
EXPLORING THE AFRICAN CONTINENT WITH AN OPEN MIND AND HEART

Donovan Leong, former ASEACC intern and current educator in Singapore, shares with us his insights and experiences as a frequent visitor to Africa.



South Africa Table Mountain (Source: Donovan Leong)

Having been to 107 countries, of which 14 in Africa, Donovan is no doubt a globetrotter in every sense of the word.

Donovan joined ASEACC during his last years at university because of his ability to work in French and English. He has had many opportunities to travel around the world, such as on an exchange programme to France, and a National Youth Council (NYC) project to Sri Lanka.

He has since moved to teaching Geography but retains his strong passion of languages and travelling.

What has been your favourite African country to visit? Why?

My favourite country to visit is South Africa, which I have been to 4 times. It is really easy to travel around, and I enjoy the diverse landscapes, the vineyards, the wildlife etc. The roads are well-developed, which makes it easy to get around by car on my own.

Moreover, there are also direct flights between Singapore and South Africa. The cafe and restaurant scene is really nice too, it is similar to Australia, but at much more affordable prices.

Have you ever been on a road-trip through the continent and how was that experience?

I have done road trips in South Africa, Eswatini, Mauritius and Namibia. As mentioned earlier, it is really easy to rent a car and self-drive around the country. Namibia has such a sparse population that you can drive for miles without seeing anyone. At the national parks, you will be wowed by the wildlife sightings and the vastness of the desert, the ocean etc. Namibia is a safe country and most people there can speak English well.

On another backpacking trip during my younger days, I traveled around Southern Africa by bus - South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana.

There are comfortable buses to get around from one city to another, but the land border crossing can be quite tiring, as I remembered the crossing from South Africa to Zimbabwe took me 7 hours. It was messy and chaotic. We had to disembark with all our luggage, people were swarming the immigration office with their passports, and there was lots of goods strewn around. I was glad to have survived this ordeal and to reach my destination.



You have visited several Francophone African countries like Madagascar and Morocco, how do you find the blend of African and French culture?

In my opinion, French culture is not so prevalent in these countries anymore, possibly as they do not wish to be associated with France. There is more Arab influence in Morocco and for Madagascar, the Malagasy culture is stronger and I even noticed some traces of Indonesian culture, such as in the food and the language they speak.

French colonial architecture, characterised by elegant colonial-era buildings, can be seen in cities like Antananarivo, Marrakesh and other urban areas.

These buildings serve as reminders of the colonial history and contribute to the country's architectural heritage. The blending of French and African cultures has contributed to the richness and diversity of Morocco's and Madagascar's cultural tapestry, creating a unique fusion of influences that is both dynamic and evolving. I hope to visit more Francophone countries in future, especially those in West Africa.



A French colonial building in Mauritius (Source: Donovan Leong)

What are some misconceptions that people have about travelling to the African continent i.e. how do people react when you say you've been to Zimbabwe, for example?

A lot of people ask me if it is safe to visit Africa, should they join a tour group etc. They are worried about contracting a disease or being eaten up by a lion. This is a common reaction from those who have not been to the continent and are used to seeing it portrayed in a very negative light in the news and popular culture. We often hear only about the bad side: corruption, war, disease, crime, and poverty. Africa stuff doesn't really appear in the news in Singapore, so most people naturally have a negative impression of Africa. There is rarely positive news about Singapore and Africa partnership, except for some bilateral visits.



Madagascar (Source: Donovan Leong)

On the flip side, what do Africans think of Singaporeans and Singaporean culture?

Africans are often impressed by the progress and development of Singapore. They know more about Singapore through their studies or watching the news. They also dream of becoming like Singapore one day or to visit Singapore. Rwanda, for example, has been modelled after Singapore in many aspects of its development. Some of the streets in the capital are even cleaner than Singapore. I have also met some Cote d'Ivoirians in Singapore who were impressed by the development of our country and also the shopping scene.

As an educator in Singapore, how have you transferred what you have learnt from your trips to Africa and elsewhere in your lessons?

I do try to infuse some of the case studies about Africa into my lesson, to show my students that it is not true that the whole of Africa is very poor. We can see skyscrapers in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Cairo etc. Not everyone in Africa is hungry or starving (the Ethiopian child narrative), there are also rich and wealthy people. So we analyse various themes during my Geography lesson, such as rural-urban migration, the rise of big African cities, and also transport. We talk a little about the rate of deforestation in Congo, and how some initiatives are implemented to reduce the deforestation.



Angola (Source: Donovan Leong)

From your first time travelling to your most recent trip to Africa, how have your perceptions changed?

I used to have negative perceptions of traveling on my own to Africa, such as safety risks and how people would stare at me. It all started off in 2012 when my parents tried to dissuade me from visiting South Africa, as they said it was very dangerous, and my dad showed me many negative news articles. I went there, took the necessary precautions, and everything turned out fine.

Of course, when traveling in big cities such as Johannesburg or Kinshasa, there are still risks. I do try to keep a low profile when traveling solo, such as not carrying any expensive items and to avoid walking around the shady districts at night. So far people in Africa have been kind and hospitable towards me, always smiling and some would also initiate conversation with me.

What advice would you give to Singaporeans travelling to Africa for the first time?

Go with an open heart, an open mind. Do not let the stereotypes of Africa hinder your travels. Perhaps choose the safe and easier to visit countries such as South Africa, Namibia, Morocco, Kenya etc. Speaking English and getting around these countries is also relatively easy. You would be surprised by how much Africa has got to offer, and also how there are some similarities between African countries and Singapore.



Zambia Victoria Falls (Source: Donovan Leong)

How do you envision Singapore-Africa relations to look like in 15 years?

Singaporean companies have recognized the vast opportunities that lie within Africa's emerging economies and are eager to explore new markets.

As for students, I hope that we can create more opportunities for partnerships between the two countries, such as for exchange or volunteering programmes. There can also be industrial visits between countries to learn more about each other's development in the various sectors.



Botswana Okavango Delta (Source: Donovan Leong)

I also think that trade between the two regions would continue to grow, as we do not need to rely on our current trade partners so much, but instead diversify our sources, in order to meet Singapore's food needs. It is heartening to hear about local Singaporeans who venture to Africa to set up businesses like egg farms or to start up a school, which I hope to see more of in the future.

Geopolitical conflicts, pandemics, growing protectionism, and the climate crisis remind us of the fragility of our political and economic systems. Our inter-dependence ensures that even distant events can adversely affect us.

For example, we may have more climate migrants moving towards Asia in the future, so Singapore has to be prepared for that.

What are your takeaways from your travels?

Traveling allows me to immerse myself in diverse cultures, languages, traditions, and customs. The world out there is so big, we only develop one small perspective of the world if we stay in our own country. I really enjoy the opportunity to interact with local communities, to learn about their way of life, and gain a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage through my travels.

I would like to spread the word about visiting African countries on our own, without the need to join tour groups. Some of these African countries also offer similar landscapes to those in Switzerland or Australia, but often at a fraction of the cost.

Special thanks to Donovan Leong