

On Thursday, March 19th, 16 of us (Phoebe & Darla included) out of the 22, left Mara West at 9:30 am and drove 8 hours to Nairobi. This in itself was a long, hard day to start out our trip. For 3 ½ hours of this ride we were literally off-roading in a safari jeep on dirt/mud roads. Our original flight through Turkish Airlines had been rescheduled to leave at 5:30 AM on Friday, the 20th instead of Sunday, the 22nd. When we got into Nairobi, we went straight to the Galleria Mall to eat supper. At this point our flight was still on, but we had gotten word that Brooke's flight had been cancelled and she was also traveling on the same Turkish airlines flight. After we ate, we went over to a hostel, Karen Gardens. We got checked in and planned on leaving there at 2:30 AM to head to the airport. All the girls were in one room: Caitlin, Sydney, Inez, Sheri and I. Mike and our boys were together, Serge and Samantha in another room, and then Frank and their three boys. Phoebe and Darla had to go straight to the airport to catch their flight to Zambia. We were all a little on edge since we knew Brooke's flight was cancelled. None of us slept well, either because of stress or the rooms being super hot. Then in the middle of the night Serge did receive word that our flight with Turkish airlines was cancelled; they no longer had any of their planes in Nairobi and were no longer allowed to enter/exit Kenya. We had thought that maybe we were going to catch the last flight out, but it was not meant to be. We were starting to get stressed at this point, but it only got worse from there.

After a short time, Serge's agent was able to find a flight on Ethiopia airlines. They were in an alliance with Turkish airlines, and the plan was to get us back to Istanbul and then catch the original flight with Turkish Airlines from Istanbul to Atlanta. Because they were an alliance, we weren't going to have to pay extra for the change which was a relief. It was routed through Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Johannesburg, South Africa, Istanbul, Turkey and then Atlanta, our final destination. South Africa was not allowing Americans in, but we weren't planning on leaving the airport during our layover so we didn't think it would be a problem. Because our flight didn't leave until 7:15 PM, we decided to sleep in a little longer and do some sightseeing in Nairobi until around 3 PM the next day. The next morning, the hostel gave us some breakfast and we had a plan to visit an elephant and giraffe sanctuary and the local Adventist school, Maxwell Adventist Academy. Everyone was able to grab a shower here before we left, we knew we wouldn't be able to get another one until we arrived home. After breakfast we packed up all our luggage and headed to the elephant sanctuary. Once we got there they were closed because of the virus and wouldn't let us in. Next, we headed to Maxwell Academy. We had to drive through the heart of Nairobi. Driving through here was quite the experience. It was so dirty and there were street markets everywhere. I got really nauseous because of all the exhaust fumes and smells. It was a little bit of a drive to get there and I had to endure the smells longer than I would have liked. Once we got there, again we were turned away because of the virus scare. We then had to drive back through Nairobi. I was starting to feel really bad at this point. Next up was the giraffe sanctuary. When we got there they too were closed, but they said if we came back in an hour, they would let us in. We went to go eat at a place called Utamaduni. This place was empty, and they were already taking precautionary measures by wiping everything down because the menus were all wet. I was starting to feel we were being looked at differently for being Americans at this point. The meal was good, but honestly, I was not hungry and didn't eat much because of the stress. After lunch we went back to the giraffe sanctuary. We went to the main entrance, but were told that we needed to use a back entrance to get in. Zach, our driver, was doing the negotiating for us. After talking awhile with them, Zach came back and said that we should probably leave. He was not getting a good vibe from the situation. He was feeling that they were going behind the powers that be, since they asked us to "come back" in an hour. He felt maybe the boss was gone now and they were going to pocket the money they were asking us to pay. Also, if anyone official did come while we were in there, we could get in trouble because we knew the place was supposed to be closed. We decided to leave. At this point we went back to the hostel to hang out. They had nice patio furniture and gazebos to hang out in. We were there about 2 hours.

