Saltycrax. There's a security guard in his car on the intersection so he can see both houses but he's only there Thursday-Sunday. I asked if it was safe to walk to the nearby convenience store and was told yes, so long as I go with somebody.

Back at Saltycrax there were about 20-25 people at the common bar area, paying 20 Rand or so a beer. Or about \$1 USD. I met people from Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands, but not one American here. But somehow they're all giving me shit about Trump. I was made a plate of food filled with rice, chicken, and some vegetables. Also caught myself munching on dried tree leaves that made their way into the meal as well as a ton of bones, large and thin. There's a rule here. No throwing away food. Period. If you can't finish your food, donate it. Same conservative approach goes for leaving the water running while washing your dishes or not turning off lights that you've turned on. In fact, you sign up for the meals you plan to eat during the week as well as your portion size (S, M, L) - if you fail to attend dinner to eat, you are charged 40 Rand (or roughly \$3 USD). They said by just having a volunteer show up, that alone pays for a child to be fed for 5 days. Breakfast porridge and a hot meal for lunch. Another rule is that it's an English-speaking house only. If someone is caught conversing in another language, it is considered rude and will cost 5 Rand per incident (roughly 35 cents USD).

After a beer and conversing with the Swede and two dudes from Switzerland, we walked to this convenience store so they could get cigarettes. I joined so I could get bottled water and a snack in the event that the community pantry let's me down tomorrow morning. After all, I only really remember seeing bread. In line at the store, the clerk waived me over and said "next." This huge African man who was

standing in front of me went ape shit and started screaming at the clerk for ignoring him. I still don't understand why she wasn't able to help him first but I definitely felt like there was zero authority on the store's side and I was about to witness a violent outburst of some kind. Somehow that mellowed out and I walked home. Took a shower and found a used towel on the rack. Walked from the bathroom to my bedroom and each foot was caked with dirt already. Realized I brought the wrong power converter to charge my phone and sparkling water instead of still. Now it's bedtime. They say you have to pee a lot when you get nervous. Well I'm peeing A LOT every 10 minutes or so it seems. Went downstairs to use the toilet as a housemate was occupying the upstairs one. When I went to wash my hands I felt a sandy texture coming from the faucet. I looked down and it was completely brown water. I elected to not wash my hands as that seemed like the cleaner option. And I'm sure people are drinking this. Waking up at 6:45am since I have the whole day off and am paying the driver from today, Yacoob, to take me around Cape Town.

Day Two: Penguins on the Beach

Jetlag yielded about 3-4 hours of sleep, waking up shortly before 5am. Had 4 chocolate biscuit crackers from the convenience store the night before and room temperature sparkling water for breakfast. Texted friends back home until it was time to get dressed and meet Yacoob out front of Saltycrax at 7:30am. He had water for me in the car and drove me all around the peninsula. He's a cool guy but says "Do you know what I'm saying?" WAY TOO much. I've also learned two other phrases that are used quite often:

1. "Make a plan" used as "hook us up" - (I.e. "Can you get a table for us and bring it outside, my brother? Make a plan for us.")
2. "Smart" and "nice"/"cool" are interchangeable (I.e. "I'll show you those houses over there. They're very smart")

Our first stop was Cape Point, the furthest tip of South Africa, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans collide. Truly incredible to see the difference between both of the colors and the merging of the two coming together. I had coffee and salmon eggs Benedict at a restaurant near the base of the lighthouse then hiked up to the top when I heard the unfortunate news that the cable car to transport people up was

down. Roughly 15 minutes later, I was at the top, next to the lighthouse and looking down on the most southern tip of the globe I've seen to date. There was a post up there with arrows pointing in multiple directions showing in nautical miles how far it is to New York, Australia, and England. From there, we continued our drive to see some of the most breathtaking white sand and complete turquoise watered beaches I've ever seen in my life. More vibrant than the Bahamas which so far has been most impressive prior to this trip. The rock formations looked like they were manually carved (which Yacoob said they were, but I doubt it). I've never seen anything like it. Greenery and a sea of flowers cascaded down the mountain from all sides. I've never seen such beautiful flowers naturally grow on their own. It was unbelievable. None of my photos did any of this justice, no matter how many times I tried. We then stopped at this upscale beach town known for their seafood. We walked down the sidewalk and saw African girls singing and dancing for money (they were VERY good) and saw men doing acrobatic tricks unlike anything I've ever seen before. Strength beyond even shows in Vegas. The outside patio was full but Yacoob negotiated with the manager (as he does everywhere we go) to have them pull a table from inside and put it on the patio for us. It was beautiful. Had the best grilled calamari I've ever tasted before and enjoyed a nice afternoon with Yacoob. We then went to Waterfront which is a mall area and there was a famous African band playing a charity show on the stage. They were excellent! Yacoob drove me back to the house around 4pm where I immediately crashed and took a nap for a couple of hours. Went to dinner at 7pm and was told my (actual) room was ready. What a difference!!! This one actually has towels. I'm in an En Suite (solo bedroom, solo bathroom) versus my previous accommodation which was a shared house with multiple cots to a room with one shower between 10-12 people. Much like a frat house.

The woman in charge, Shannon, asked if I was good with kids and then asked what role I want to take on for school (8am-12pm daily). This happens before project which is in the afternoon and consists of either surfing, skating, swimming, or sport. My school options were:

1. Be an aid to a proficient teacher and simply help out.
2. Replace the existing shitty teacher in the classroom.
3. Be the teacher in a classroom that has no teacher.

Options 2 and 3 require developing lesson plans, choosing a song to sing, and coming up with a craft to do for the kids. It's amazing how much we take for granted in the states.

Had dinner with the group, watched about half of Lion King with the Scandinavian group with a beer, then called it an early night going back to my new room to have a shower, catch up on work, and relax. Tomorrow is going to be a short day of touring the school and then Yacoob is taking me wine tasting throughout Cape Town.

Just found 2 spiders in my bed.

Day Three: Offline Negotiations

Awoke feeling well rested but still rose early. Roughly 6:30am. Reached for my phone to catch up on texts and emails but the WiFi wouldn't connect. Tried to restart the phone and still nothing. Grabbed those breakfast biscuits from my personal stash and decided to walk to the next block over where I was previously staying to see if I could tap into the internet. To my surprise, my new set of keys did not have one for that gate anymore (even though I still need access there throughout the week). Wouldn't work through the walls either so I was back to walking to Saltycrax to try again. Still no luck. Went to the opposite side of the house where dinner is served each night and got it working there. Of course, I'm just the creep sitting outside these bedroom windows with dogs barking at me as I'm trying to scan through emails (Note to self: When you get home, DO NOT take your internet for granted).

Went to the kitchen to make myself breakfast. Options:

- 1.) Cereal with some sort of milk product. I say "milk product" because it's purchased in bulk and stored at room temperature.
- 2.) Bread.
- 3.) Yogurt.
- 4.) Tomatoes.
- 5.) Apple.

I went with bread and found some jam. I can only assume I'll do this every day for the next 2 weeks.

I spoke to the intern working behind the bar and asked her to sign me up for skydiving on Saturday morning. It's locked in but gets cancelled/postponed more often than not due to the heavy winds in Cape Town. We'll see.

Our group gathered at 9:00am to do our "Walking Tour." We walked about 15 minutes to the nearest bus station and then hopped on the bus to Green Market Square. This was NOT what I expected and had solid plans to meet Yacoob at noon for a day of wine tasting. Despite the fuck up and domino effect on the delayed time, it was actually pretty remarkable. So much history, so much culture. I mean, sure we were reminded several times to keep items in our front pockets and for girls to always have the zipper of their purse in sight, but still remarkable. LOTS of pick-pocketers in South Africa. So many in fact, that there are security guards on every corner just so that if someone gets robbed, you can tell a guard and they'll walkie over to the next one to describe who just took your shit.

Saw old churches, housing for slaves, white/non-white benches, and the balcony where Nelson Mandela said his speech when he was released as a prisoner from Robben Island and elected to be President. You can see Robben Island and Table Mountain from just about everywhere. It's pretty surreal. During the time he was imprisoned, prisoners were allowed 1 single visitor every 6 months. So maybe you'd have your wife visit you in June, and your daughter in December. Crazy.

Anyway, once that wrapped up the group stayed together to explore more of the market area while I raced to get the hell out of there with Yanga to catch my ride with Yacoob. At this point, I was going to be an hour late and had no way of notifying Yacoob and couldn't let my secret out that I hired the airport pickup employee from the organization to be my personal driver for 2 weeks. That'd be bad news for Yacoob.

I made it back to the house and changed out of my clothes as it was hot as hell outside. Emailed Yacoob apologizing profusely for standing him up. Didn't get anything back for 15 minutes or so and WiFi was spotty, so I walked about a mile or so to a mall. I figured it'd be a good time for me to have lunch that didn't consist of an apple and a piece of bread while simultaneously using public internet that I could

depend on. As I was crushing a guacamole cheeseburger in the food court, I heard back from Yacoob. He said, "Don't worry about a thing, I'll come get you now." He picked me up and we used the time we had to hit a winery called Spier. This place was beautiful and had awesome handmade art being sold out front. There were 3 choices for wine tastings ranging from basic (40 Rand) to premium (90 Rand). I chose the premium one which consisted of 6 glasses for essentially \$6 USD. After finishing, I bought an awesome wood serving platter made out of a wine barrel (which I have no idea how I'm going to get back to the states because of how big it is) and a red man made of wire from the artists outside. Yacoob is the man. He negotiates EVERYTHING for me. EVERYTHING. And he's aggressive.

The price tag was 4500R. He asked for a better price and the guy said 4000R. Yacoob said 2800R. The guy said he'd need to call "Jeff the artist" to go any lower. Yacoob said if you call Jeff it goes down to 2500R. The man called Jeff and offered 3000R. Yacoob grabbed the phone out of the man's hand and spoke to Jeff himself. I bought it for 2700R, he bubble wrapped the whole thing, and bubble wrapped the serving platter I bought inside the winery. Yacoob then suggested they hire him and we laughed and walked away.

Next stop was the mall so we could get some supplies I needed for the week and a bag to transport this new piece of art home incognito without having to claim it (bought a cheap gym bag). Also managed to schedule a tattoo appointment for next Wednesday night to get the outline of Table Mountain on the top of my left ribs. Arrived back at the pad and am starting to realize how much I silo myself from the others. Kind of makes sense though. I'm easily the oldest one here. Most of these kids are between 19-25 and are on a Gapyear from school. The accommodations range from pitching a tent in the backyard (60R /\$3 USD), sharing a room that sleeps 10 people (170R /\$10 USD), or going balls deep as I've done with my own Four Seasons bedroom and attached bathroom for (690R / \$40 USD). You know you're getting old when the kids you're talking to wouldn't pay \$40/night for a hotel room. Or maybe I'm just high maintenance. Maybe that's it. After all, these people are taking buses, Ubers, and walking while I've hired my own private driver and chief negotiator.

Had a quick nap, ate dinner, and now relaxing. It's 8:51pm and I'm already exhausted. Tomorrow is the first day at the teacherless schools with the children I

will somehow be in charge of. I don't think I've ever truly experienced the phrase "I have no idea what I'm in for" until this trip. Literally. No idea. And there's another spider on my leg.

