

Michelle Bounkousohn

I'm finally getting situated to life here in the Turkana Basin, with our strict daily routine of breakfast, fieldwork, lunch, fieldwork, evening tea, free time, dinner, and movie time. Time has flown by so quickly this week, which makes me both excited to move back to the U.S. and start school in New York, but also so sad to see that my time here in Buluk is fleeting. I've finally gotten comfortable being out in the desert, the field, and becoming acquainted with our field crew even though I'm so introverted. I've learned so much about myself and about others this week, and the long hours out in the field often give me hours to get to know members of our paleoanthropology crew, who range from the weekly rotation of Kenyan soldiers who guard our camp, my fellow De Anza students, our professor Isaiah Nengo, and the brilliant men from local Turkana tribes who lead our excavations. My sense of perspective has been broadened dramatically being out here at Buluk, and even though I'm often mentally and physically exhausted from the culture shock and labor that comprises fieldwork, I spend every day an eager sponge hoping to gain every morsel of knowledge that is out here in this desert.

I have never been so keenly aware of the amount of space I occupy in my everyday life—be it in my communities, the world, or even the universe—a sobering conclusion I came to as us students walked back to our tents at night only to see the velvety blanket of stars draped above us. I've never seen so many stars in my life, and in that moment, I realized how much life I have left to experience. Throughout my adolescence, I never had enough foresight to think more than a few months into the future, as I was addled with a lack of guidance, with manic depression and anxiety, and the stresses of balancing school with low-paying jobs. Here at Buluk, I realized how far I have come from those days, and also acknowledge that those struggles have also come with an immensity of privileges that have brought me here today. In staying up through the night devouring biographies about the Leakey family and their research, through the conversations and bonds I've established with members of our crew, through the amount of human and natural life I've encountered during these past few weeks, it is finally hitting me that I am here in a country I would have never imagined coming to, conducting the kind of research I've always dreamed of with an amazing team of extraordinary stories and talents. With the impact this trip has had on me, I will only try to continue extending opportunities like this to students like me when I get back, and hope to solidify the goals I now have of becoming an educator who empowers struggling youth of color.

Viana Roland

It was a fantastic week for paleoanthropology because we found over 15 primate specimens! Primate fossils often lead to grants, allowing crucial projects like this to continue. I'm so honored and excited to be a part of a project like this.

As the weeks progress I find myself getting much closer to the other members of the team and crew. We have been exchanging and sharing cultural norms and stories from our lives. One nice thing about rotating four Kenyan National police officers every week is that they are from all over that county and belong to different tribes. (There are 43 different tribes in Kenya alone!) They are able to talk about some of the norms, practices and traditions in their tribes, which lets me compare across the other tribes and even my own culture. Many of them have windows phones so we have been able to bluetooth music and photos from our phones to one another. That has proved to be an excellent way to collect some great Kenyan music to listen to when I get back to the states. Music has always been a great way to connect to people across cultural divides.

On the first day of Professor Nengo's physical anthropology class, I was so ecstatic that I had my first black teacher AND African teacher. Never before in my life did I have a person of color as a teacher or in any position of authority in any schools I attended. It may not sound like much but it really means a lot and it has really inspired me. You can tell that it also means something to the rest of the team to have a fellow Kenyan in charge of the whole project, that is something they are also not used to. The history of anthropology is a history of mainly white men, or the old boys club it is sometimes referred to. Despite the fact that I am an Afro Latina woman I am here and I now understand that I can do anything I put my mind too If I work hard enough.

Vincent Gomez

I think I've finally gotten used to the rhythm of camp life. The schedule that we are on is pretty rigorous and often takes a lot of mental and physical strength. I'm always caught in between being tired of walking and excitement of what we will find. Every time we leave the camp, we are expanding our knowledge of paleoanthropology and working towards ultimately knowing ourselves and this is what has gotten me up every morning. I think that all of us can agree that there is something about fossils and understanding where we come from that hits a nerve in all of us. I know for certain that my fellow students are tired but are also very determined to do the physical and mental work in expanding our understanding of human origins.

I admire the hard work and dedication each and every fossil hunter puts into their craft. They are extremely focused for hours on end without any sense of fatigue. I know for certain that the first time I was prospecting and looking at the grounds for hours on end I thought I was going crazy. I'm hoping that after a couple more weeks I can develop my focusing skills more.

The night sky is beautiful here. I've never seen so many stars in my life. To be completely honest, it made me sad for a little bit. Those stars have been visible for thousands of years. They were up there in the California but we just couldn't see them. It's sad to think that you have to travel halfway across the world to see something so breathtaking that has been above our heads this whole time.

Chris Mayes

Last week I mistakenly referred to the dead elephant site as Illeret. Every time I mentioned Illeret I was actually referring to the dead elephant site. This week went by so fast it shocked me.

I spent the first half of the week excavating at the dead elephant site. At the site we discovered many ancient elephant, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus fossils but not many ape and monkey fossils. I ended up finally excavating a first big fossil from the excavation for the first time but I'm not sure which bone it was exactly at this time. One of the crew member here named Linga excavated a full elephant tusk, which I thought was interesting.

The second half of the week I spent prospecting and sifting locations where monkey teeth had been found previously. I didn't find anything myself but a few monkey molars were discovered by fellow classmates from De Anza. The sense of family and community that I am experiencing here at Buluk is one that I have never experienced before. The people here are among the friendliest people I have ever met, people seem to genuinely care about your wellbeing. Everyday we have breakfast, teatime, lunch, dinner, and often movie time, together as a family, which is not something that I am accustomed to. I am beginning to form real bonds and friendships with the crew as well as the other students from De Anza. Last night was the first night that the moon cycle restarted allowing us to really see the sky. When I first noticed how beautiful the stars were I immediately called my peers from De Anza over to look. We stood under the stars in astonishment for at least an hour just admiring the scenery. While admiring the sky we all got to see a huge shooting star fly through the sky.

Growing up in San Jose, I was never able to witness such a vast amount of stars. I'm starting to become very interested in learning Swahili as I plan on visiting East Africa many times in my life. The guys here have been quite helpful in helping me to learn and I've been writing everything they teach down in my notebook. When we first arrived it felt like our time here would feel like forever, now it's feeling like we'll be heading back to California too quickly.