After hanging out for a while we decided to go on to the airport early to make sure our flight was still good. Once we got there and checked in, we found out there was an earlier flight that was leaving at 5 PM, so they put us on that flight instead on the original one at 7:15. We were checked in, went through security and got straight on the plane. Once we arrived in Addis Ababa, we had to go through an infrared camera to do a temperature screening. In Ethiopia, they give you a hotel to stay in if you have a delay that is longer than 8 hours. It took a little longer to work out the details because they had put all of our group in different hotels. Once we figured that all out, we caught a shuttle to the hotel. We didn't have any issues, but it did seem sketchy to drive through Addis Ababa. Mother's with "babies" waiting at the windows begging & prostitutes on a lot of the corners. Later we were told that people had heard that especially in Addis Ababa they were not being nice to Americans because "we had brought this virus there". We got to the hotel around 9:00 PM. They had supper ready for us because the rooms weren't ready. We went upstairs to eat at a buffet, again I couldn't eat anything, but was thankful that they offered bottled water. Finally got into the rooms at 10:30 PM. The hotel, Debre Damo, was probably a nice one at one time, but now was sketchy. The floors were very dirty and evidently their washer or dryer was broken, and we only got one towel per room. No hand towels, washcloths, etc. Some rooms didn't get a towel at all. A couple of rooms had clearly been smoked in even though it was apparently a nonsmoking hotel, and they smelled awful. We had been offered an upgrade to a 5 star hotel earlier, but it was \$50 a person to do that, and we decided to pass. We were definitely regretting that now. Mike and I were in a room, the girls together, and the boys. The boys were right next to us, the girls were right above us, one floor up. We were able to get a shower that night, but we had to share towels and I had to use my tennis shoes to step on since they were the only pair of shoes I had and didn't want to walk around barefoot. This was the last shower we were able to get until we were home Monday night. It was Friday night, the 20th. I was fretting so much and my thoughts wouldn't stop racing. I couldn't sleep. Worrying about whether flights would remain available, whether we would get quarantined, whether we would stay healthy, whether the countries would start shutting down and not let us leave. I DID NOT want to be stuck in Ethiopia. Mike had to give me some meds to help me sleep that night.

We woke up the next morning to ride back to the airport at 6:40 AM. It was neat to wake up to the morning prayers there. Our window was open in the hotel and you could hear the morning prayers going on outside throughout the city. Once back at the airport we got through security again. When we got to the gate to board, they told us that South Africa was not allowing Americans in. After some calls were made, they allowed us to go since we were only going to be transferring and not exiting the airport. It was a 5-hour flight to Johannesburg, South Africa. Once the plane landed at 1:45 PM, we had to get our temperatures checked and fill in new health paperwork again. We waited on the plane for over an hour while all the health screenings took place. They let all the South African citizens and permanent residents off first and detained us on the exit ramp. After some discussion, they told us that we would not be able to disembark and catch our flight to Istanbul. We were going to have to re-board the plane we just came in on and return to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was 3:30 PM. We never left the exit ramp and they literally took a blank piece of paper, tore it into pieces, and handwrote seat numbers on it as our boarding pass. Probably won't ever see that again. It was quite the experience to be detained at an airport strictly because we were US citizens; a rare occurrence. We flew back into Addis Ababa at 9:30 PM and sat for several hours trying to find different flights with no success. We were still inside the airport so we could only check on flights through Ethiopia airlines (even though multiple other airlines fly through Addis Ababa) since they were the only airlines located inside security. At one point we were going to go through Sweden, but we thought better of it since flights through Europe were already banned from coming into the US. Serge & Mike worked for hours on trying to get something. We didn't want to leave the airport because we were afraid we'd be quarantined and not able to come back in since we didn't have boarding pass for our next flight at this point. The best they could do was get us a flight on Thursday, the 26th. Today was the 21st. Finally, one of the men helping us in the airport felt bad for us and gave us vouchers to go into

one of the airport lounges. Up until then we had just been laying/sitting in the main hallways of the airport. We were able to get food there before they kicked us back out less than a half hour later around 12:30 AM. Serge & Mike were still working on finding us a flight, and we went back out to the main hallway to wait for them. Once they finished talking with the airline people, they gave us another voucher for a different lounge, and we slept in there. They had comfier chairs and the kids were able to get some better sleep.