Day Four: Acclimating to the 3rd World

Woke up at 4:30AM and used the off-peak hours to utilize the WIFI to upload journal entries to FB. The photos are a killer, and video...forget about it. Just sucks the bandwidth and makes it impossible. So far each upload has taken roughly an hour. I was under the impression that today was the first day at the school, but directions are not clear at all here and so some of my entries may be inaccurate and corrected later. Today was a training day for new volunteers. I began the morning by walking over to the house they call "House 22" where all meals are served. Well, self-served. Except dinner. Someone cooks dinner. Everything else you're on your own. I was making my go-to toast recipe when all of a sudden I looked down at my feet and a wild turtle was crawling next to me. I'll take that over the wild baboons any day. After eating breakfast, we were to meet at the "Volunteer House" (the place I spent my first night) to go over what the week would entail and how to teach the kids. This training facility is a garage attached to a multi-family dwelling, similar to a frat house. Shannon wrote the daily schedules on the board that consist of school for the first half of the day and then project for the second half of the day. Project (depending on the day) is either swim, skate, surf, or sport. She began reviewing the different schools each person will be assigned to, where they are located, and essentially what we are in for in terms of students and their family life.

The first township she mentioned was the unnatural outcome of the government pushing people out of their homes about 20km north of where they resided in order to build a landfill of some kind. This could not be done with people living there, so they got pushed inland and were promised better schools, electricity, jobs, etc. Needless to say, not only did none of those things happen, but the people lost their jobs because they were unable to walk or find transportation being so far away. There are no jobs, there is no electricity, no showers, and there is one toilet to every 49 people. These homes are about the size of a single car garage, made of sheet metal and aluminum, and house about 9 people each in one main room. If that's not enough, they often get burned down since there is no heat in South Africa and no proper place to have a fire. It's not uncommon for a family to start a fire to stay warm and accidentally burn down their home. Shannon continued down the list

describing each of the schools and where they are located. She also mentioned areas to not go, one of which is a main drag area where you are sure to get mugged, the other of which is called Lavender Hills. Sounds pretty, and there's no mugging here, instead you will be shot and killed.

The school I am assigned to is called Wings of Hope located in Dunoon. This is another massively impoverished township where wives are abused daily by their husbands and often are unable to take their kids to school as it interferes with their schedule of getting to work themselves. It is not uncommon to see children as young as 2 being left on their own to fend for themselves at home, often playing in the dirt in the streets. At Wings of Hope, there are no teachers. None. There used to be one but the woman was being beaten by her husband every night (domestic violence is the norm here) and decided to fight back. The government didn't like this and she's in jail now. On top of that, the average salary for a teacher is 1500R/month (\$90 USD) so it is more common to be a teller or find a position without the pressure of babysitting. There are roughly 20 children to a classroom, all in kindergarten but some as old as 8. This is because children who have immigrated from bordering countries, such as Zimbabwe, do not have the proper papers to be admitted into primary school. With the lack of leadership and regimented learning, most kids are severely underdeveloped. We reviewed 8 different types of learning we will go over with the kids ranging from fine motor skills to auditory discrimination. Things so basic we would never think to define them. The importance of this was to understand how the kids learn and how they are only capable of 1 thing at a time whereas most kids with proper schooling might be able to handle 4-5. For example, if you were to say, "Go sit down at your chair and then put your hand on your head" it is too much to grasp. 1 thing at a time. The child will sit down and not remember what the 2nd thing was. Similarly, and perhaps the most interesting, is that when learning letters and numbers, we are told not to teach things the way we have learned them as kids, but instead to apply the practical meaning to it instantly as the kids will not be able to connect the dots otherwise. For example, we would not pronounce the letters "A", "B", or "C" the way you just read it in your head and instead would teach them as "A(ah)", "B(buh)", "C(cah)", immediately getting the child to understand its phonetic purpose rather than learning that later on. To them, if they learn each letter, it's just a letter and means nothing. Same with $1 + 2 = 3$. That's incorrect. Instead we use symbols (I'll use a dollar sign): $\$ + \$\$ = \$\$\$$ - now they are applying the concept of addition because they are seeing how it makes sense. A "2" or a "3" means nothing to them. Aside from mental disorders, several of the children have

HIV, AIDS, and/or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS); a very common one in South Africa where the mother drinks during her pregnancy. One of the teachers here had a daughter who was infected with AIDS at age 13 and died at age 21. She's the founder of several of these programs to teach children about HIV/AIDS.

After learning about these schools and the townships, we were asked to go to the supply area and find things to make a craft for the kids. This was basic training we would exercise on one another to practice for school days. Remember, there are no teachers, so it's up to us to develop lesson plans, sing songs, and create arts/crafts with the children (see photo of supply area below – it's the one that consists of two by four shelving in the garage and miscellaneous materials spread around).

Additionally, we learned a few key words like "Quiet, "sit down", "listen", and "don't" in a native dialect called Xhosa. When asking how to say "please" or "thank you" the question was chuckled at as those are words that they don't say. There is literally no Xhosa translation for the word "please."

We wrapped up around noon and walked back to Saltycrax so each person could make themselves lunch. Following that, we had our weekly volunteer meeting at the "Volunteer House" at 1:30pm. There were about 45 of us basking in the sun, going over the previous week and the week to come. Pretty cool to see people from all over the world speaking in different accents all with different stories. Concluding the meeting, the manager assigns duties for the week: Dish-up, Refill, and Cooking. Dish-up is the group responsible for prepping the kitchen and dinner area every night and washes all dishes after the meal (Note: only the dishes used for cooking. All other plates, silverware, and bowls are assigned to volunteers upon arrival, they are responsible to clean them, and store them in their room for their next meal). When asked who would volunteer to clean the dishes for the week, the entire group was silent. My buddy Axcel and I manned the fuck up and will be washing pots and pans all week (which started tonight). Our friend Eva joined as well.

The "Refill" job is to ensure all houses (3) are fully stocked with the proper food and supplies. The "Cooking" duty is literally an assignment that requires someone to cook for all 50 people on Sunday. My friend Jess signed up for that. Talk about high pressure!

Prior to dinner, I grabbed a beer from the reception/bar area and came back to my room to relax for a bit. I was super excited to chill, watch a documentary I've been meaning to get into on YouTube, enjoy my beer, and relax. 5 minutes in, the WIFI went out and was out for 5 hours. There went that idea. I took a nap instead before getting ready to set up for dinner. After dinner, we made a party out of the dishwashing in the kitchen when I turned music on from my phone and people continued to cry about Trump being my new President (Note: I say "my" president because I'm the only one from the states here. They say they get one American every couple of months).

On my way back to my room, Yanga stopped me with a shot of Jager. This is very popular here (see photo of me and Yanga and all Jager bottles up above). Grabbed another beer and conversed with a girl from Norway who has been here for 9 weeks. I'm realizing that my time spent here is easily the shortest amount of time anyone has ever spent here. Kind of a joke like I'm just stopping by. In other news, skydiving got moved from Saturday to Friday and tomorrow is the big day of me being a teacher to a bunch of rowdy kids. Wish me luck.

Day Five: It's Not a Tumor

Another morning quick to rise with plenty of time for my 8am rendezvous, prior to departure for school. Woke up, showered, made my breakfast in the community kitchen with 40 other volunteers, then walked over to the next block to plan our lesson for the day. Like most things in South Africa, however, things don't go according to plan and I was told we were not going to have time to put together a lesson plan for today and we would instead just leave for the school at 9am. I went back to Saltycrax, took a 20-minute nap, and headed back to start the day at 9. I'm a teacher at Wings of Hope, a school with no teachers. We drove about 20 minutes inland from Cape Town until we reached the town of Dunoon. As we turned the corner, my heart abruptly stopped. Immediately before me was a village that made Skid Row look like a Motel 6. In just a moment's notice, I was literally driving through the infomercials I had changed the channel on every time I couldn't be bothered with a problem outside of Saved by the Bell or Fresh Prince of Bel Air. I selfishly wish I would have opted in for the \$1/day donation instead, simply to make it less real. As we were turning throughout the unmarked streets, our seasoned and confident driver Steph, described Dunoon as a safe place...followed by the afterthought, "during the day." She went on to say that this is the area that is a bit

nicer than where we are going and these families have more money. I couldn't help but think this was a joke. We are no longer talking about lower class, middle class, and upper class. Now this is a function of poor, poorer, and poorest (see supplemental photos of Dunoon).

We landed at Wings of Hope where we were told to not take out our phone, don't look like a tourist in any capacity, and just walk forward into the school (which was of course locked and gated). Before even being let in, a handful of young children bombarded the car hugging my legs and grabbing my arms to look at my tattoos. As we entered the school, the identical behavior took place but not with a handful of kids, but a swarming sea of 4 and 5 year-olds, looking like they just saw Elvis – (no idea why I went for Elvis on that, I fucking hate Elvis). It was refreshing to see that people are naturally born to love and hate is a learned behavior.

We were shown the few different classrooms within the guarded square protected by the parameter walls of Wings. In each classroom, there were kids screaming and yelling, pushing each other, laughing, and chairs continuously falling over. The only constant between all the rooms was the absence of a teacher. I was asked which room I wanted. I just pointed to the nearest one and that was my assignment. It was the 4-year old classroom. As I entered the room the kids roared in unison, "TEE-CHA! TEE-CHA!", acknowledging me as their new teacher. I was an Orange County Arnold Schwarzenegger in a South African Kindergarten Cop.

Within minutes, I had reprimanded 2 separate kids for stabbing fellow students with their pencil, and another for throwing a chair; all while trying to maintain control of the classroom and keep people seated. This was essentially impossible. I later learned that regardless of how stern a white person is, the kids do not respect them the same way as they would a black elder, because they know the white person is trained not to hit them. They respond better to their native body language: violence. Only 15 minutes had passed (which felt like more than enough for my entire trip), and I was pulled by the driver who took us there, asking if I would help her deliver porridge to the surrounding schools. Each bag of porridge weighs probably 35 pounds and we had roughly a dozen of them to stack into the car and drop off at various locations.

One of our first stops was the school for disabled students. The moment I exited the car and went to the trunk to grab the first bag, a young teenage girl who suffers from

severe autism fearfully ran into our van, jumping over a peer of mine to wedge her way into the middle so no one could find her. She clung to the seats for dear life and the fear in her eyes as the supervising teachers tried to fetch her was similar to a horror movie. It took a solid 10 minutes and a sleeve of cookies to remove her. The next stop was Honeybees, a school that does have a teacher, but a sad sight nonetheless. The daycare room for babies (ages 2-3) is completely dark because there is no natural light, contains a dirty tile floor, and no color at all. This theme continued as did the repeating mantra of "TEE-CHA! TEE-CHA!" at each location when I walked into the room. Funny enough, every school would instantly grab my arms, completely fascinated by my tattoos. They'd latch onto me and pull me from both sides like I was Stretch Armstrong, showing their friends the canvased ink that is my skin. One school in particular, Good Hope, was enamored by my biceps and continued to ask me to flex, gripping my arms in amazement (much like the girls do back in the States – right, guys?...Guys...?)

We then proceeded to Sunshine. This school is run by a woman named Patricia who lost her daughter to AIDS on her 21st birthday. I was fortunate enough to have met her and gave her an enormous hug upon our first greeting. She is truly an incredible human being.

Our last stop was a quick one, where our driver (Steph) ran out to get a paper signed and left us in the car. Within just that 1 minute unattended, a man approached our vehicle asking to get inside and begging for money. Oddly enough, none of this behavior or neighborhood activity has made me feel scared, just barely uneasy at times. I have no idea why.

After making our deliveries, it was time to go back to Wings of Hope and finish the school day in the classroom I was assigned to. On the way there, driving through Dunoon, a 12-year old looking girl saw our van of white people and waved two hands in the air, making gun gestures, pretending to shoot us if we came back.

