

## Journey prompts couple to introduce others to ‘the real Africa’

It's only fitting that Jeff Smith '80 has a business card that invites others to “see the real Africa.” After all, he has experienced the “real deal” on two occasions. He knows the people and speaks their language. From 1989 to 1994, Jeff served as a Peace Corps volunteer and worked on a wildlife sanctuary. Most recently he lived in Africa for 16 months working for a development organization in the southern African country of Botswana. It was this latest stint that prompted Smith and his wife, Gina, to begin offering guided tours to others who wish to experience the treasures of Africa.

“We want other people to enjoy similar experiences that we had with interesting people and different aspects of African culture,” said Jeff, who taught industrial technology at a middle school in Nata while he was in the Peace Corps.

In 2006, Jeff accepted a job opportunity in Shakawe, Botswana, as a deputy coordinator for Kuru Development Trust. That spring, he sold his Maryville general contracting business, and one week later was on a 17-hour flight to Africa. Gina, currently an admissions representative for Northwest, joined him later that month.

While in Africa, Jeff supervised a staff of 20 people and mentored the coordinator for the Trust for the Okavango Cultural and Development Initiative, a non-governmental organization that assists small business development in the Okavango region of Botswana. He helped the indigenous people develop an understanding of Western business culture and taught them about developing sustainable economic systems.

The day after his flight, Jeff made life a little easier and purchased a vehicle for the four-hour drive along a two-lane road (shared with cows, donkeys, goats, elephants and pythons) to Maun, the nearest large city where most food and everyday necessities were available. With no way to ship perishable items to the small stores in Shakawe, groceries like cheese and milk weren't locally available.

“Our income level was down, petrol prices were up, vehicle prices were up, and repair costs were up. We didn't want to drive all over because owning and operating a vehicle was expensive.

We were very aware of that,” Jeff said.

While there were many potential dangers and inconveniences associated with traveling throughout the African countries, Gina said the good experiences outweighed the bad.

“Even the things I thought were annoying, like driving for hours to the grocery store, gave me good stories later,” Gina said. “I don't regret anything. If you're going to learn about another culture, the best way is to live there and see what works, what doesn't and how people live.”

During their stay, the Smiths also enjoyed Zimbabwe and its people, although the country is on the U.S. Department of State's travel alert list as a destination that poses imminent risks to Americans.

“I've been to Zimbabwe many times and loved it, but it's hard to pick a favorite city or country when every place is so different,” Jeff said.

Another scenic visit the Smiths took was a trip to Victoria Falls. There also was beauty to be found closer to home. The Okavango Delta rippled through their backyard and attracted many tourists and bird-watchers.

The couple returned to their Maryville home in fall 2007, but now possess memories of Africa that they'll cherish for a lifetime.

“The elephants and scenery are nice, but in the end, that's not the reason I go,” said Jeff, who is now a general contractor in Maryville. “I go for the people I meet, to see how they live and to learn from their refreshing attitudes about life.” ■

For information about Jeff and Gina Smith's guided tours, visit [www.botswanabush.com](http://www.botswanabush.com), or contact Jeff at [jeff@botswanabush.com](mailto:jeff@botswanabush.com) or (660) 541-0947.



(Top) While in Zimbabwe, Jeff and Gina Smith visited Victoria Falls, commonly considered one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

(Bottom) Jeff Smith, who had taught at a boarding school in Nata, Botswana, in the early 1990s, returned to visit with the children who currently attend the school.