At one point during the night, we found out that the Peace Corps had chartered three planes to get all their Peace Corp volunteers out of Africa. Two of their planes had already left, but they had their last flight leaving the next day, the 22nd. The plane could hold 300 people and they only had 150 confirmed on it. After we told them we were interested, they called us back and told us we had confirmed seats for \$2,400 a person on the flight if the flight was full. If there were empty seats remaining on the plane, we would have to split the cost of the plane among those riding it, meaning that the tickets could be up to \$5,000 a person. We felt good about this, although it was going to be VERY expensive. Everyone tried to get some sleep. Then around 4, Serge found out they had rescinded their offer and we no longer had that option. They had more volunteers who were returning to the states and they needed to take care of them and bumped us. More disappointment. I think at this point I had to go to the bathroom and lost it a little. I was so tired and stressed. I made sure to stay strong for the kids, but I also had a hard time keeping it together and needed a little stress reliever. Back to square one. We started looking for flights again, sigh. We ate breakfast in the lounge.

After searching online in the airport, Mike found some tickets going to Dubai, U.A.E, JFK in New York, and then Atlanta, leaving on Sunday, the 22nd at 3pm through Emirates airlines. The only problem was the ticket counter was outside security. As mentioned before, we were feeling worried about leaving the airport. We did have a flight leaving on Thursday but didn't want to get quarantined there if we went outside the airport and entered Ethiopia. We finally did decide to go out of the security area, mostly because our baggage had come back from Johannesburg to Addis Ababa and we had to go get it at baggage claim outside security. We had to get a visa (cost \$50 a person) to get into the country. While we were out there, we were going to try to get tickets on the flight Mike found through Emirates airline. If it worked then we'd go back into the airport and take the flight, and if not then we'd get a hotel and wait it out until Thursday for our second flight. We didn't have any other choice. Once we found our luggage, it was all wet, inside & out because they had left it out in the rain. Also, all of it had been gone through. Our big SLR camera was stolen, and Caitlin had a ton of stuff in her suitcase that didn't belong to her; a pair of shoes, a single shoe, two little girls' dresses, two jars of Vaseline, and a travel pillow. All the rest of our bags had been gone through and messed up also. Honestly at this point I didn't know if anything else was stolen. Mike tried to make a claim, but they said they weigh the luggage and if it's the same weight when it was checked in, then nothing is missing. That's probably why they were stuffing other people's stuff in suitcases to even out the weight. They wouldn't do anything about the missing camera.

Once we got our luggage, we went right outside of the airport to find the ticket counters. We waited out there for a while trying to get online to find new tickets. We finally decided to purchase the tickets through Serge's travel agent (\$900 per person, but I have heard that's a great price. Another blessing, and way less than the \$2400 minimum that the Peace Corps wanted). We were a little nervous because the travel agent said it seemed too easy to book the flight last minute for 14 people, and she didn't know if Dubai was accepting Americans, and that they might send us back to Addis Ababa like South Africa did. Was the easy booking a God thing? I think absolutely!! We then waited awhile right outside the entrance doors until the ticket gates opened to get our boarding passes and went back through security. We had thought about going out into Addis Ababa to check out a hotel in case we needed to stay at one until Thursday and get some food. We decided against that though and decided to stay at the airport to go ahead and check our bags. We had to wait awhile before the ticket counters opened, so we just hung out on the floor in the corner of the airport again. Once the ticket counters opened, we got our boarding passes,

checked our bags and went through security. Again, they checked our temperatures before we could enter. I will say at this point that this was a scary thing and we had been constantly praying that we all stayed healthy. Ethan had some GI issues and was feeling bad. He never ran a fever, but because he wasn't feeling good, I was always worried that there was a possibility that he could be quarantined. We were getting run down at this point also and some of us even had some sniffles. It was unsettling just not knowing what might happen. We did all remain healthy, but anytime you coughed, sneezed or sniffled you felt like all eyes were on you.