Another interesting sight were the sporadic BBQs throughout the town, cooking what are called "Smileys." This is literally a sheep's head. You can see it clear as day on the grill. In South Africa, they believe eating the sheep's ears will give you better hearing, eating the sheep's eyes will give you better vision, eating the sheep's nose will give you better sense of smell, and eating the sheep's brain will give you more

knowledge. They call it a “Smiley” because when the sheep’s head begins to cook, the skin around the jaw starts to tighten, appearing like the sheep is smiling. When I stepped back into my classroom and relieved another volunteer, I tried to facilitate an activity around coloring shapes. It’s amazing how much the kids don’t know and/or simply don’t listen. It only took 5 minutes before I was sweating profusely in this small stuffy room, slightly more narrow than a 1-car garage, accompanied by flies, cockroaches, and the odor of 30 unshowered kindergarteners (half of which had dried snot on their faces).

After multiple attempts, I was somewhat able to get them to follow the pattern I was dictating to them for the coloring project. However, it didn’t take long before that got boring and the agitated children began getting out of their seats once again, yelling, screaming, hitting, and chaos quickly filled the room. My voice, regardless of how firm it was, fell on deaf ears. In a Hail Mary moment, I sang out, “HEADS!!!! SHOULDERS, KNEES, AND TOES, KNEEES AND TOES!!!” (while dancing the moves). “HEADS!!!! SHOULDERS, KNEES, AND TOES, KNEEES AND TOES!!!” Holy shit! This worked! The kids began copying me and after each completion of the song I asked them to do it a different way. They were receptive for about 4 times and then that got boring and my life turned to shambles all over again.

After the first half of the day was over, it was time to go back to Saltycrax to make myself lunch and then head to project at 1:30PM. Today I was on swim. The weather in Cape Town changes frequently and can quickly become cold and windy. The pool water is so cold that you have to wear a wetsuit to get in. The kids arrived and were full of energy. One girl, Bianka, celebrated how clean the pool was. She said, “Oh my God, look how clean this pool is! I can see the bottles at the bottom of it and the leaves on the floor!” I guess my opinion of a clean pool is different than Bianka’s. On top of that, the length of the pool is the same size of the width of mine back home. We had a total of 12 people in the pool as we taught the kids swimming for 90 minutes and played Marco Polo, which as you could imagine just requires you to reach your arms out in order to win. Another ruckus, but definitely the lesser of the two evils. When we finished up, the kids got to have hot chocolate and two pieces of bread.

I met a guy from Copenhagen named Oliver at swim project and he and I walked to the grocery store immediately after, me still in my wetsuit. He spotted me for all my stuff since I didn’t have money on me and I heard that band from Saturday on the

speakers in the grocery store! I guess they really are big! I came back to Saltycrax, took a quick shower, then met Yanga for a beer in the bar area. Then two. Then three. It was good to catch up with him and hear about his aspirations to visit the States. He lives in a tent in the backyard and wishes to travel to see California and to stay at the Palms in Vegas.

Had a few other great conversations with local volunteers and staff members, and really feel like I'm starting to belong here now. It took 5 days but I feel like there is a level of comfort and familiarity at this point. I know most of the people around me, I'm appreciating the grounds much more, and it's incredible to connect with people from all over the world. Some of the most powerful realizations revolve around the volunteers who intended to come here for just a few weeks and never left. Literally people have been here since February, April, and the driver from today who is just a boss ass bitch, weaving in and out of third-world environments, unpaved roads, and handling locals like they're nothing has been here since June. She's fearless and super confident. She came here from England for two weeks, fell in love, got hired on as staff, and never left. She now runs a huge segment of the project team, drives volunteers to and from Dunoon, and interfaces directly with every teacher (or babysitter) at the schools to put together Christmas projects, staff more volunteers, organize schedules, and replenish supplies. It's remarkable.

She's 19.

Day 6: Bug Bites and Autographs

Slept peacefully while listening to the whistling of the wind and consistent downpour of the rain all throughout the night. I awoke early, as usual, but felt itchy as one does when waking up to unmistakable bug bites. I actually woke up from the buzzing of something in my bed. As I'm typing this, I can physically see the bug bites on my hands and arms. Aside from cuddling with a mosquito, I awoke feeling a new sense of home. Walking through the brisk and dewy air to House 22 (where there is food to make breakfast and lunch), I'm now exchanging "Good Mornings" with accents from all over the world with fellow housemates who have transitioned from strangers to friends. It's impossible to know everyone's name still, but there's an understanding in facial recognition that is strong enough to create some element of a bond. As I exit my room, I wave "Hello" to the bearded dude wearing dreadlocks dressed with Coke-can size plugs in his ears. His home is a tent in the backyard. He's not a

volunteer and to be honest I actually don't know what he does aside from sleep, listen to music, and enjoy a beer occasionally. I then pass through the reception/bar area and trade a "Good Morning" with the Norwegian girl (I say "the" like there's one. There are at least half a dozen from Norway). This pattern continues with a variety of individuals until I reach the kitchen in House 22. It's a choreographed dance between 40 or so volunteers, as we share 1 toaster, open and close the refrigerator door, and wash our own dishes. Once we've run out of dishes, people will often look to the community table and say, "Anyone almost done with a bowl? How about a spoon?" and patiently wait to clean it and take the place of another. There's an intimacy behind this that's quite cool. We've literally all come from all over the globe, have completely different backgrounds, and yet this is our common denominator; toasted white bread and giving back.

The Wings of Hope group was supposed to meet at the Volunteer House AKA "Vol House" at 8am. Because nobody is on time ever in South Africa, I (for once in my life) moved leisurely without prioritizing the time. As I began walking to the house, Molly and Nat urgently told me that my group was leaving and may have already departed from the house. They said, "RUN!" I ran to the "Vol House" perpetually repeating in my head, "There's no fucking way." I showed up at 8:05am and naturally I was the first person there. Molly and Nat were mistaking me for someone else in another group. I knew this wasn't right because we show up at 8am in order to put together a lesson plan before our 9am takeoff. I did not want a repeat of Monday's chaos so I decided to put together far more activities than probably even necessary, just so I had a go-to option and could change things up consistently if need be. After gathering the materials and putting together the plan(s), we headed to Dunoon.

The transportation consists of an old van of sorts, littered with dust, dirt, and footprints of past volunteers. It actually broke down yesterday and was stranded for 2 hours now that I think of it. There is no radio so we either sing for music or play something from someone's cell phone, hoping the thin treble speaker will fill the car adequately. It's hot so we roll down the windows, but once we get past 40MPH, the wind violently shakes the van to the point where we need to roll the windows back up to stay streamlined and not tip over.

We rolled into Dunoon and the same overwhelming sense of poverty and despair pierced my heart, not diluted at all from the day before. In fact, today was even more surreal. There's a stretch between my school and another that reeks of what

can only be described as a human waste smell. When one of the volunteers inquired as to what it was, the response was disturbing. Dead bodies. The stench that fills the air in that particular section is the scent of expired human bodies. It's too expensive for a proper burial so this is a poor man's form of cremation. I'm told that just last week, the volunteers that drove into Dunoon saw 5 dead bodies near the entrance.

We parked in front of Wings of Hope and immediately upon entering, roughly 100 kids ranging from 2 to 5 stampeded to hug me and the other volunteers. I heard phrases from, "YOU'RE BACK!" to "Are you my fatha?" It's incredible that these children just want to share their love and want nothing more than to be loved in return. We grasp each other and clench tightly for seconds at a time and rinse and repeat until we've felt the joy from dozens of students. After the celebration, we have the kids line up in front of each classroom and wait to go inside. I set the tone early with my class as I didn't want a rerun of the day before, and did my best to be a scary black lady from the start so they would respect me. They filed in one by one and took a seat. I immediately started them off with an activity that had the words "B-U-S" and "C-A-R" outlined with dots so they could fill them in. As I instructed them to trace the lines, I asked the kids questions about what a bus looks like, where do you see a bus, have you ever been on a bus, etc. Same with the "C-A-R". When things got out of control, as they always do, I bribed the students who were the quietest with a chance to play with a toy bus or toy car for their table. See, planning ahead...

We did this activity as well as one around their names until we broke for Playtime (this is how I met Beyoncé. Beyoncé fell in love with me and wouldn't leave my side. It was adorable and she's a good girl). Playtime is when all the kids go to their bags and eat a snack their parents packed and then get to play. It's amazing how quickly these children are willing to generously share their food with one another, especially when they see someone has nothing (This IS NOT the case with toys or school supplies. That's a civil war that involves roughly 3 timeouts every 5 minutes between the 30 kids). It's interesting to see how different the snacks are between all the kids and how different all their homes must be in terms of cooking, shopping, and what's available. They all eat their food, spill everywhere, and even swat the flies off each other's faces as they laugh together. There's a jug of water outside in the corner with 2 green plastic cups on top. This is for all the children to share when they are thirsty. They grab a cup, fill it up, drink from it, and put it back. The same 2 cups are used by all 100 or so kids. The erratic running nearly set me into a panic attack as the school

is not child safe...at all. There's a ravine about 6 inches wide for draining that runs across the inside parameter of all classrooms, about 4 feet from the door. Kids are constantly tripping on this and falling down. The windows that are cracked open also hang so low that the edges are almost exactly the height of a 4 year-old child, creating a poking hazard on the head or in the eye (look for these in supplemental photos).

After Playtime, we lined everyone back up again and tried to calm their energy from the last 30 minutes of wildness. The next activity was to color in a photocopied picture of prince or princess that was hand-drawn by a volunteer earlier that morning. I learned how difficult it must be to work in that classroom as a student when Beyoncé asked me for a black colored pencil; I couldn't differentiate the colors because there is no light in the room and you just hope there's enough sun shining through that day. As the kids were preoccupied with this, I had to take small groups to the bathroom to brush their teeth; balancing a quick oral hygiene task with keeping the coloring going was tricky to say the least. Not to mention, getting 30 4-year olds to brush their teeth is an extremely arduous exercise. Once it was noon, it was time to go.

We drove through the unpaved streets of Dunoon where it appears people make up the rules of the road as they go. Near the exit, we saw a man on the corner trying to sell a single can of Coke. He must have found it somewhere. We had about an hour to make lunch, hang out, and then meet at the Vol House for project. Today was skateboarding and as I approached, a cleaning lady was casually walking down the street with a filled up bag of laundry balancing on her head.

The kids arrived at 1:30pm and we began by doing a basic workout and stretching exercise near the outskirts of the pool with the swim project. It's funny to see what is considered exercise. After a 5-minute routine, the skate team split off and started suiting up with knee pads, elbow pads, and helmets. I was very excited for this day because before I strived to be a rockstar, I wanted to be a professional skateboarder and dedicated every minute of my life toward that for about 8 years. Needless to say, I have some tricks up my sleeve. Once we got started, I instantly became the favorite among the kids as they watched me nail kickflips, pop shove-its, 180s, long manuals, and big spins. I felt like I was competing in the VANS Triple Crown Circa 1996 alongside Ronnie Creager. It was awesome to skate with my fellow volunteers and see them enjoy a sport they had never tried before. We finished around 3pm

when the kids got their routine hot chocolate and bread. Another ritual (among the volunteers only) is to review our “compost” and “daisy” at the end of each project day. This is where we say one thing that could have been improved in the activity and one thing that we really enjoyed.

We were quickly getting to Beer-30, a time I made up and happen to enjoy every day after an exhausting morning and afternoon. I went back to my room, had a shower, and made my way to the Reception/Bar area for an ice cold Castle Lager, South Africa’s National Beer. I come back to my bed, sprawl out, and stare at the wall reflecting on the day. I’ve failed to mention my room is adjacent, DIRECTLY, adjacent to two public bathrooms. Not only do I hear the traffic and door-slamming as I’m in bed, but also the audible delights of the exiting of meals. In this exact moment, someone just passed my room saying, “I gotta puke” followed by the proof outside my window.

