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Foerderer Travel Grant Journal
Location: Rwanda, July 12-August 10, 2014

Finding Location and Planning Trip:

I have been interested in the Jeff HEALTH program since Nancy Chernett mentioned it during my entrance interview in December of 2012. As a candidate for a Masters in Public Health the program seemed tailor made to my interests and field of study. The travelers from previous years were instrumental in answering questions and helping to coordinate work projects. The Rwandan Village Concept Program (RVCP) students, returned home and living in Rwanda, were great assets in navigating transportation to and from the airport, hotel reservations, and cell phone procurement after arrival. I bought my ticket in the end of February and I think that may have been too early. I have since heard that the best deals are approximately 3 months prior to travel. With insurance my airplane ticket was $2000.00.

Accommodations:

My first night in Kigali I stayed at Auberge which is the inn recommended by the RVCP students. The cost was 15000RWF (approximately $21 USD) for one night. The Dream Apple Inn is directly across the street and for about $20 more it was absolutely worth the splurge. The rooms are clean, the water is hot, and there is wifi and breakfast included. I am pretty sure Auberge gave me bed bug bites. Not a pleasant welcome to Rwanda!! Both locations are within walking distance of Union Trade Center (UTC) and the Kigali Commerce Tower (KCT). In either of these locations you will find a Nakumatt which is a grocery store and more. You can buy personal hygiene products, household goods as well as water and fruit. Because it is a commercial district it’s a little more expensive but not by much- the difference of a few hundred francs.

Major Expenses:

I spent, after airfare, approximately $2000.00 in country during the four weeks I travelled. That said, I visited the gorillas at great expense (please see following section and travel blog link for description) and, since I had a birthday while I was in Rwanda, I splurged on a luxurious hotel for the weekend in Nyungwe Park. Those two activities appropriated $1100.00 of my total expense budget. I was in Rwanda for four weeks but only spent 18 nights at the parish house. Those nights, including breakfast and dinner, cost $193.00.

Turn your American cell phone on airplane mode and LEAVE IT ON!! Be sure to turn off your data as well. You will be tempted to use it at your layover or before you set up your wifi/cell plan in Rwanda. I burned through $100 worth of data in less than 24 hours. Some of the other ladies downloaded Whatsapp before leaving America and could therefore send texts over a wifi connection. BE CAREFUL!!
Activities:

If there is one thing I would recommend you do before leaving Rwanda it is to go to Volcanoes Park and see the gorillas. Yes, it is expensive. A day permit was $650.00 USD and a hired car round trip per person was another $100.00 per person. I do not regret spending a single cent of that money. They are so beautiful and intelligent, and it is a once in a lifetime chance. Literally. They may be extinct in the next decade without tourism programs like this run by the Rwandan Development Board. The RDB controls permits and passes for all of the national parks in Rwanda and I am told that about 15% of the money goes right back to the surrounding communities as schools, water development and health care services. Not only that, the trackers who help locate the gorillas are former poachers. They know exactly how to find the gorillas and they are able to see that there is sustainable income to be had by keeping the gorillas alive instead of killing them for the bush meat trade. It is a wonderful program started by Dian Fossey, whose grave is right there in Volcanoes, where she did so much to help our primate cousins.

Figure 1 After a 30 minute hike through the forest we met this guy! Some travelers voiced concern about the proximity to the Democratic Republic of Congo but I felt completely safe.

Now, poor planning on our part caused us to spend more money in transport than we needed to. We returned to Kigali after the gorilla trek to run errands for the JeffHEALTH program and decided that we wanted to go back to Volcanoes to hike Mt. Biseoke. We bargained our second private car down to $75.00 per person round trip. The park permit for the climb was also $75.00 USD. That is a climb not for
the faint of heart. I am in decent shape; I go to the gym four times a week and watch what I eat. But that hike was brutal. It is advertised as a beautiful scenic excursion, which is certainly true, but it was vigorous and demanding. I also did not have footwear that was even remotely appropriate. I was wearing my old New Balances and even with tread pretty well intact I spent the majority of the descent sliding down the mountain. Get a good pair of hiking boots. You will appreciate them during your walks to Akarambi and Ruli villages, both of which are a good 45 minutes away.

Be Sure To Bring:

Chapstick! It is very dry and even though I was keeping well-hydrated my lips were uncomfortably chapped. Tube application only since your hands will be pretty dirty most of the time. Which leads me to the important issue of hand sanitizer. Bring at least one small one that you can carry in your pocket at all times and a large one to refill your on-the-go supply. There is no running water at the parish so you cannot wash your hands before meals.

Cargo pants. They make a great brand at EMS that is made with a quick dry material. A very important factor when you are washing your clothes by hand. They were a little on the expensive side ($60/pair) but totally worth the expense. We do get a 20% discount as students!! I did buy a quick dry towel and cannot say that the expense was worth the product. It was only about $18 at EMS but a regular towel would have done fine.

I absolutely need my eyeglasses to see. I bought a second pair online (some cheaper options are warbyparker.com or zennioptical.com) which cost $100.00 but the peace of mind was worth it to me. It would be very difficult if not impossible to replace my prescription in Rwanda.
I kept a travel blog during my stay in Rwanda. Please use this link to get an in-depth review of my impressions of the local health care system and the clinics that we saw, places visited, and photos of the beautiful country. I was able to go into the Rutongo mines, where 90% of Akarambi men work and I also did an initial health assessment of Ruli village where Jeff HEALTH hopes to expend next year. Murakoze!

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Figure 3 This young lady was no more than 12 years old. She may travel to the village water source 45 minutes away, up to three times a day, carrying jugs that weigh as much as her.