Once through security we grabbed a bite to eat, most of which we all hated, they didn't have any good options. We waited for a while at the gate and then it was time to board. It was a huge plane that was going to Dubai, a Boeing 777-300 ER. We boarded with no problem and we were a little more reassured because there were several other Americans on this flight. The flight took about 4 hours to get to Dubai. Once we landed in Dubai we had to stay in the airport again for our layover. Unfortunately, it was dark, and we couldn't see out any of the windows. We walked around the airport, which was very nice and fancy. They had Rolex wall clocks and many posh and fancy stores: Rolex, Cartier, etc. We got a few souvenirs and ate supper at the Hard Rock Café there. We were also able to get cleaned up a little: brush our teeth, wash our face, etc. We just waited around until it was almost time to board. About an hour and a half before boarding time they moved us out of the waiting area to a screening area. We had to walk in front of infrared cameras, which were actually in most of the airports, to check for fevers, and asked questions about where we had been, and then had to go through a more thorough security check just to enter another waiting area to sit in before boarding. There were so many Americans on this flight going home. I did find a statement about Emirates airline that made us feel better about getting to the states "having received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travelers, we will continue to operate passenger flights to the UK, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, the US and Canada as long as borders remain open, and there is demand". They did say they were stopping most flights on Wednesday though (today was Sunday). Made us a little more confident about getting the earlier flight instead of waiting until the Thursday one. And we were on the last flight flying to JFK. We also found out this particular flight was supposed to go out the day before but had been rescheduled to the next day to combine flights. Another answer to prayer since we would not have been able to make the flight if it had gone out the day before.

The plane we boarded in Dubai was the largest passenger plane they make, a double decker plane – Airbus A380. All the first class and business seats were upstairs, and we were downstairs in economy. The flight left at 3am from Dubai and was a 14 hour to JFK. We mostly slept on this flight, but also watched a few movies. The plane was super nice. Gave us two full meals and mini pizzas for a snack; a blanket, pillow, and little bags that had socks, eye covers, ear plugs, and toothbrush/paste. I would highly recommend Emirates airlines. This was such a long flight, my longest to date. We finally landed in JFK at 9:10 AM, losing 8 hours in time difference. We were all so relieved and grateful. We thought the lines to get through customs were going to be long, but they had a pretty good system and we were through in no time. We didn't have to do any health screening, which was surprising. We did have to fill in a health declaration, but they didn't even ask for that from most of us. After customs we had to retrieve our luggage and then go on the domestic side of the airport to recheck everything in to fly to Atlanta. Once again, we had to go through security. I had lost track at this point how many times we had gone in and out of security. Once inside, things seemed a little bare. A lot of restaurants and stores were closed and not very many people were around. We were able to get a NY style pizza (Mike was happy), and some stuff from Starbucks. Our layover there was 4 hours. We just ate, relaxed, and got cleaned up as best as we could at this point. There was such relief now because we were on this side of the Atlantic Ocean and if anything else happened then we could at least rent a car and drive home if needed.

At 1:30 PM, we boarded our last flight to Atlanta. Such relief, although the flight was a little rough because of a storm we flew through. We landed in Atlanta at 4 o'clock. We went out to baggage claim to

get our luggage, unfortunately we did lose Samantha's bag in the process. We were super thankful that Serge's brother was able to pick us up from the airport and then we headed straight to GCA to pick up our two cars there. We got there at 6:45 PM and then had to grab a lot of Ethan's stuff from the dorm since school was going to continue at home and we didn't have any of his schoolbooks and computer. The next stop was Jacob's house in Collegedale. Thankful Melody (Sydney's suitemate) had packed up all of Sydney's stuff in the dorm and stored it for us until we could pick it up. We stopped there to pick up everything of hers. Almost didn't fit everything in the two cars, what with all our luggage, and Ethan and Sydney's dorm things, but we did manage. We were so tired at this point but headed home and finished our trip at 10:25 PM. Estimated total travel time: 102 hours from 9:30 am at Mara West to 10:25 pm in Knoxville. 41.5 hours spent exclusively on planes. Days to return: 5, March 19th – March 23rd.

Map courtesy of Serge

