

REFLECTIONS...

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

Fall 2012

My semester in Australia was by no means the first time I had traveled out of the country. It wasn't even the first time I had traveled to Australia, though that trip had been with my family many years ago. I have visited many countries for varying lengths of time from a few days to several weeks both with and without my family, but always in a group of some kind. I even lived in New Zealand for a year when I was ten. For me, while every country has its unique points the more a travel the more I see the world as uniform. The settings and cultures may change but people in general are the same everywhere. I had never been anxious about travelling abroad, only excited, until a few weeks before this latest trip to Australia. I could not figure out why this was until recently when I realized that not only was I moving for six months to a place where I knew no one and would attending a school which was very different from JMU, but it was the first time I was living on my own.

Up until that time I had lived with my family or in a dorm. When I travelled previously I had stayed in hotels, hostels, and other people's houses. This time I was renting a room in a house and had to take of everything myself. I had to figure out as I went along what I needed as the house only provided some things. The place I was staying was close to the school, about a 15-20 minute walk, and had bus stop nearby, about a 10-15 minute walk. Google maps was a life saver for figuring which buses and stops I needed to get everywhere and was pretty accurate. However, having to rely on the bus for everything made me nostalgic for my car. I have never enjoyed cooking and after having to cook about every other day in Australia this hasn't changed, though I would like to think I have become more competent doing it.

It was stressful and difficult but I adjusted rather quickly to life on my own and in Australia. I had got all my anxiety about it out before I arrived. One huge help was having my sister with me. She took vacation time from her job and we traveled around some of southeastern Australia a couple weeks classes a Flinders started. While I did the things such as finding a place, signing the lease, and paying the bond myself it was great to have her there lending me support and advice. I Skyped my parents about once a week and was only homesick twice, when I turned twenty one and when I sprained my ankle. There were plenty of things I had to learn to do on my own after my sister left, but the trip starting off well was very important for establishing the tone

for the rest of my stay.

I had to set up a bank account, learn about what information is necessary to receive a wire transfer from the US as well as how long it takes and the cost, and learn how to pay my rent and power online. This may not seem like a big deal, but as someone for which this was all new it was more than a little intimidating. I enjoyed Flinders and learned a lot in my classes but nothing near as much as what I learned in living on my own for the first time. Since those months in Australia were the first time I lived on my own, in a new city, attending a different school, and half way around the world from everyone I knew I feel confident about my ability to do it again and better wherever I end up for graduate school and get a job.

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia Spring 2010

Advice to Future Exchange Students

I attended Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia during the first semester of 2010. It was an absolutely amazing experience and I am so grateful. I was able to live in another culture while fulfilling one of my life-long dreams. Meeting new people, trying new things, learning to grow in yet another way has further helped mature myself as an individual.

However, one thing that made this semester so wonderful was all the planning ahead of time. Yes, LOTS OF PLANNING. I can't even begin to explain what a frustration all of this was at the start, but had I not made a checklist of deadlines, I probably would not have had such an enjoyable semester. It was very important to figure out my classes abroad far in advance. Visiting both universities' websites to read about the courses offered during the semester I was attending helped immensely. Make sure you choose classes you know you'll enjoy and *want* to attend. For example, there was no sense in me taking Economics 101 because, let's face it, if I sign up for a class I hate and I'm in a country I have now grown to love... You'll see me exploring Australia before sitting at that desk. Part of studying abroad is being able to participate in a new learning environment and it was interesting to recognize similarities and differences, so don't miss out on the experience.

Once I had done my research on which classes would transfer to JMU, I went to speak with all the JMU cluster advisors and get their signatures of approval. Class approval is a long and grueling process, so the earlier completed, the better. You won't have to worry about it in later months when you're too busy in a packing frenzy. Yet another thing not to leave to the last minute.

On a random side note, when classes actually begin, wait to purchase your textbooks. I shelled out \$130 for one textbook that I never needed once. (This is one time you don't have to "prepare" ahead of time, despite my overall claim.) Much like JMU, your lecturers will inform you during the first week of classes if the textbook is needed. However, if the textbook is required, check the on-campus library for copies of it and ask the lecturer or students who have previously taken the class, how often the text is used. For majority of my classes, I used the 'two-hour checkout' system offered at Flinders because I would only have to read one chapter per week. This saved me over \$100 worth of textbooks. Granted, I had to be on top on my assignments and not leave reading to the last minute, but this actually helped in the long-run with time management and finances. Save money when you can because, unfortunately, it doesn't grow on trees 'down under' either.