Signing up for the “Dish-Up” role has proven to be more than a kind gesture and instead has become my 3rd job. 5 nights ago I was nervously meeting people and slowly exploring the grounds, now I’m behind the bar, in the kitchen, and serving 50 people dinner (see photo of our Braai – also known as BBQ). On top of that, it’s always interesting to see what your options are when it’s finally your time to eat. For example, tonight I was left eating ribs, chicken, salad, and potatoes with a single butter knife. Have you ever tried eating a salad with a butter knife as your sole utensil?

After dinner, Eva, Aksel, and I spent over an hour and a half cleaning pots and pans. We spoke of music and when I mentioned James Vincent McMorrow as one of the artists I listen to, Eva stopped what she was doing and gave me a huge hug from behind as I continued washing. She couldn’t believe we had that in common as no one she knows listens to him in the Dominican Republic. The feeling was mutual. When we finally finished and began leaving the kitchen, another handful of huge pots came our way. My back literally hurts from being bent over washing so many dishes. I guess it’s time that the white man serves as the slave in Africa. Poetic in a way.

Meanwhile, a girl at Saltycrax had a shot in her ass today from this gnarly infection on her leg from a mosquito bite. Got me wondering if I’m going to catch Malaria after last night’s slumber party with the flesh-eating devil. She went on to tell me it

came from a rural area in Thailand she just left and not to worry about the mosquitos in this area of Africa. I've actually been told that before. Regardless, a sweet English girl named Gemma offered me oral medication and cream to help with the irritation. She also offered me milk. And to help with dishes (Note to self: Adjust filter on [Match.com](https://www.match.com) to yield British girls only). Speaking of British girls, there was a new one to the bunch today just stopping by for a couple of nights. Since Aksel found Champagne Blvd on Spotify last night, people have been coming up to me asking me to sing for them. It's very sweet. The newb at the bar, Laura, asked me what the name of my band was and I told her. She exclaimed that she knew us and her boyfriend listens to our record. I went along with it and thanked her but was really thinking, "Ummm....bullshit." A few hours later, I was walking through the backyard area and she flagged me down. Her boyfriend was on the phone and fanboying out hard asking if he could talk to me. I grabbed the phone and the dude literally couldn't even catch his breath when speaking. My first thought was, "this poor guy thinks he's talking to the lead singer of a different band." I asked him what his favorite song was as a form of qualifying him as a real fan. He responded with "The Destroyer" and "O.A.R. to Heaven" – HOLY SHIT!!! This just got real. This dude ACTUALLY listens to our band! He asked if I would autograph something for his girlfriend and she later came up to me in the bar and asked for a photo, stating that her boyfriend would kill her if she didn't get one. Now everyone is looking at me like I'm famous.

Oh, and I'm cage diving with great whites on Sunday with my new friend Oliver from Copenhagen.

Where. The Fuck. Am I?

Day Seven: Thanksgiving

It's amazing how blind we can be to clear beauty simply when it's not something we are used to seeing. I'm beginning to appreciate every detail in each nuance of every day. It's safe to say at this point that 2 weeks will not be long enough and I will greatly miss it here.

Today is Thanksgiving.

This morning was the normal routine of waking up, walking to the Saltycrax kitchen to fetch a dish and eating utensil, strolling over to House 22 where the food itself

resides, and fixing myself another yogurt granola delight with toast on the side. Got ready for the day, and headed to Dunoon to continue my newfound teaching career to two dozen 4-year-olds.

Halfway to Dunoon, I spotted a man on the corner trying to sell a single paintbrush. Immediately to the left was a place called Builder's Warehouse. I was now doing some math of my own.

We arrived at Wings of Hope and today I was EXTRA prepared, determined to have a quiet and well-behaved classroom. This is ultimately impossible to achieve consistently, but you take the wins as often as you can and strive to make them longer and longer. My first task was to have the kids trace the words "L-I-O-N" and "F-I-S-H" on a worksheet I had made earlier in the morning during the lesson plan development hour (see supplemental photo). As I got the class going and they shockingly were obeying, I glanced outside to breathe in the day a bit. Another morning heating up, sounds of undeveloped high octave voices in adjacent classrooms, and a 19-year-old mother sweeping the playground area with her baby tied to her back snugly. The school day is a balance between moments like these and utter chaos with "TEE-CHA! TEE-CHA!" shouted from all directions, posters falling, colored pencils kissing the ground, perpetual requests to use the toilet, raining Legos, and a student's foot in front of my face gesturing for me to tie their shoe.

In a quick moment of visiting the staff room for supplies, I noticed a girl who I presumed to be deaf after not responding to audible phrases normally and was making the same sound repeatedly very quietly to herself. I knelt down with her and explored this a bit more. Still the same outcome. I found two containers, one filled with small craft supplies and the other filled with pencils. I shook each of them one at a time to see if she would react differently to one sound over another as they would each create separate tones at different pitches. She somehow responded but it was only when I put each one up to her ear. I think she was feeling the vibration on the higher pitched craft supplies because that one would get her to smile. I then started to softly sing "Head, shoulders, knees and toes" with her while using my hands for each movement to see if she could copy me. She performed the hand gestures but was unable to sing along. Next, with our eyes locked on one another, I widely opened my mouth to make a "LA-LA-LA" sound and encouraged her to mimic me. She started to do it just like me but barely a sound was coming from her tiny

voice, mostly just the flick of the tongue. This continued with locked lips projecting an “OOOOOOOOOO” noise as well as a few other attempts to get her to start speaking. When I asked the surrounding adults in the area if she was deaf, not only did nobody know, but they didn’t even know who I was talking about. These kids are just another brick in the wall, getting lost in the shuffle of every day Dunoon daycare disguised as a school.

Shortly after our 2nd exercise, we broke for Playtime. Today Beyoncé found me right after her snack, wanted to play with me throughout the entire playground, and then switched to just holding my hand, walking the same back and forth path, kissing my wrist and hand intermittently in between moments of swinging from it when she got bored of walking. She asked me if we were going to paint or do a puzzle (because those are her favorite things). Knowing this wasn’t planned, I asked her if she’d dance with me to reverse the disappointment and we were soon the center-staged spotlight dancers of a corny ‘80s movie. After roughly 45 minutes of inseparable hand-holding, Beyoncé went completely silent and seemed sad. Every question I asked her fell on deaf ears and her upbeat personality was completely dormant. It took me about 10 minutes to realize nothing was wrong and she’s probably just tired. I put her down for a nap in the staff shoebox lounge on a princess mat and she was out cold. I guess these are what people would refer to as fatherly instincts.

As we left and were exiting Dunoon, I noticed a few women at different shacks sweeping out front of their metal home. This hit me on a different level. These people haven’t given up. They’re trying. And this is home. It’s impossible to imagine for me as it seems like a pointless task closely resembling the perpetual cleaning of a landfill. It’s inspiring to see the perseverance behind it all. It was at this point that our driver, Steph, explained that tomorrow is a half day and we never stay in Dunoon past 12pm as it’s extremely dangerous. I asked her to elaborate and she explained that citizens of Dunoon drink continuously from Friday to Sunday, all day long, and it becomes a very violent place. She had mentioned community punishments for stealing and/or raping consisting of stoning someone to death or even slaughtering them in public. Yes, she literally used the word “slaughtering.” I was still trying to make sense of it all to see how this micro village operates, asking more questions to grasp why this behavior occurs on weekends only. It was then that Steph simply asked me, “Have you ever seen the movie The Purge?” I used deductive reasoning to understand the rest.

We headed back to Saltycrax for the 1-hour lunch period before everyone goes to their respective projects. Today I was on surf. It's pretty cool to walk from house to house, especially at this time during the day, and see all of the volunteer shirts passing one another, all on the same break. It's gotten quite special to share this similarity with everyone on the grounds. We all wake up early, go sweat and put in hard work for the whole morning, with enough time for a High-5 "Hello" and "Goodbye" before we're onto the 2nd half of our day. We'll all meet again for our community dinner and drinks at the Reception/Bar area after, before we do it all over again the next day.

It was Mikey's birthday today. He's the instructor for the surf project. He's turning 23 and is one of the coolest dudes I've ever met. We met at Vol House to gather up the surfboards, stack them in the trailer, get the wetsuit gear, and head out to the beach. I'm with the same 5 people every afternoon for the different projects we're on; Eva (Dominican Republic), Oliver (Denmark), Aksel (Sweden), Lisa (Sweden), and Suzanne (Finland). It's been fun to swim with each other, skateboard together, and now get in the ocean and ride waves side by side one another. The first 30 minutes was us on our own as we waited for the kids to arrive, entering the piercing cold water of 10 degrees (50 Fahrenheit). Eva and Aksel had barely surfed before and got up on almost every single wave they attempted. It was so impressive. Surprisingly, so did I. I just remember thinking, "There's no way in hell I'm going to be the 30-year-old from California who can't surf." This is another memory that will be catalogued in my greatest hits. It reminded me a lot of being in a band. Waiting for the next set, all of us sitting on our boards, staring off at an unobstructed view of Table Mountain, catching waves with 1 of the 7 Wonders of Nature to our backs as we rode into shore. We all taught the kids and supervised them one on one for about 30 minutes until it was time for them to meet at the playground up the beach for an upcoming birthday celebration. We finished off with another 30 minutes of surfing to ourselves.

We met at a park that sits adjacent to the sand and watched the kids chase each other around as we prepped two cakes and a few bags of chips to celebrate Mikey's birthday along with 5 other November birthdays among the kids. Shannon forgot to purchase the proper tools to cut a cake as well as plates and eating utensils. That's something I would do. Everyone grew very impressed when I quickly reacted by asking if anyone had floss and showed the group how to use it as a precise way to divide slices of a cake. I then used a pocket knife as a serving utensil. After the

volunteers and students came together to sing Happy Birthday, we served up the kids one by one with a piece of half-melted chocolate cake to their small hands where they contently walked about the park with evidence of a party all over their hands and faces.

Driving back to Saltycrax, I spotted a buff midget riding a skateboard and a homeless man with a sign that read, "Wife taken by ninjas, need money for karate lessons." You can't make this shit up.

Beer-30 was at a later hour today, as we had an extended afternoon of surf project. I came back to shower and saw Yanga emerge from his tent formally dressed as if he was going to a Sunday church service. I called out to him and asked what the occasion was. He said, "It's Mikey's birthday dinner, broo" (yes it's "BROO" not "BRO"). So badass. Yanga is one of the sweetest, smartest, and down to earth individuals I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. And he's funny as hell. Just days ago I noticed he created a sign next to his tent that says, "Little Dunoon: Population 1."

After my shower, I paid for a round of 4 shots and 4 beers for myself, Yanga, Molly, and Mikey to celebrate his birthday (\$9 USD). Molly is the skate instructor and resides from Boston originally, so our toast was dual-purpose, combining Mike's conquest to 23 as well as appreciating Thanksgiving on a different continent. To my surprise, an American Facebook friend of mine saw that I was in South Africa and coincidentally happens to be in Cape Town on vacation. He kindly reached out to me earlier in the week and invited me to join his formal Thanksgiving dinner at a friend's apartment near Table Mountain.

Preparing for the drive to town and a traditional Thanksgiving feast, I walked to the nearby convenience store for a couple bottles of wine and searched for a couple of pies. Found the wine but no luck on the pies. I ordered an Uber on WIFI and asked my driver if he would swing by a grocery store on our way to town to which he kindly obliged. As he waited outside, I ran into a Pick 'N Pay and darted to the Bakery section. My digital friend, Fernando, mentioned his craving for pumpkin or pecan pie, but explained that I will most likely only be able to find milk tart. What the hell is milk tart? Sure enough, he was right. I grabbed the best-looking milk tart and apple tart pies and made my way back out to the idle Uber.

