Exchange at University of the South Pacific, Fiji

I’ve just gotten back from an exchange in Fiji, at University of the South Pacific, from February until June 2012. It was an amazing experience, and although it’s good to be home and see friends and family, I miss Fiji a lot!

Preparing for my exchange was not too difficult, other than the apprehension of not knowing what the country would be like: I found that getting the medical for the student visa was one of the most daunting tasks since some medical centers charge up to $300 to do the complete physical: I checked around and found that the medical center at SFU was the cheapest option, and only ended up having to pay $40. Chest X-rays were not necessary, even though some doctors seemed to think they would be. USP will process your visa for you, so you simply send the documents to the international office at USP and then explain to the airport officials, that you are a USP student who will have a student visa.
It’s cheaper to fly into Nadi and the take the three hour bus ride across the country to Suva, because all of the incoming flights land in Nadi first anyway and then some carry on to Suva. The Sunbeam busses which travel from Nadi to Suva are surprisingly nice and air conditioned. The busses which operate in Suva are much more of what you would expect in a developing country, very old. But they come with the fun benefit of super loud Fijian music, so loud that often you can’t even hear the person you’re sitting next to!

Main bus station in Suva

Orientation at USP was a fun experience, the university puts on a lot of cultural events like dances from the different cultures. USP is the closest university for 12 different South Pacific countries, most being tiny little islands, so the culture is really interesting and there are lots of different people to meet. Each of the islands has some similarities and some differences, like different foods and dances and so on.
People might tell you that Fiji is always hot, but in the winter we found that we were wearing sweaters and leggings, and the weather was similar to an October day in Vancouver, so make sure to bring some sweaters. On most days it rains and is sunny at some point, so always have an umbrella and a pair of sunglasses.

A shopping street in Suva

Classes at USP were easy to register for, you send your choices to the international office before arrival and they will register you for classes. Classes were much easier than SFU, since most students do not have English as a first language, if you do than you have a major advantage and will probably get A’s. I recommend taking classes about the South Pacific, I took one called Geography and development of the South Pacific, you learn about tiny islands that no one you know has heard of, and their culture is really interesting.

Life in Fiji is much slower than in Canada, people there are late for most things and no one seems to mind, so try to go with the flow and you will blend right in. Since classes are easier you will have a good amount of free time, and since it does rain a lot in Suva, load up your computer with some good shows and
movies. Also there is a great little book exchange booth in the flea market across from the bus terminal in Suva, I went there every week and traded books, you just pay a few dollars to exchange them.

Things in Fiji are quite cheap, and cash is basically the only way to function, the only time you might use a credit card is to pay at a resort, even restaurants don’t usually take them. There is a good pizza restaurant across from campus called Wishbone, and the MH and Tappoo mall food courts have a lot of great food, mostly Indian or Chinese. The dining hall on campus has a little grocery store and a few Indian places and not much else, and there is another good restaurant on campus called Southern Cross which is Chinese.

There are a lot of fun things to get involved in on campus, I found that people spent a lot of time hanging out on campus as compared to SFU. Most students sit around outside the dining hall and work on assignments and chat. There are a lot of sports to get involved in, friends of mine enjoyed playing basketball, volleyball, field hockey, and rowing. Sports are a great way to meet locals. Often
Fijians and other South Pacific islanders are very shy, in their culture they are taught to speak softly out of respect, so you might not find that many people approach you in classes, which often results in the international students spending time with each other. However, if you get involved in a team or group and get to know the locals you’ll find that they are not nearly as shy as they seems at first, and have a great sense of humor.

The biggest challenges for me in Fiji were staying busy, and slowing down my pace to match “Fiji time”. Since Fiji is just a tiny island, and Suva is not a big city, I found that it was hard to stay busy. I made an effort to go out and get involved in things even if it was pouring rain and I just wanted to stay in bed with a movie, because I knew that I’d look back and didn’t want my memories of Fiji to just be of my dorm room. My philosophy was to say yes to anything I was invited to, even if it seemed different and out of my comfort zone, and I made some great memories that way. I found a great yoga studio called Pure Fiji, about a ten minute taxi or bus ride from campus, §5 FJ per class which is around §3 Canadian. This was where I went when I go homesick, since it was just like yoga classes in Vancouver, and almost all the people who came to it were tourists. Also, the movie theatre in Suva was great, §6 FJ and showed all the newest movies.
Fiji was an amazing experience, and I would love to go back someday. My advice to you is to get as involved as you can, get to know some locals, and embrace the culture! Try to spend your weekends doing new and exciting things, and don’t feel like you have to go to O’Reily’s and Traps (the local clubs) every night just because the other international students do. Spending your Saturday at home with a hangover isn’t nearly as amazing an experience as going hiking at a waterfall, paddle boarding at the beach, or Snorkeling and seeing amazing fish! Make the most of your time in Fiji because it goes by fast!