

As the end of my six month stay in Cape Town, South Africa, approached, I experienced a mix of emotions I could not have predicted at the beginning of my journey. While I had previously traveled to South Africa and had seen the incredible sights of Cape Town and Kruger National Park, the lure to return had not been simply rooted in the country's beauty or the thrill of going on safari. I had been exposed to the country's widespread poverty and lingering cultural tensions, yet I was fascinated by the development and spirit of the young, evolving nation. As I departed the United States for my semester abroad, my primary goal as a Henry Mitchell scholar and a student at the University of Western Cape was to be immersed in the ongoing cultural transformation and unyielding progress of South Africa following the end of apartheid less than 20 years ago.

My experience at the University of Western Cape far exceeded all my expectations. Arriving at UWC I was amazed at the beauty of the campus and the friendliness of the faculty and students. Unsurprisingly, there were challenges and frustrations in the registration process that students in the United States are fortunate to avoid, but the staff in the UWC International Office always did their best to assist and resolve any problems or issues I encountered.

The history and political science courses I completed were an integral part of my successful semester and positive university experience. My history courses focused on Africa during colonization and Africa post-colonization and were especially interesting as it was not presented from a Western perspective. Additionally, I had a professor from Namibia who was able to offer his own personal stories and experiences that illustrated the course subject matter far beyond the scope of any textbook. My political science courses related to international

politics, and while the coursework was not challenging or difficult, I enjoyed learning the information in a manner that was not American-centric as it seemed to offer a more objective, less-biased appraisal of international political events, institutions, and relations.

Beyond the classroom, being at the University of Western Cape allowed me to interact with students from all over South Africa and the world. I became good friends with many of my classmates and had more than one memorable conversation with strangers who enjoyed the opportunity to randomly introduce themselves to an exchange student. It was rewarding to speak with these individuals about life as a student in South Africa, their vastly different experiences growing up, and their future goals and aspirations. I met university students from South Africa, Ghana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and exchange students from all over the United States and Europe. The relationships I forged at UWC helped me explore South Africa outside of the university in a manner much more rewarding than that of a normal tourist. The real value of these friendships was the window it provided into the true, unbiased nature of South African culture. I heard firsthand of the socioeconomic hardships and racial conflicts far too many students had encountered. These students amazed me as they were resilient, optimistic, charitable, and held steadfast beliefs in tolerance and equality, despite the unimaginable adversity many of them faced.

In addition to the friends I made at UWC, I made several close friends living in Observatory in a youth lodge with 10 other residents. The house typically had a few long-term South African occupants along with several students and interns from North American, Europe, and the Middle East who generally stayed a few weeks or months. Living off campus with

similarly minded people made it easy to find groups to explore the attractions in Cape Town such as Table Mountain, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, and Camps Bay. I also enjoyed the many local shops and restaurants that were within walking distance of my home that provided delicious and affordable meals. While safety was a constant concern and transportation to Bellville for classes took nearly 45 minutes, I was pleased with my decision to live off campus.

While my University of Western Cape experience was itself a rewarding experience, being located in Cape Town allowed me to easily take advantage of school breaks to travel around the country. Over spring break I traveled up the Garden Route to the Gold Coast and jumped off the world's highest commercial bungee jump. Over Easter break, I was able to visit Kruger National Park and spend a day in Swaziland. After finals in May, I traveled to the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya and hiked Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. These trips provided a further opportunity to explore African culture and make acquaintances with people from all over the world with immensely different ways of life.

As my departure from Cape Town loomed, I realized satisfying my initial goal was far more than just an objective success. I finally understood my experience would not come to an end when I left the country, rather the lessons and experiences I had would continue to challenge and influence my personal growth for years to come.

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