Exchange Report
South Africa
UCT
July to November 2009
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I really had no reason to go to the University of Cape Town other than the fact that I wanted to go somewhere different with a completely new background and context. Cape Town is also the farthest place I could go (much to the dismay of my mother), being situated halfway around the world. I am a fourth year Communications major with a minor in Sociology and so I sought to do Sociology in Cape Town. It was a great decision as I got amazing perspectives in terms of education and life experiences that I will not forget. Much of what I will write about Cape Town and my exchange will contain clichés such as 'experience of a lifetime' and an abundance of hyperboles, but believe me, there is no other way to describe the past 5 months of my life. Best thing I've done. DO IT.

In terms of travel and visa stuff, get all your visa stuff prepared once you get your SFU acceptance but BEFORE you get your UCT acceptance. This means radiological reports, medical tests, and everything on that long, long checklist. As soon as you get your acceptance from UCT, express mail it to Toronto because their processing time is about a month and sometimes they miss things that you KNEW you included, but it was lost or whatever and you have to refax it. God, I was so stressed. As for booking your plane ticket, don’t do it until you get your acceptance. And book your flight so you arrive there about 10 days before the first class of term starts. Orientation is the first week but they want you to get there about 2 days before that, and only then will they pick you up from the airport. Use kayak.com for your ticket and keeping checking back to get the best price. I was lucky and paid about $1750, but prices are varied depending on when you go and when you check.

As for finances, it obviously depends on how much and where and in what comfort level you want to travel in after the semester ends. Notice how I said how much you want to travel, instead of if? That’s because the ‘if’ is not an option and you must do it. Seriously, you can’t be one of those boring American kids who go home as soon as term ends and want to be home for thanksgiving. Be Canadian and live it up. I even did a Canadian thanksgiving in Cape Town and made pumpkin pie from scratch. Anyways, leave as much money as you can for the end of term to travel. I used about three grand for a 20 day trip including flights, spending, housing etc. There are lots of options and you can really cheap it. Having lots of time helps though, because it means you can do a 10 hour bus ride instead of paying for a 2 hour flight. Before my exchange, I made a mini budget plan, then looked at it halfway through the semester and laughed. Think about how much you think you will spend, then double it. Then double it again. And then you’re kind of close.
When you arrive on the designated days, students from IAPO's orientation will pick you up. They tell you in the pre-arrival booklet that's emailed to you shortly after you're accepted from UCT so wait for that before you book your ticket. Orientation is pretty interesting, but there's a lot of it and can be overwhelming. I slept in for some of it but some of the sessions are really informative and interesting.

Accommodation is provided by IAPO and the housing is pretty good, albeit varied. You could be placed in a cozy little 4 person cottage or a 20 person mansion. The former is better to live in and the latter better to party in, is my opinion. I had a very attentive landlord who provided me and my housemates with everything we needed, but the case isn't so for all houses.

As for UCT and school itself, make sure you get your courses preapproved before you leave. It's such a hassle to do it when you get there, needing to run around to all the departments to get signatures like some of my friends did. Depending on what classes you take, profs can be great or not so great. Taking Sociology classes was sweet because it provided me with such great perspectives in terms of being part of the post-apartheid era, in what they called the 'new South Africa'. Oh and try and read up on the history (and current events) of South Africa and Cape Town before you leave, so you don't look like an idiot when they're all talking about that 'event from last May' or whatever and you're just sitting there, thinking 'what now?'. I also took a class on Visual Art and Contemporary Culture which was just an elective, but was so much fun. I got to go to different galleries and art spaces within the city, which gave me a more multi-faceted approach of the city as well.

As for the country itself, there is so much to do. I spent five months there and feel like I haven't done everything yet. When you go, try to embrace the culture and lifestyle there and don't get too caught up in the westernized life that is beginning to saturate Cape Town. Also, dress for the weather. I was there for part of winter and did not pack enough warm clothing. My SFU sweatpants saved my life when I was camping and a windproof rain jacket is never a bad thing. It is windy there ALL THE TIME. And seriously, I'm telling you this now, and you still won't get the capacity of wind I'm talking until you feel it. Sometimes I couldn't even go for a run because it was so windy! Oh and take care of yourself there. Stay active and enjoy life there at the same time. Don't however, let yourself go and gain 7 kgs in 7 weeks like one of my roommates. Muffins are delicious there though...

It can be easy to get caught up in writing papers balanced with the partying on Long St. (like our Granville, but smaller and cheaper). But I made a goal of doing something different every weekend during the school semester and succeeded pretty well. Go to different sporting events or plays around
the city. My favourite jazz bar was Asoka on Kloof St. Join the Mountain and Ski club at UCT (pretty much the only active club at UCT that actually hold events) and hike table mountain and sleep overnight. Hike Lion’s Head at full moon. Buy fruits from the guy down the road off of his truck. Eat bunny chows. Rent or be a passenger in a Best Beetle (and find yourself pushing it later…it’s the most run down vehicle you will find). Find a long weekend and take a trip and fly somewhere. Drive the Garden Route and go bungee jumping off the highest commercial jump in the world. Go skydiving!! Go to Hermanus and go shark cage diving (not that thrilling but it’s something to do). Rent a car and drive on the left hand side of the road and shift with your left hand. Head to Stellenbosch or another wine region and do wine tours. Raft and camp along the Orange river in Namibia. When you go grocery shopping buy and try something you’ve never seen before. Go to the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and hike Table Mountain through skeleton gorge. After your semester, fly to Vic Falls and jump in the devil’s pool!!! Drink as much wine as possible because, well, it’s just so good and cheap. Oh and South Africans also have a brandy and coke thing going.

Throughout this exchange, I’ve learned about the entire world. How cliché and open ended is that? I’ve hung out with many other international students and learned about the functioning of other countries in terms of social policies and politics amongst many other things. Then we compared it to the likes of Cape Town, and through many black label beers, shots of brandy and glasses of merlot, we had a mini model UN going. I’ve learned to become more open minded and how to open a bottle of wine very well. Those are two important things, I think.

Sitting the back of a packed (10 passenger +) minibus – cheap transport around Cape (about 5 rand or 80 cents to town)
On a hike to table mountain, a must do
After the semester ended, we flew to Victoria Falls (on the Zambian side) and took a jump into the Devil's Pool, right before the falls.