A Truly Humbling Experience: Sandi SSS, South Africa, 2015

In the summer of 2015, four Berkhamsted students and four Berkhamsted staff were lucky enough to travel to South Africa for a trip of a lifetime. The fortunate party members were: Jonny Thomas-Davies, Lily Frost, Grace Harrington and Robert Barrow along with Mr and Mrs Grant and Mr and Mrs Gunary. As we all know, Berkhamsted School has an exciting and thriving link with a secondary school in South Africa, whereby we raise money in order to send a Sandi student to University. At University, they train to be a teacher in a specialised subject area, and when they are fully qualified they return to teach at Sandi, or an alternative rural school, and the cycle of inspiration continues. What we soon found out from the students at Sandi was that these teachers, the ones who had received our funding for a bursary, were their favourites. They felt they understood each other because they had been in the same position as them only a few years ago, in the same seats, in the same classrooms with the same limited life ambitions in front of them. However this relationship demonstrated exactly what our link is all about. It's about inspiration. These teachers who have now made a life for themselves through hard work and dedication, along with financial support from us, offer hope for the future, for all of the students they teach. Sadly we can't change the life of every Sandi student, but the difference we are making, the difference you are making, is immense, and greatly appreciated by all at Sandi.

The trip was basically split into half, a ten day trip with five days of culture and safari along with five days of celebration and friendship making at Sandi SSS. Firstly, the safari and wildlife was everything you could ever hope for from an African adventure. The list of animals we were fortunate enough to see is endless, but there were a couple of highlights. A voyage into the segregated lion enclosure, was a moment I'm sure we will never forget. These majestic animals were a sight to behold, and it was remarkable to have the opportunity to get up close and personal to such breath-taking beasts in their natural habitat. Next on the list was an activity labelled on the trip itinerary as ‘Cheetah Interaction’, which everyone was very excited for. It certainly didn’t disappoint, and lived up to all of our expectations. The most awesome and unbelievable animal tale to tell however, was the evening we decided to go zebra tracking. From the idyllic beachfront we could see a single zebra on top of a faraway hill and so we trekked through the undergrowth to try and get a closer look. To our amazement and total surprise, when we did eventually get over the ridge, stood serenely in front of us were in fact five zebras of different sizes and ages. After biding our time we crept up slowly to within an arm’s length of the wild animals, a truly astonishing moment.

In addition to our wildlife exploits, we also visited the Nelson Mandela Museum and went to various sites associated with the great South African political figure, personally guided by one of Mandela’s grandsons to make the experience all the more special. We were also treated to a traditional dance demonstration by the local ladies. Despite the language barrier, Lily and Grace both joined the women and honed their South African dancing skills (and yes don’t worry, we do have video evidence). Other excursions include the evening river cruise on
the first night of our adventure and the uplifting church service we attended later on in the week.

When we arrived at Sandi we did not know what to expect. As soon as we rocked up in our air-conditioned Quantum, everybody wanted to say "hello". We were hugged, thanked and welcomed with open arms before we had even had an opportunity to get our bearings. What we soon realised however, was how much of a difference our fundraising, our presence makes to the lives of these people oh so many miles away. We were prayed for, fed a sumptuous banquet, the students both sang and danced for us, all in the first day. We were treated like VIPs, honoured guests, and the fact that we were from such a privileged background did not seem to affect what the generous community of Sandi thought of us. All in all the following few days flew by in a whirlwind of fun, dancing and friendship making. A trip to the junior school to see children as young as 3 or 4 was really lovely, and keeping them entertained was a task we grasped with both hands. We presented the Sandi teachers with the gifts they had requested, a union flag, a rugby ball and a microwave, and they returned the favour through generosity and love.

We also had the opportunity to meet our prospective bursary students, interviewing them and learning about their upbringing. This was emotional. The majority of these students were orphans, their guardians had little income and life looked pretty bleak. However, they were still happy. They were still thrilled to have been given an education and the possibility of a life beyond poverty. I think more than anything this is what touched us the most. Yes, there is a huge social, financial and educational difference between a Berkhamsted student and a student from Sandi, but yet they were still so happy. We often want everything to go perfectly in our day, in order to feel satisfied with our lives, whereas for the Sandi students, simply an education and even our presence made them overjoyed. So although we really set out for South Africa to learn about the Sandi students, in reality we returned having learnt a lot about ourselves.

So thank you Sandi, the pleasure was all ours and we hope that we can continue to maintain and strengthen the link in the coming years. We are truly grateful.

Robert Barrow