Roughly 40 minutes later, I got buzzed into Fernando's friends building and met everyone for the first time. Fernando, Kat, Ryan, Caroline, and Barry. 5 amazingly hospitable individuals who immediately greeted me with a beer and an unbelievable balcony view of Table Mountain (see photo). We listened to tunes as the sun set, exchanging funny stories, and toasting one another with the opening of each new bottle of suds.

We sat down to a full spread, home-cooked by Fernando himself. Not only was I super impressed, but the Pick 'N Pay employee was also astonished when he saw a man shopping for groceries. He explained to Fernando, "Ya know, marriage is a workshop. You work, SHE shops."

Dusk turned into night and several libations later, it was time for me to head back to Saltycrax as I would be meeting Yacoob at 6am sharp for a long day of exploring and a 12-noon skydive. WIFI was out and I attempted an Uber order for roughly 15 minutes to no avail. Barry came to the rescue when he mentioned his driver friend, Gift, who accommodated these guys anytime they needed a lift. After a 30-second call, Gift was on his way. He charged me R200 for a 25-mile ride (\$12 USD) and I slept the whole way home.

Now it's after midnight, and I need to wake up in 5 hours to see the Top of Table Mountain before jumping out of a plane at 10,000 feet.

If there isn't another journal entry after this, please give my belongings to Carl.

Day Eight: King of the Mountain

After about 5 hours of sleep, I was up again, hopping in the shower and getting ready for a 6am pickup by Yacoob. I'm fully acclimated to South African time now so this was far more brutal than it would have been just days ago. It was an incredibly surreal moment to reflect back on waking up early for past Black Fridays when I was hustling in the retail space, compared to electively exiting my bed to go and explore the southern tip of Africa.

I waited outside Saltycrax with the oversized souvenirs I purchased during our last outing in an attempt to send them home via DHL so I wouldn't have to worry about carrying them with me on my flights. Yacoob was running late so I just enjoyed the

morning sunrise in peace, patiently outside the gate. He arrived closer to 7am and we were off to Table Mountain.

After an hour of traffic, we landed at the base of this majestic mountain, where Yacoob told me he would pick me up in 2 hours. It took an hour to get through the line and soon I was on my way to the top of 1 of the 7 Wonders of Nature in the world.

Most of the volunteers who have visited this landmark have hiked up the mountain not only for the experience but to further appreciate the view when reaching the top. There are several different paths at various inclines and even rock steps that are completely at a vertical near the front. To give you an idea of the height, the peak hovers around 3,800 feet above sea level. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile tall. In other words, I'm taking the 5-minute cable car and bypassing the physical trek, as I have my early 20's. The cable car fits 65 people and spins around slowly as it elevates up to the summit of the mountain. There's glass partially surrounding the transportation bubble with a couple spots containing open windows. If you're afraid of heights, you'd definitely want to stay in the center and not look down. However, it's absolutely incredible to be pulled up, looking at a 360 degree view of Cape Town from all angles.

The top of the mountain is enormous and you could stay up there exploring different paths for hours. There's a café that offers a full buffet, a cart that serves beer/wine/champagne, and a full coffee bar. YES!!! REAL FOOD!!! NO TOAST!!! This was one of my first stops where I built up a sizable plate, ordered a mimosa, and grabbed my first coffee in a week. God, I've missed coffee. I ate my breakfast in peace while staring off at the opposite side of the mountain with a clear view of the ocean and Camp's Bay. I then continued walking the different paths while trying to keep hold of my phone through the extreme wind during each selfie. This is the setting for a perfect proposal. It's phenomenally breathtaking. Or, in the case of the depressed businessman from two years ago, the last place you'd want to see, when he parked his Audi R8, gave it to the valet attendants and jumped to his death from the peak of the mountain.

I made my way back down and found Yacoob marketing himself to a tour guide, again, as he always does. Pretty much everywhere we go Yacoob is hustling to get more work. It's impressive and something we should see more of in the States. We made our way through town and passed Blouberg (where I'm staying) to hit DHL

before the 12:30pm skydive. Yacoob's mom called for the 2nd time (as she always does) explaining she found toilet paper for cheap. Yacoob explained he was driving and couldn't talk right now concluding the conversation quickly with, "Bye-bye, bye-bye- bye-bye, bye-bye" (as HE always does). After getting the price to ship my items back home, I opted to be inconvenienced during the flight rather than take out a 2nd mortgage on my house to afford it. Hit an ATM and continued to the jumping spot.

We pulled off the main highway onto a dirt road and drove in for roughly a mile. As we arrived at our destination, I saw a small blue dwelling of sorts with the sign "Welcome to Skydive Cape Town" on it (see photo). Behind it was a metal airplane hangar that housed old couches and a litter of pit bulls. I popped a Xanax and a Dramamine to curb my nerves and motion sickness and offered the same to 3 Swedish strangers awaiting their jump before me. From the expression on their faces looking at this tattooed guy unzipping a backpack, I quickly realized it just looked like some dumb American offering up drugs. Needless to say, they declined. I filled out the form that essentially says "Don't sue us if you die" and that really kicked in as a reality when one of the fields is "Family Member and Contact Info."

The instructor came over and told me he would strap me up in 15 minutes. I patiently waited in silence as the Swedes weren't too keen on conversing with a scary pill-popper from the States. 15 minutes later, we had been told the wind had picked up and they would monitor it for the next 30 minutes to see if it would be safe to continue the flight. 20 minutes later, we were cancelled. I rescheduled for the following day at 9:30am and rapidly felt the drugs closing my eyelids as Yacoob drove me back to Saltycrax (see photo of me and Yacoob 2 minutes before I went dark). I passed Mikey on the way to my room to see when they were going surfing as I could now join, but he was leaving in a matter of minutes, and my body was going to have a nap whether I liked it or not. 3 hours later, I awoke.

Wednesdays and Fridays are braai nights and I'm still on "Dish Up" for the week, so it was another BBQ to prep for and another few dozen pots and pans to clean upon completion. Braais are in the Reception/Bar area instead of the other meals that take place at House 22 (see video). The volunteers work up an appetite while sharing stories of the day over shots of Jager and bottles of beer. Yanga gives me a hand clap and hug every single time he sees me. Even if there's only a 1 minute gap between visits. Tonight he said, "You're not a volunteer here, broo. You're my nigga."

The order of who gets served first begins with guests, then new volunteers, then existing volunteers, then staff. The female staff members near me were taken back when I refused to go in front of them, regardless of the order of operations. Ladies first.

After the meal, I washed the dishes with Aksel and Eva's replacement for tonight (as she was hiking Table Mountain). Soon after, a large group of us went to the local karaoke bar where I sang NSYNC's Tearin' Up My Heart and later closed the night with Don't Stop Believin' to a crowd of roughly 200, surprisingly nailing every note and gaining a new South African fan base. I walked home feeling fulfilled, looking up toward the sky completely crowded of bright stars, something that we don't get back home.

I felt like fucking Simba looking up at all the kings who had been here prior to me.

Day Nine: Freefalling

Okay, I'm being a baby now. I don't want to leave.

One of the really cool things about this organization and Saltycrax itself is that they want to accommodate their volunteers as much as possible. If you'd rather surf than skate one day, no problem, we'll switch you. If you want to climb Lion's Head but you have school, no problem, we'll find you a replacement. Yesterday was one of those days. It was the only available day to skydive which ended up being cancelled due to heavy winds, but I had the entire day away from Wings of Hope because of my initial plan. Unfortunately, not only did the jump get postponed, but Beyoncé tugged on a T-shirt of another volunteer and asked, "Where's tee-cha Jay?"

It's Saturday morning and Yacoob kindly agreed to pick me up and take me to the Skydive facility free of charge due to the inclement weather schedule from the day before. As we drove there, I noticed 2 things: 1.) Yacoob has the same USB stick in his car playing the same 90s R&B hits from all week and 2.) People in South Africa flash their hazards as a sign of saying "thank you" when passing lanes. It was easy to recognize the first point after hearing "Kisses in the Moonlight" no less than half a dozen times in 6 days.

I arrived at the Cape Town Skydive venue right around 9:15am, 15 minutes prior to my scheduled jump. Between the time it took to get suited up and my departure from the plane, I watched groups fall from the sky and rush the hangar filled with adrenaline sharing their experience. Soon, I was paired up with my tandem partner, Rob, dressing in the proper gear while listening to a heavy Deftones track.

We made our way to the rickety airplane, walking on pebbles sleeping in dirt paths, as I overheard one instructor say to another, "Yeah broo, people won't stop sending me that video of the girl falling out of her harness." This naturally made me feel reassured and panic-free.

I entered the cabin of the plane which could adequately be compared to the size of two coffins stacked on top of one another. 6 of us squeezed in, knees to chest, preparing for the 20-minute climb to 9,000 feet. I was facing the opposite direction, and as we took off I silently bid farewell to the South African soil, deeply hoping I'd return in one piece. As we slowly chugged our way to the tipping point, we had a clear view of Table Mountain, Cape Point, the beautiful Atlantic Ocean, and every other speck that decorated the ground from our aerial view.

It was calming until the airplane door was slid open by another instructor, and the mild wind we felt coercing its way into the vehicle was transformed into a violent hurricane. Out went Stephen, a stick figure from the UK, visibly more scared than me. As he made his involuntary exit, I witnessed his body flee the rest of us faster than I could even measure. This was the first time my heart actually started beating a bit faster (thanks Xanax).

My instructor, Rob, was doing some sort of waddle behind me, inching me closer and closer to the edge. I showed him how loose my harness felt like a Jansport backpack I could just slide off. He assured me I was fine. Now my legs were hanging out of the plane and I felt an uncontrollable strength pushing my limbs at a height I'd never experienced outdoors. He pulled my head back and forced us to make the leap, free-falling from 9,000 feet in the air at 125mph for 35 seconds. After a couple of white girl "Woo-hoo" screams and a completely dry mouth, I felt the parachute open and catapult me upward, changing the perpendicular shape of my body to a perfectly erect vertical.

It took about 5 minutes to float down, appreciating the unobstructed view of every South African landmark in pure silence. I was meditating in thin air before Rob asked, "Do you want to steer the parachute?" My knee-jerk internal response was "FUCK NO" but my lips managed to extract the words, "Sure."

I grabbed hold of both handles and instantly felt the sensitivity behind the wind, controlling our descent. It was quite intimidating actually. I did a few zig-zags toward the landing space and then kindly offered (insisted) Rob take the wheel. My feet touched the sand and I was home free. Time to grab my pen and check that shit off my bucket list.

Yacoob, waiting with my belongings and taking pictures from my phone, was ready to head out, with the caveat of us taking another group with us as he was obviously hustling for more business during my launch from the clouds. He took me back to Saltycrax and I paid him for the free ride just so he could get his car washed from the dirt road. Like me, Yacoob keeps his shit clean no matter what.

I walked through the grounds to see who was doing what on a Saturday and only spotted a few volunteers. Most were out wine tasting or on a tour of some kind. I made my way to House 22 to make lunch alongside one of the maids who would be cleaning my room 5 minutes later, and reflected on the fact that I just jumped out of a fucking airplane while chiefting YET ANOTHER ham and cheese sandwich.

I made tentative plans on Thanksgiving to join my new friends from Cape Town to celebrate Kat's birthday in Bellville, at a pool party at Barry and Ryan's parents' estate. First, I went to my room to catch up on work for a bit before calling an Uber, throwing on my board shorts, and heading about 30 minutes out into another personally unexplored area of South Africa.