Another crucial deadline is the housing contract. I completed this early fall and I am so glad I did. There is only one "hall," or dorm complex, on Flinders' campus and it is the place you want to be! It is similar to JMU's dorm buildings, but it has the only dining hall attached to the dorm building which provides meals throughout the week. Not having to worry about buying food in a foreign country, no matter how much like your home country it is, five days a week is a huge weight off your shoulders. The hall organizes so many fun activities; there was never a dull moment. Plus, your hall mates become your family. You share meals together, go to events together, study together, watch movies together, exercise together, etc. The list could go on. Over the period of just five months, I have made unforgettable friendships. Housing-wise, the hall accommodation is the way to go.

Another important factor I found was it was very beneficial to take full advantage of the luggage restrictions. Of course all airlines have different restrictions so I had to make sure all the restrictions corresponded with each other. For example, I was flying with both Qantas and American Airlines and they had different luggage restrictions with weight and dimensions. I found that packing up to the limit was actually beneficial. By this, I don't mean clothes, but packing a good deal of toiletries helped when settling in because I didn't have to make a quick stop for shampoo nor did I have to try to find where the drugstore was right off the bat!

Once I got past all the nitty-gritty planning, it was smooth sailing. Be careful not to get too caught up in all the fun and remember all the difficulties that went towards planning your semester abroad. No, I don't mean to sound like a parent here, but the last thing I wanted was to finish all my

preparation and find out later I failed the classes I worked so hard to get approved in the first place. That being said, have a wonderful semester and take in as much as you can. It will be the time of your life you will cherish forever.

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

Fall 09

I studied at Flinders Uni in Adelaide, South Australia, and I absolutely loved it! My family flew to Sydney with me in July and stayed for a week. It was nice becoming acclimated with them by my side, because once they left and I moved into Uni Hall by myself I felt so alone. However, within minutes someone knocked on my door and introduced herself. Everyone is so welcoming in Australia, especially the residents of Uni Hall.

I stayed in the on-campus dorm Uni Hall; best decision. I made genuine friends immediately, and eventually I got to know everyone. I know, without living in the Hall my experience at Flinders would not have been complete. I took three topics (classes) while I was there. I had nine contact hours, with minimal assignments. At Flinders, there are fewer assignments, but they are weighted more heavily. This allowed me to have an active social calendar throughout the semester. The Hall always has activities, so there was never a dull moment. We were about 15 minutes from the beach, so after dinner, or whenever we had free time, people would pile in cars and head to the beach.

I packed pretty well, I felt. Their winter is not like ours, but it is in the 50s, so layers are advisable. Once spring/summer come along, light materials are great. I brought one large suitcase and one smaller suitcase, which I used while I traveled. My theory was if I could not fit something in that amount of luggage then I could live without it, or I would buy it when I got there. There was not much of a culture shock. There is a large American influence in Australia; however, some things are different. They abbreviate everything. It can cause some conversational hold-ups, but you soon catch on. I embraced the differences and never took them as burdens. The food was not much different than what I eat at home. I definitely ate more fast food, especially Macca's (McDonald's), in Australia than I do in the States. Kangaroo is delicious. I did not try crocodile or emu, but I wish I had. Vegemite is yucky. I had to try it since I was there, but I did not enjoy it. Tim Tams are amazing. They have just been introduced to America, so it kind of ruins their exoticism, but they are wonderful.

I had the time of my life while I was there, truly. Everyone is so amazing. I wish I had been more outgoing at the beginning of the semester. I was a little hesitant to join in on activities, but I definitely made up for lost time later. The one problem I found with studying in Australia is the major cities are pretty far apart, which makes weekend travels difficult. I made it up to Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef, which were fabulous. I wish I could have made more time for excursions, but it was hard since most of the people in the Hall were Australians, so they were not as eager to travel. The expenses add up while you are abroad, but they are worth it in the end. I also bought my return plane ticket, before I left the US, for the last day of the semester, which gave me little time after exams to travel. That was a mistake. I should have known that I would make great friends who would be more than happy to invite me to their homes. A piece of advice: get minimal sleep the night before the flight over the Pacific. It is a 14-hour flight and you will want to be as tired as you can to make the flight go as quickly as possible.

One thing I still find amazing is how clear their water is. The beaches are so brilliant and clean. It is so refreshing being in the Australian environment. One thing I found surprising was how very few people talk and act like Paul Hogan. Very few Aussies are all about the outback. They are a very laid-back, casual group. They do not take life too seriously. Australia is more wonderful to me now than it was when I first arrived. I have life long connections to the country and I cannot wait to return.

