International Exchange to New Zealand
By: Nathan Chiu

It wasn’t until my fourth year at SFU that I even contemplated going on exchange. I spent four years trudging along towards graduating a geography student, and to be completely honest it wasn’t a lot of fun. However I was extremely fortunate in having the opportunity to go to New Zealand for a school exchange. I don’t think I was ever as excited to be going to school as I was in New Zealand. I feel the change of scenery may have helped with the change of heart.

The actual exchange program was an absolute blast. Besides the fair bit of work preparing for the travels, the rest of the time away just flowed along smoothly. The school itself (the University of Auckland) didn’t seem all that different from SFU or any other school. At least for myself, I found that the structure for the arts (history, geography, and english) courses I was in were quite similar to those that SFU has to offer. The workload is pretty typical with weekly course readings, two-hour lectures, one-hour tutorials, and the standard mid-term and year-end essays. But for me personally, I didn’t choose to go to New Zealand for the academics, really it was sort of an excuse for me to go exploring traveling around such a gorgeous place.

I left for New Zealand a month before orientation started to give myself the chance to travel before school started to get a feel for the country I’d call home for half a year. I have to admit New Zealand is a place that does not require a long time before cementing a place in your heart. The country itself is absolutely stunning, quite Canada-esq in its landscapes, weather and views. But what’s so amazing about New Zealand is that its environment is so diverse within such a small country that you never have to go far to see something new and amazing. But its not just the scenery of New Zealand that leaves an impression on you, the overall feel to the country is so relaxed that its hard not to fall into the atmosphere of the laid back lifestyle. Moreover the people there are unbelievably friendly that it felt a little strange at first. Within the first day upon setting out on my biking journey, I met a guy that offered me a place to stay along my trip, found a riding partner for the day, as well having cars stop along roads asking if I was okay while I was simply taking a break. The rest of the trip was no different as I was offered car rides on two separate occasions during tough and rainy days. But one of my favourite experiences was definitely when I took a trip out to Great Barrier Island a few hours ferry ride away from Auckland. I was walking along the road with my big backpack and was waved down by a driver who offered to drive me to the next stop. Along the way the guy made some stops to show me around and to say hi to some of his friends. It was weird and wild at the same time because it was like I was just hanging out with one of my buddies back home but it was a guy I had just met an hour before. The short car ride to my destination turned into one of my greatest memories of New Zealand because I took him up on his offer and I was fortunate enough to spend the day with him as my guide and friend around. So that’s just a sample of some of the amazing people Kiwi’s are.

New Zealand and traveling seem to have been made for each other. Traveling around is as easy as it gets. There are heaps of hostels around that cost only around $20 a
night where you can meet other travelers looking for some company. Bussing is easy and affordable and can get you practically anywhere. There were quite a few people traveling New Zealand by hitch hiking around which is probably the only place where it is safe to do. Biking is also a great way to get around as well, which is what I chose and absolutely loved. However you choose to get around, it’ll be an adventure in itself. Places such as Dunedin where there are penguins, Milford Sound that is mystic and gorgeous, the Southern Alps, The Glaciers, the Abel Tasman or the Queen Charlotte National Parks. The amount to do is ridiculous, and the most difficult part of the trip is trying to find enough time to get in all these must-sees.

Back stuck in Auckland wasn’t such a bad spot either. I found it really important to get involved wherever you could. Just the first week of orientation meeting new people helped me make the friends that I spent the majority of my time with there. With that though is that you meet a ton of other international students, which is sweet as well. But where I found I met most of the kiwis was when I joined clubs and participated in trips and events. If I were to try it again, I’d definitely try harder to make stronger connections with the locals, just to try to gain a greater feel of the culture. With the cultural atmosphere in Auckland, I have to admit it didn’t feel very different at all from being in Vancouver. Auckland is very multicultural and New Zealand being a western society made things a little too familiar than what I was hoping for. But for some that may be nice to get away but have that safe sense of familiarity there. Ultimately it was a great time away that I’m grateful I was able to take part in.