As we weaved off the highway and drove through wide-paved neighborhoods, I noticed a golf course and tennis club as anchors to the residential neighborhood we were in. Before long, I looked up and saw an oversized residence dressed in pink balloons and thought to myself, "We're here."

I approached the door which was wide open but still guarded by a locked metal gate, restricting unwanted visitors. The bell didn't work so I called out to the first person I saw. She granted me access with an English bully escorting her (much like my own),

named Bentley. I made my way to the backyard, exiting through panoramic bi-folding glass doors, seeing dozens of beautiful people surrounding a swimming pool and smoke arising from the background as a braai was taking place. I was warmly greeted with a beer and started to meet the friends of my new friends. I felt like fucking Freddie Prinze Jr. on a movie set in the 1990s. 10 minutes later, I was in the pool with a can of Castle Light and a squirt gun, conversing with South African folks under the Summer sun.

We were served delicious burgers accompanied by a self-serving table full of accoutrement ranging from diced pickles to brie. FUCKING brie on a burger. Fancy schmancy. After a few hours, I called an Uber, and headed back to Saltycrax to allow myself enough time to shower and be in the kitchen for my "Dish Up" duties. I left my room feeling rejuvenated and made my way to the Reception/Bar area. I attempted to buy a drink for Yanga but he insisted to get me instead. I redundantly told him I would pay to which he responded with the delivery of a life lesson: "Jay, you must learn how to accept gifts from other people." I stood silently and waited for my 1-ounce present. Seconds later, we were hugging as we always do when we drink.

I bounced from group to group to see how everyone's day was. Unfortunately, Mikey was down because someone broke into the van and stole his surfboards. Thievery is fucking insane in South Africa. If it's not nailed down, consider it gone. This was also the time I realized that my final full day off was going to be tomorrow. I had cage-diving scheduled (and paid for) with the great white sharks of South Africa, but after much surveying, a common response of sea sickness left me feeling like I should weigh out some alternatives. I made an executive decision to cancel and figured I'd ring Yacoob for a ride to wine country instead. After notifying Nat at the Saltycrax reception, she said the money was non-refundable, so I made a public announcement to the entire bar, offering a free shark-diving afternoon to anyone who would bite. Congratulations, Craig. You're in.

After dinner and dishwashing, a group of us landed at a common dining table area in Saltycrax, playing the drinking game, "Never have I ever." About an hour later, we all headed to the same karaoke bar from the night before, as an encore for my "Don't Stop Believing" cover was repeatedly requested. We sang and drank all night long. The girls wanted to go to Long Street, a main drag in town, most famously known for the sure fact you will be mugged just walking from one establishment to another as a

tourist. I've grown very protective of these ladies and am stern with setting rules as to what will and won't happen. They call me grandpa.

After the karaoke bar, we headed to the Thursty Turtle (yes, "Thursty" not "Thirsty") and had another few rounds of drinks. I tend to be the one ordering up for everyone at the bar and picking up the tab as it's just easier that way; now everyone thinks I'm rich. The volunteers are beside themselves insisting they get the next round to pay me back. I explain to them, when you're 30, just take care of the 20-year-olds you're with and pay it forward. The grand total for 14 people typically adds up to no more than \$25 USD. Definitely puts things into perspective.

I coherently stumbled out of the bar around 1am, making sure the remaining girls still had a man to escort them back on the walk home, and made my way to my studio suite at Saltycrax, where I would sink into my sheets and enjoy a few hours of hibernated slumber until my wake-up call at 6:45am, for another Yacoob pickup time.

Day Ten: Curbing a Hangover

Last night's festivities yielded delayed evidence as I pulled a sock from my sweatshirt pocket, climbing into Yacoob's passenger seat. He noticed I was a bit beat and it was early. A hangover in South Africa is referred to as being "babaloss."

Yacoob knows I don't like crowded places and since we had wine tasting on the agenda, he insisted on picking me up at 7:30am to beat the tour buses that would inevitably serve as the bottleneck to our stride. Real serenity is sipping fermented grapes in solitude, not overhearing the chaos of a group of 20 with cameras dangling from their necks.

I zoned out a tad, staring out the window, listening to the radio as we made our way to wine country. This was the first moment I recognized it's Christmas time. Sort of a weird realization being in sweltering heat in the Summer of Africa, both because it's 90 degrees nearing December and I'm 10,000 miles away from home. I took in the holiday music and panned my vision to fully download the new scenery of an unexplored route thus far.

About an hour out, we exited the highway and saw a few different young guys trying to sell fruit to passing cars. I was half surprised that Yacoob rolled down his window to inquire on the price for a nectarine, and not surprised at all when he tried to work the guy down from R30 to R10 (\$2 USD to 70 cents). Yacoob doesn't pay full price for anything. Especially not unrefrigerated produce in the middle of an intersection.

Before ingesting more alcohol to accompany the leftovers still residing in me from the night before, I figured it'd be a good idea to lay the foundation of the day with breakfast. We stopped off at a small café near the stretch of wineries, where I ordered 2 lattes, a large bottle of water, and my classic go-to menu item: Eggs Benedict with Salmon. This was exactly the sort of pick-me-up I needed. I was now recharged and ready to enjoy the fields of vines that generate the perfect blend of yummy on my tongue and smiles on my brain.

Our first stop was Mullineux & Leeu, a winery founded by an American girl who graduated from UC Davis (in California), trying her hand at international wine-making. Well, not trying. This place was recently ranked The Best Winery in South Africa via the authoritative opinion of the Platter's Guide. Basically, a bible for winos. A strapping young man by the name of Admire from Zimbabwe introduced himself and began the sequence of taste-testing for me as I tried to pay attention to what he was saying, focus on not being hungover, and flick the half-inch sized ant off my shirt...all at the same time. He ended with a magical stage right exit with the words, "Enjoy." Now I was peacefully drinking Wine Enthusiast's #16 wine while absorbing the fine sounds of Otis Redding.

We continued our exclusive and unofficial wine tour, next heading to an establishment owned by an affluent South African with vacation properties available to rent locally, in New Zealand, and in Fiji. The getaway spot in Fiji is called Dolphin Island, suited for 4 couples to take over entirely. Our server said he would be in soon in case we had any questions and Yacoob finished his sentence with an assumptive giveaway. He does this everywhere we go. It sounds something like this:

"Server: Fantastic, well our owner will be here shortly so you can speak with him directly and meet him face...."

Yacoob: (interrupting and taking over the sentence) "and then he gives us maybe a couple of bottles of wine or something for the road."

He did the same thing at DHL yesterday when the cashier said she would check on the price and as she looked in her book Yacoob casually said, “And of course you’ll give us your employee discount and everything.”

I conversed with the man to inquire on pricing and he referred me to his published book, *Worlds Apart*, with photos and descriptions of all 3 slices of Heaven (see photo). I saw a tour bus entering the property and that was my cue to close out and get the hell out of there. We asked our colored server to bring us the credit card machine so I could pay before his time got monopolized by the incoming clan (Note: In South Africa, not only is referring to someone as being ‘colored’ not derogatory, it’s encouraged as it’s something to be proud of given the history and heritage of the country. Note 2: You always ask for the credit card machine to come to the table so you can swipe yourself. If you allow a server to take your card and run it at the register, you run the risk of your information getting copied and stolen).

Our last tasting was at a locally recommended winery, where I placed an order for 5 decent pours of red blends only, coming to a total of R25 (just over \$1 USD). I sipped slowly, appreciating the incredible view of the gardens. I walked the bar area and overheard an American accent. I immediately introduce myself in these situations as it’s very uncommon. I met Lisa and Eli from Washington, D.C., currently on their honeymoon celebrating a fresh marriage of 6 ripe and healthy months. We chatted for a bit, then I was ready to go. I missed my friends at Saltycrax and wanted to see what everyone was up to.

On the way back, we drove in silence. I remember cognitively acknowledging how happy I was in this moment; especially when passing a bumper sticker that read, “I used to have a life but my job ate it.” I also remember secretly wanting to hear Brandy’s hit single from the ‘90s, “Have You Ever?” and knew it was track 45 on Yacoob’s USB stick. My energy must have made my wish come true and I was soon transported to reliving the days of my middle school crush, and oddly got a whiff of Cool Water cologne.

I asked Yacoob what his daughter wanted for Christmas. He said she wanted a bike, a tablet, and a girl-themed (I forget the brand) purse. She’s only 2. I pried a little bit more to see what her interests were and understand her personality further. He told me how much the gifts cost and nonchalantly explained, “Yeah, you know she ride the bike for 3 months, then we give it to someone who doesn’t have a bike. Do you

know what I'm trying to say, broo?" I pushed this a bit more to make sure I was understanding. I asked, "So in a few months you're going to tell your daughter you're giving her bike away?" He responded with, "Yes, broo. She gets to ride it for a few months, then we give it to someone else to try who can't afford a bike." Now I felt like Grammy was somewhere in Yacoob speaking to me from above.

We were nearing Blouberg when Yacoob told me a story from 3 months ago. He did a pick up, drove about 10 minutes, then was asked to turn back around to the original location. He felt like something peculiar was going on when his suspicions were instantly confirmed as he felt the ice-cold cylinder of a 9mm pistol on the back of his head. He was instructed to put his hands on the steering wheel so he could be zip-tied to the car during the robbery. Yacoob calmly explained that he refused to do that and offered up the R200 (\$15 USD) he had and a broken GPS. The gunman got frustrated and ended up jumping out of the car. I was audibly shocked by the story, but it was just another day in the life for Yacoob. He went on to explain that all his cabbie friends have been robbed in Dunoon at least once.

About a minute away from Saltycrax, Yacoob spoke up about wanting to have a drink with me as we have not yet shared a toast together. I complied and we headed to the nearby beachfront joint called Pakalolo's, a dive bar vibe with an incredible ocean view. We ran into his friends from the UK, Nikki and Clay, had a couple drinks, and headed out shortly after I deadlifted a collapsed man off the ground to perch his slouched body back up at the bar. I don't even think he knew he fell.

I took a short nap while Jess cooked up Spaghetti Bolognese, quickly falling asleep to the talking voices outside my room leaking through the window.

I met my crew at House 22 for our last night of "Dish Up." Eva, Aksel, and I have grown quite close because of this nightly routine. It's one of those things that will end up being salient in my mind and sticking with me for the rest of my life. Sharing stories of the day at dusk and organizing dishes to be put away later into the night. All in good company.

I had a few beers with Jess and the girls after her fantastic meal while the second half of the group watched Charlie and the Chocolate Factory behind us. Everyone was tired from the night before.

I made my classic Irish Goodbye exit and was off to bed. Tomorrow I'm teaching Molli how to do a kickflip.

Day Eleven: Raising the Roof

This morning kickstarted at 2:30am as I felt myself doing a continuous round of applause with my elbows to curb the itching from my collected bites. Eventually I got up to start the day and smelled the shared plumbing as I was brushing my teeth and the toilet next door flushed. I was out of bottled water again so I just grabbed an old one and filled it up in the sink, convincing myself I had waited a few minutes and the water was clean enough.

I met Eva in the Teacher's Lounge (AKA garage with supplies at Vol House) to start creating our lesson plan for the day. Today was also the first day Katie was not joining us. Eva came up with a great idea to draw a large Christmastree and have the kids color in ornaments to tape onto it, creating a holiday decoration for the classroom. We put together a few more lessons and activities as backups in case the attention spans were running extra short today. Soon we were off, in the bus, on a typical Monday morning ride to Dunoon.

I'm starting to get my geographical bearings a bit more in Dunoon, making mental landmarks in my head for north, south, east, and west. Recognizing the wooden posts with abortion advertisements on it, stray dogs surrounding the same few shops, and the iconic tipped over car on the corner of the 2nd intersection. These all lead me to Wings of Hope each morning, where I am greeted with a sea of twig arms wrapping around my body and in the case of today, an "I love you" in the middle of the group hug.

