South Africa Exchange Report

By Laurinda Cheng

Introduction: Why Cape Town?

Of all the places to go in the world, I—much to the dismay of my parents—chose to venture into Cape Town, South Africa, a part of the so called “dark continent,” characterized by the media as a violent, impoverished, and racially divided. These parents of mine often lamented the fact that their daughter diverged from the interests of most average young middle-class North Americans who dreamed of frolicking off to Europe for a semester abroad. I chose to do my exchange in South Africa because of its controversial political history of apartheid. I wanted to see what post-apartheid life in South Africa looked like. In addition, I chose South Africa because of my interest in African politics. I was particularly curious as to how politics would be taught and understood in a non-western context. Also, as a devoted skeptic of the mainstream discourse on Africa, I wanted to draw my own conclusions from first-hand experience.

Pre-departure

Start planning your trip well in advance! Trying to get your documentation together to apply for your visa will probably be the most difficult part. Second to that, I found that trying to contact the International Exchange Office at UCT was difficult. If you need to contact them, I’d recommend calling them. Other than that, I’d recommend you glance through some travel guides for tips on planning your trip to Cape Town. You can get a copy of the Lonely Planet Guide for South Africa at many libraries. By learning as much as you can about the country beforehand, you can save yourself a lot of inconvenience in the long-run. For example, I wish that someone had told me that in Cape Town, when it rains, it pours! If you’re going to be there in the July to December semester, pack rainboots and a rain jacket.

Studying in Cape Town

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has a beautiful campus and overall I thought it was a good school. I took three politics classes and a course from the African Gender Institute. Most classes consist of three one-hour lectures a week and then a one-hour tutorial. In terms of difficulty, I would rate the coursework as similar to SFU. What I found to be the most contrastig feature between UCT and SFU was the teaching style. The professors I had at UCT provided very structured lectures that usually involved a lot of detailed information and note-taking. Whereas at SFU, lectures tend to be a bit more ambiguous and professors expect students to engage in a lot more independent learning. Both styles of teaching have their strengths and weaknesses, and I enjoyed the experience of taking classes at another university.

Safety

South Africa’s certainly got a reputation for violence and crime. However, it’s important to keep in mind that crime rates vary across the country. In Cape Town, there’s no need for paranoia; Capetonians are generally very laid back. The most common crime that exchange
students seem to experience is theft, either through in-house robberies or muggings. There are a few things you can do to prevent yourself from becoming a target. First, never carry valuables out in the open when you’re walking, such as your cell phone, MP3 player, or camera. Also, be conscious of who is around you when you’re walking by yourself. Don’t walk alone at night, take a cab instead. And if you’re out clubbing late at night in downtown, don’t spend tons of time loitering outside clubs because this is when things can be easily stolen off you. To prevent home robbery, always lock your room door, front door and gate. Also, keep valuables, such as laptops and passports hidden away. The longer you spend in Cape Town, the more street savvy you’ll become. Overall, I felt pretty safe in Cape Town. I walked all over the city by myself during the day and never had any problems.

**Transportation**

The transportation system in Cape Town leaves much to be desired. Getting around during the day is pretty easy, but your options are fairly limited at night. During the day you can travel by mini-taxi, train, bus, or foot. Mini-taxis are convenient because they’re cheap and run frequently. You’ll probably encounter them on your first day in Cape Town. If you see a white van blazing down the street and a guy shouting out the window, don’t be alarmed, he just wants to know if you want a lift. Mini-taxis will pick you up from basically any point on the street. Most likely you’ll catch the mini-taxi from somewhere on Main Road in the suburbs to head downtown. The train (http://www.capemetrorail.co.za/) is easy to take during the weekdays, but runs infrequently on the weekends. There’s also the Golden Arrow’s bus, but it also doesn’t seem to run all that frequently. I never took the bus when I was in Cape Town. In the evenings, it’s recommended that you take a cab. Thus, going out at night can be a challenge if you don’t have a group of people to share the cost of a cab.

**Travel**

There are many opportunities to travel throughout South Africa and beyond during your exchange. A great time to travel is during the one week break in the middle of the semester. There is an overland tour that is planned through Two-Way-Travel that is available especially for exchange students. As well, there are other overland tours you can book through Two-Way Travel that will take you throughout Africa. Another popular way of getting around is the Baz Bus. The bus picks-up and drops off backpackers at designated hostels in South Africa, making it one of the safest and most reliable ways to travel if you’re planning on making any solo trips. Plus, you meet travellers from all over the world!

**Recommendations: What Not to Miss in Cape Town!**

Cape Town is a world-class city, where you’ll meet people from all over. While it’s easy to get caught up in the extravagence of this city, however, there’s more to Cape Town than just trendy cafes and nightclubs. South Africa has the highest level of inequality in the world, which becomes apparent when you compare the luxery homes on the beach front to the shacks of the townships. I recommend you experience a day in a township. I stayed overnight in Khayelitsha, the largest township in South Africa, at a local woman’s B&B
Townships, despite their rough-looking exteriors, are communities that are bubbling with life. Everyone was very friendly and I was amazed by the rich sense of community these people shared. I guarantee that you will have a different perspective of South Africa and development after your visit. If you’re interested in learning more about township life, I recommend the book *Khayelitsha: uMlungu in a Township* by Steven Otter.

In terms of entertainment, Baxter Theatre (UCT’s theater) provides a lot of excellent entertainment, from theatre to dance to opera. Students usually get in free or receive a big discount. I don’t think I ever paid more than $7 to see a show.

The Farmer’s Market in the Old Biscuit Mill in Woodstock is super fun to go to on a Saturday. The Market features many vendors selling delicious food! There are also lots of stores that sell crafts, art, and clothing that you can browse through.