Today is a halfday. As are all Mondays. And Fridays. It's sad that having halfdays and more playtime for kids is just easier and provides more relief to those in charge of lesson-planning and babysitting (AKA me). Lennox asked for a drink of water prior to going into class and signaled that the jug had run dry. Before I could lift the container he disappeared behind me and started drinking from a hose.

An important thing to know about the density of these classrooms, is that the room for seating is so compressed that the kids literally cannot scoot out of their chairs to move. Instead, we are often picking them up by the armpits to transport them

about. When it's time to sit back down, we lift them toward the ceiling and maneuver a sort of "slide into the crevice" situation. After the decoration collaboration (yeah, sometimes I rhyme) it was finally playtime (see, I did it again). The kids jolted out the door, grabbing their backpacks, and started snack time with their peers. The deaf sweet pea from last week was calmly leaned up against the door eating an apple.

This begins at 10:30am everyday and lasts until 11:00am, when we continue the lessons for the day. On Mondays, however, playtime begins at 10:30am and goes for 2 hours straight. This was going to be an exhausting morning/afternoon. I wiped Beyonce's yogurt-face cheeks and it was now time to play!

The first hour was filled with celebrating Teacher Tina's birthday (another volunteer) with chocolate cake and balloons for each student. The kids all had to wait in line for a balloon and couldn't choose their color since there was a finite supply, but when my Beyonce wants a pink balloon, best believe she gets one and doesn't wait in line. Lesson #47: In life, it's all about who you know.

It got hot, then hotter, then really hot. Beyonce came and asked me if I could remove her tights because of the heat. I had to check with someone else as:

A) I don't even know how high those things go and in the States you would be executed if you tried to find out.

B) I don't know the rules with all of that. Maybe a girl teacher should do this.

Some fellow volunteers assured me it was fine so I slipped off her shoes and made her more comfortable. She explained to me as I was helping her that they are called socks, not tights. She must have overheard my question to Tina. I was putting her shoes back on with the buckles and said, "Okay, Cinderella, time for me to put your glass slippers back on." She pointed at my sunglasses and said, "Take off these things." Once she had my undivided attention and could see my eyes she corrected me sternly with, "I'm Beyonce. Not Cinderella."

I got to know a lot of the kids from the other classes too. I'm the guy with Nelson Mandela tattooed on his arm (actually a portrait of Salvador Dali but the kids point and say, 'Mandela!').

After school, we had our weekly Volunteer Meeting at the Vol House at 1:30pm. Gail is the manager of the SAVE organization and runs these meetings. Today she enlightened us more on the culture in Dunoon, reminding us how important our impact is on the pre-teens on surf/swim/skate projects. These kids are at a crossroads at this age where they will either continue with school or become a gangster. If you want to leave the gang in Dunoon, you're able to, so long as you understand one of your family members will be killed as payment for your departure.

Last night I caught up with Gail and told her I'd like to know exactly what is needed in each of the schools, where money is going in terms of donations, and I'd like to have a proper meeting with her to find out more. She agreed to meet with myself and some other staff members today after the meeting.

We walked over to the SAVE office around 2pm (another garage in the back of House 22) and sat down on whatever we could find, sidestepping boxes and miscellaneous items along the way. Last night Gail told me that my school, Wings of Hope, is in desperate need of a new roof. It's Summer now but when Winter comes back around and it begins raining more often, all the classrooms leak and the kids get wet while they're sitting at their desks. They've been saving and raising money for months and received a quote for the work back in August. I asked her to see the quote when we meet. She sort of chuckled telling me it wasn't cheap and quickly disregarded my interest but obliged in a, "HA, okay...yeah sure, I'll show you the quote" sort of way.

She began by going over all the existing projects and where she sees the future for various schools. One school in particular needs renovations but they are unable to get in there to do the work because squatters took it over. Now, much like the States, they can take legal action and have the school vacant tomorrow. However, NOT like the States, this is a sure way to have your school burned down as you just stole someone's home. This happened with a church just recently. Instead, you need to wait for the government to place the squatters elsewhere before you're able to have your property back. At least if you want your property still standing.

She went down the list going over items like fans in the classrooms that get hot, ink for printers, and more porridge for breakfast. Then she showed me the quote for the roof at Wings of Hope. In a moment, I embarrassingly experienced a gut-wrenching

reality that made me feel both grateful that I could help and sick to my fucking stomach on how much I could. To replace the entire roof on the whole school is going to cost less than one of my car payments. Now you can understand the embarrassing shame running through my bones, like I hit the lottery and never shared the wealth. Needless to say, tomorrow Gail and I are going to the vendor to pay for the job in full and Beyonce's little head won't ever get dripped on again.

I think Gail and Steph saw an opening after witnessing my willingness to give, and subsequently asked me to be Santa Claus at the school, Babes, tomorrow morning. Jesus, sure, why not?

After a quick walk to the nearby convenience store to replenish my water and snack stash, I had an appointment with Molli (the skate instructor) to teach her how to do a kickflip. We worked on this for about 20 minutes or so before cruising back to the Reception/Bar area where me and my group of 8 would wait for an Uber to take us to Moyo, an upscale restaurant on the water that serves native South African cuisine.

Moyo has an awesome vibe to it! You walk up, there's indoor/outdoor seating and several tables that are hovered over water with surfboards as benches (see photo). Due to the wind, we elected to be inside and enjoy our first meal out together. Eva, Aksel, and I had the luxury of doing this tonight as we were finally retired from "Dish Up." We ordered countless starters including obscure dishes such as crocodile pies and smoked snoek (a fish Yacoob tells me is only caught in Cape Town). The guys ordered up the Mixed Grill that serves 4 as an entrée which consisted of lamb, filet, and ostrich. I was really hoping to eat zebra but no luck.

We sipped on our cocktails, toasted one another, and watched the sun descend, sinking like quicksand into the horizon.

It was perfect.

Day Twelve: South African Santa Claus

Woke up with a pep in my step as I knew today was going to be the day I could pay for Wings of Hope to have a new roof in time for Winter. Left my room to drop off my last set of laundry at the Reception/Bar area, greeted Mikey with a "Good

Morning!” then headed over to the Vol House to help Eva with today’s lesson plan since I wouldn’t be with her during the first part of the morning.

Gail and I went to Saltycrax and fired up our computers to catch up on our respective work prior to leaving. I was on a mission to deduce a plan that would get money from the U.S. to South Africa without automatically stopping payment on all my accounts for suspicion of fraud. No such luck but found a workaround and the deposit went through.

We drove to Dunoon and visited a school called Babes, a completely pink-painted structure that housed a family and served as a school to about 100 native Dunoonians. Gail handed me a bag and a pillow and told me to get dressed. The reason we were there kind of slipped my mind until I opened the package and remembered I’m going to be Santa Claus today. The pillow was my belly. I tried to figure that whole thing out and admittedly took a few bathroom selfies as St. Nick. Another “Where the fuck am I?” moment.

The kids were screaming in the other room anticipating me walking out the door. I was in a band all over again playing a sold-out show and the crowd was on fire. Only instead of the sound guy saying, “You’re up” it was Gail conducting the audience to project in unison, “Come out, Fatha Crease-moss!” I hit the linoleum stage (plastic chair in front of the desks) and played up the part of Santa as I slowly sat down, pretending to be a fat guy, wedging my way into the seat. Hopefully this never becomes a reality one day.

I began handing out shoebox gifts while each child’s name was called one by one. They would light up as they walked toward me, preciously grateful for the box that contained 1 article of clothing, a small toy, and hygienic products. Gail would snap a photo of me handing the gift to each student and we rinsed and repeated about 100 times. Surprisingly, only two of the 4-year olds feared me. Extra surprising considering I’m simply a scary white man in a makeshift beard, sweating with the pillow belly now up to my neck, just loitering in a classroom taking photos with kids. I really have underestimated the power behind a child’s imagination. After all of the kids received their gifts, it was time to change and head over to Wings of Hope to catch the 2nd half of my shift.

When I entered the classroom, there was an eruption of cheers. After trying to calm everyone down with no luck, I had straight up ruined all of Eva and Lauren's progress and hard work. I literally ended up having to leave the classroom as I was doing my harm than good, constantly serving as a distraction simply by being there. But what am I supposed to do? NOT hug Beyoncé every time I see her?

After school, we got dropped off at Vol House and I walked to House 22, making myself a typical weekday lunch: ham and salami sandwich, strawberry yogurt with trail mix, and a leftover sweet potato mash from the night before. I had about 1 hour, as I usually do, to eat in silence, collect my thoughts, relax in my room, and get ready for project. Today was swim so I needed to get my wetsuit on and be at Vol House by 1:30pm sharp.

We had a new group of kids today and I was paired up with Ebigail, a naturally beautiful girl with a stunning smile. She had never swum before. She was eager, excited, nervous, and scared. It's amazing how frightening the water can be to people who can't swim, even when they know they can just stand up if shit hits the fan. We ran through some exercises and I spent the most time going over the most important lesson: it's not kicking or moving your arms, it's to know how to relax and get comfortable holding your breath underwater. Ebigail went from screams or horror to nervous chuckles during each monumental moment of achievement. It was pretty cool to see how brave she was and anxious to get through something she really didn't want to do. I quickly stopped the lesson and told her to remember not just now, but for the rest of your life, true growth will only be achieved when you purposely put yourself in uncomfortable positions. I feel like she sincerely understood.

After an exhausting day of being Santa in extreme heat to 100 kids, trying to keep a classroom of 4-year olds in order, and teaching a panicked preteen the art of not drowning, it was time to relax.

A few beers in the bar with my fellow school colleagues, a walk to the store, and a large Mexican supper night with Bianca serving beef burritos. It's like home was creeping back in, re-entering my world, knowing I'd soon be back on my continent. Suzanne had to request to leave her school, Honeybees, today after a week of discouragement. There are teachers at Suzanne's school so volunteers are used as dishwashers, babysitters, and errand-runners. This isn't part of the program and no

one should ever be "running errands" in Dunoon. This, however, is not the reason for Suzanne's request as she's not one to complain about anything. She's perhaps one of the most adaptable people I've ever met in my life. When she's not playing nomad throughout Africa, she resides in a forest back in Finland. So dishwashing and a child vomiting on her isn't enough to shake her. But harming innocent 4-year olds is.

At Honeybees, the kids regularly get lined up in a row and hit on the wrist with a metal spoon, and across the face if it gives the teacher more gratification. Which today, it did. Suzanne has witnessed this behavior for nearly 7 days and reported it along the way. But good luck trying to tell an African woman she is raising a child incorrectly. Above the kitchen weaponry, this morning's antics included encouraging one child to smack another through retaliation and a teacher taking off her shoe to hit a child in the head with it.

We spent the evening conversing and everyone called it an early night. I realized it was going to be my last night having dinner at Saltycrax as tomorrow I'll be getting a tattoo and eating out.

I'm starting to miss my friends already.

Day 13 (Part 1): Welling of the Heart

I could feel my finale in the air, through the sun, and on my face as I made my final walk to Vol House to gear up for my last day of school. The wind was mild, but comforting, slowly brushing a strand of hair here and there, as if it were purposely endearing.

When fellow volunteers shared stories that they signed up for a couple of weeks at SAVE but fell in love with the students and extended their stay (or in some cases never left), I didn't really connect with that possibility. But wow, these kids definitely find a way to seep deep into your pores.

My entire day carried a different kind of weight to it, with a constant reminder of some level of sadness. Maybe it was the last drive through Dunoon, watching the women wash their clothes in buckets, seeing "Smileys" for sale on the corner littered in flies, or the kids chasing our van like we were fucking Kobe Bryant pulling up to the Olympics. Maybe it was just so touching because I knew it was

the end. Man, I couldn't begin to start swallowing the reality that today I'd have to say goodbye to Beyonce. My heart hurts and my eyes well up just thinking about it.

We got to Wings and my demeanor when entering the classroom was polarizingly different. Like walking into a funeral. I couldn't find the strength to be authoritative and my mood was relaxed in a deflated, "I'm gonna miss you" sort of way. The kids took their seats and Beyonce of course greeted me with her hug-a-bunch, love bug arms, clueless to the countdown of our time together. Regardless of my upcoming departure, it was a normal day just like any other. Limited useable pencils, infinitite "shhh"s, and Precious licking her knee when being asked to help her neighbor. Eva, Lauren, and I carried out the lesson plans and activities together before Playtime, when I would find a time during my handholding routine with Beyonce to let her know I'm leaving.

The kids had their variety of snacks as usual, ranging from porridge looking rice in Tupperware to leftovers stored in old McDonald's French fries containers. You could hear the click-clacking between the children, now able to speak their 1st language (Xhosa) instead of English, which is the only thing they're allowed to speak while in class.

After eating and sharing her treat with her friends, Beyonce came up to me, flailing her waving arms up to my towering body with her neck kinked back like a Pez dispenser, smiling. She wants me to pick her up which I desperately want to do, but can't, as 100 kids will then follow with, "And me, tee-cha!", "And me", "Tee-cha, me!"

Instead she settles for the grasping of my hands the best she can with her tiny paws, swinging my arms back and forth. We proceed to do our aimless walkabout as she holds my hand and directs me where to go, intermittently looking back up at me to make sure I'm still there. She'd break off every once in a while to skip and sing with Precious and Necole, but would soon find her way back to me. About 5 minutes before it was time to go back into class, I knew this was my only remaining opening for a proper explanation and a formal goodbye.

I leaned down to Beyonce's level and said, "C'mere, sweetheart," pulling her toward me a bit and locking eyes with her.

“Today is my last day with you, Princess. Tomorrow I go back home.”

She innocently responded with a sharp, “What?” in her high octave voice, honestly probably not hearing what I was saying because of the noise. I got closer to her ear as I was not going to be able to stay strong enough explaining this more than once.

“I’m going back home tomorrow, which means today is our last day together.”

“Going?? What does thease mean? Who’s going?”

“I am, sweetheart.”

Trying to explain this to a 4-year old delicately is difficult as simplifying it makes it all come out so much more harsh.

I think she finally understood when I asked her to give me the biggest hug she’s ever given me. She took a running start, leaping into my arms, squeezing my neck so tightly as if she let go the ground would gobble her up. My hands clenched her small body back and I could have lived in that moment forever. Neither one of us let go until the other kids got jealous and joined in.

We went back to class to continue the rest of the day. I had about an hour left before I was going to get picked up for project. Lauren would continue leading the rest of class on her own into the afternoon. Everyone was tracing numbers and when they finish they’re allowed to turn the paper over and draw.

Beyonce called me from the other side of the room. When I looked down at her, she used her pencil to point at her paper then back at me. She had drawn me with my sunglasses on. I choked back all that I could and told her how beautiful it was. 45 minutes later, Shannon peaked in the door and signalled it was time to go. I didn’t want to make a big stink about it as we already said goodbye so I made it as casual as possible. This is when I for sure knew Beyonce understood. She got up from her chair and pulled me down to her in between the students on each side of her. I hugged her one last time and quietly told her, “Goodbye, sweetheart.”

I walked out of Wings of Hope for the last time, feeling like it was in slow motion, trying to ignore the brash reality that I have no idea when or if I'll ever meet Beyonce again.

I internally thanked her for spending Thanksgiving with me and for dancing with me on the playground that day. I ran a sequence of memories through the catalogue in my heart and slowly stepped into the van, thanking God for allowing me to exchange a love more powerful than I have ever experienced, or could ever write about.

I can only hope that her little heart will not miss me as much as I'm going to miss her.

Day Thirteen (Part 2): Karaoke Farewell

After bidding farewell to Wings of Hope, it was time to get ready for surfing.

We left Vol House at 1:30pm SHARP. Mikey is like me with punctuality. He leaves at 1:30pm on the button. If people are missing, not his problem.

The first 20 minutes the volunteers are able to surf with one another as we wait for the kids to arrive. We all wear green rashguards over our wetsuits symbolizing we are volunteers while the students wear blue ones. Except today the students were the teachers. We had a group of 7th grade boys who had been surfing for roughly 2 years each. All of them were better than us. So instead of teaching, it really just became a time to bond and get to know one another in the water.

I was paired up with Christian, a tall 13-year old boy with fake teardrop tattoos drawn on his face. From the moment he entered the water, I knew he was talented as his balance was impeccable when paddling out through the waves on his knees. It was choppy as hell today and so windy that even when you caught a wave you could hardly see in front of your face from the spray. The kite and wind surfers were in Heaven. When I left, I was exhausted and had to fight the urge to nap as I was on a schedule and had to get ready for Yacoob to grab me for my tattoo.

Yacoob is punctual as hell too and really prides himself on professionalism. I really admire it. Especially because that's quite the contrary in South Africa. They call it African time because everyone is late everywhere. He picked me up from Saltycrax at 4:30pm on the dot and we headed out to get an outline of Table Mountain tattooed on the top left area of my ribcage.

We went to a rickety hole in the wall that was inland quite a ways called Circle of Life. This place opened its "doors" (if you want to call them that) back in 1994 in celebration of the Apartheid being over. In an attempt to bring both races together officially, they created a ritual known as "Branded Love." Essentially, this is just people getting tattooed together like a pseudo blood brother type of thing. The center of the room has a large caldron-looking pot of boiling water, where a 22-year old long needle is placed, as a means to sterilize the tool in between sessions.

If you read the last paragraph and believed it, you're just the cutest thing ever. I got my tattoo at the 2nd largest mall in the world. It's called Canal Walk. A normal shop with brand new needles in sealed packaging like any other legitimate establishment. Before doing so, I ordered an enormous sushi platter in the food court and took down 2 beers with a beautiful view of the Canal Walk fountains.

I finished just in time to meet Yacoob who said he would be back from his new gig to meet me in front at 7pm sharp. Again, didn't disappoint. He dropped me off at Saltycrax for a quick shower, I got dressed, and my buddy Paul from the states (who just landed in Cape Town) had planned to meet me for a night of karaoke with my volunteer friends, sending me off properly back to the States. It was cool to see Paul naturally converse with everyone as if he had been there since the beginning. He joined in on the Wednesday night braai and before long our entire group was walking to Casa Do Mar to have our last evening together.

We walked in as nearly the first group of people there and monopolized the karaoke machine for an hour or so before the place started to fill up. The night consisted of bad covers of Journey, TLC, Spice Girls, the list goes on. My favorite part was when all of the girls got up to sing, "Goodbye My Friend," and I think even to their surprise realized no one knew the lyrics. They just improvised, made up their own words, and pointed at me illustrating the song dedication.

We concluded the night with all of us (maybe a group of 12 at this point) singing Bohemian Rhapsody together. Another powerful moment logged in my Greatest Hits.

As we made our first stop back on the way home to Vol House, shit got real. It was time to say goodbye to my friends.

I hugged all of them so tightly. It's an incredibly peculiar feeling to have become so close to someone in such a short amount of time who literally lives on the other side of the globe in a completely different reality. SAVE was our common denominator.

Next to Beyonce, it was the hardest to say goodbye to Eva. Eva is one of the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. For reasons she probably will never know or even understand because they're just subtleties that are embedded in her as a person. She possesses a kindness in her heart and characteristics in her personality that every man looks for in a woman. She's assertive, funny, smart as hell, and just a damn good human being. We emotionally hugged one another probably 4-5 times, refusing that each one was the last.

I went back to my room and felt an overwhelming sadness fall over me. I can't remember having a heart this heavy in a moment like this. I knew this day would come and I didn't even know these people half a month ago. But like the kids, they seep into your pores. Volunteer strangers become lifelong friends. People you can't imagine not having in your daily routine anymore. I spent a good amount of time just sitting down in silence in my room, reflecting on the last few weeks, acknowledging the power and impact of it all. Both grateful and appreciative for the experience, while undoubtedly sad it was all over.

It's time for my last night's sleep in this bed. Tomorrow I will close the door behind me for the last time at Saltycrax.

Day Fourteen: Final Entry

Awoke to the voices of Mikey, Shannon, and Molli conversing outside my bedroom door. It was just another morning of socializing before coordinating the day and

heading off to the schools in half an hour. I stared at the ceiling, smiling, listening to them.

I took my time packing my bags and cleaning up my home for the last time. Found the last pack of breakfast biscuits that I relied so heavily on two weeks ago and took them with me. Killed the last spider on my comforter and came across an enormous insect in my luggage that I threw out the door by its tentacles. Soon I heard Yacoob's voice in the courtyard at Saltycrax, on a business call, waiting for me to leave my room.

He greeted me with a, "Hey, broo!" and hospitably grabbed a bag for me. We loaded up the car and made our final trip together. On the way to the airport, Yacoob shared his excitement for his business picking up and the new account he got from the day before. I'm so proud of this guy. He said, "I'm seriously going to miss you, broo." I feel the same way.

We made our final pass along the highway, seeing the shacks just miles away from the airport that I first saw when I arrived. What a mess.

Yacoob overextends everything and offered to come into the airport with me, to carry my luggage, to make sure the items I bought here would get through, etc. He always says, "If you run into a problem, you call me. You know I'm always here for you, broo."

He parked the car and quickly got out to get me a luggage trolley as he removed my bags from the car and started placing them on the cart for me. Fuck man, I'm saying goodbye to Yacoob.

I paid him for the ride and placed another wad of bills in his hand.

"This is for you to buy your daughter everything she wants for Christmas."

I gave him a huge hug and thanked him for everything. He had my back from the second I got off the plane and throughout my entire stay in South Africa. Another amazing soul that I will miss dearly.

Just a few hours later, I was on the plane, ascended up into the air, and waved goodbye to the African soil that delivered more than I could have ever asked for.

If you asked me on Day 1 if I'd like to leave, I would have. Even Day 2 or 3. I remember a specific moment that occurred on the Friday night I arrived. The Reception/Bar area was full, I knew absolutely no one, and it was like being at a new school trying to coerce your way into other people's conversations. I had the key to my room and justified in my head that I was tired and should go back to the room and call it an early night. But internally I knew that was bullshit and I just felt super far outside of my comfort zone in a foreign country. I remember cognitively advising myself, this is a telling moment. Flee and find your comfort zone by yourself or embrace what you came here for and bask in the discomfort. I fortunately forced myself to choose the latter.

One thing's for sure. This wasn't easy. It wasn't easy landing in a 3rd world country not knowing a single person. It wasn't easy having 100 screaming snot-faced children grabbing me on my first day. It wasn't easy being away from my family on Thanksgiving. It wasn't easy driving through one of the most dangerous townships in the world every single day. It wasn't easy hearing Christmas music, being alone and away from home.

But I didn't do this because it was easy. I did it because that's what giving back is. It requires sacrifice. It doesn't mean doing things that are fulfilling so long as you can stay comfortable in the process. It means sacrificing that comfort to make someone else feel something for a change.

Like Ebigail, you need to push yourself into situations that make you kick, make you scream, make you cry, and make you deathly afraid sometimes. It's the way to adapt. It's the way to grow.

Cape Town was my pool.

And now I'm the one swimming.