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia Fall 2008

Before July, I had never left the U.S and the farthest I had ever been away from my family was two hours away, at JMU. I didn't know anyone from another country and was always jealous of my peers who travelled around the world and who seemed so much more cultured than I was. Today, I can say that I have been halfway across the world. I have friends from many different countries who I plan to keep in touch with. And I have officially caught the "travelling bug," which makes me want to go to even more places and meet more people from all over the world.

My time in Australia was one of the best experiences I have ever had. I was extremely nervous going into it, but now that I am back home I would definitely do it over again if I had the chance.

Before I came to Australia, I pictured kangaroos hopping down the streets and everyone

looking like the Crocodile Hunter. I really had no idea what the culture would be like. I was very surprised how much Australia was like America. I thought that everything would seem really foreign to me, but just walking down the road I couldn't tell that I was in another country (except for the fact that the cars drive on the left side of the road). The first thing I noticed coming into the country was that the people were all so friendly. I literally didn't meet one unfriendly person the entire time I was there. I came into the University Hall at Flinders halfway through the year and was from another country, yet everyone made me feel so welcome and made a point of welcoming me into their community. It was incredibly easy for me to fit in and accommodate to the lifestyle. My hallmates all seemed really interested in the American culture and surprised me by knowing so much about our politics. I was there during Obama's election, and that was a huge time for Australians. I was able to see how our president truly affects the entire world, as every newspaper there would have some mention of Obama each day. It made me proud to be an American, but also made me want to research the politics of other countries so I could be more aware of what is going on elsewhere in the world.

I don't know if I had an official culture shock. I didn't really get homesick until about 3 months in. I was having so much fun and meeting new people that I didn't really think about home. I still talked to my family about 3 times a week on Skype, which I strongly recommend for anyone going abroad. It was great to be able to see my family and talk to them about what was going on. I didn't feel so far away from them when I was able to see their faces. When I did get homesick, there was always someone to talk to or something to distract me with. I really wasn't ever bored and there was always something going on in our hall.

Some things that I wish I had known before I left are that I wish I had known more about what the weather would be like. I came in July, but that was winter time for Australia. In Adelaide especially, which is where I lived, it was the coldest part of Australia. I brought mostly summer clothes and didn't prepare enough for the weather. It got down to the 40s while I was first there. I also should have looked up how to convert Celsius to Fahrenheit because often times I had no idea what the weather really was because it would be listed in Celsius. It was also strange using the metric system and the money definitely took me awhile to get used to. But I really liked having these new things in my life because it was something different and exciting. I picked up on the Aussie slang pretty quickly, but it was really interesting hearing their language.

The first time someone asked me “how ya goin?” I didn’t really know what to say. It was funny to me how they thought that I spoke with an accent when I had never thought of myself as having an accent. I liked the fact that I was different from everyone and had a different background. Especially since the Aussies think so highly of Americans.

I made some really good friends while studying abroad. It was incredibly easy to bond with the other Americans who were there, since we had so much in common. One girl I met from New Mexico ended up coming with me on our mid-semester break and we stayed in hostels and traveled around Australia. I am hoping to visit her again one day. The Australians were also super easy to get along with because they were so laid back. Two of my friends drove me to the airport when I left to come home and stayed with me until I boarded the plane. A few people are going to be coming to America next year and we have made plans to meet up. I definitely plan on returning to Australia in the next few years to catch up with everyone and to explore more. I would even consider living there when I’m older.

My accommodation was the best part about my experience. I stayed at a dorm, but it was completely different from any dorm I lived in at JMU. It was so much better because everyone in the hall knew everyone and we were all friends. It was like a big family. There were events set up when I first got there so I could get to know the other new students and exchange students. We put on events in the hall such as pub crawls, toga parties, and formal dinners. There was also a huge sports aspect that I loved. Everyone in the hall came out to the sporting events and supported each other. I played for our hall’s soccer team, competing against other colleges in South Australia. We ended up winning our championship and got a trophy. It was such a great experience. I also participated in our Athletics Day and ran in our hall’s 5K towards the end of the semester.

The classroom situation in Australia was slightly different from here. For one, all of the lectures were put up on the school’s website, so attendance wasn’t mandatory and you could always listen to what you missed online. There were also classes called tutorials where you would go in with a small group from your lecture class and have a discussion about what you learned that week. I thought that was a really interesting concept and something that we should think about implementing here. It made everyone have a reason to do the readings and gave them a place to be able to ask questions in a small group setting.

In conclusion, I wouldn't trade my experience abroad for anything. I believe that it really made me a better and more rounded person. I feel more cultured and knowledgeable about the world than ever before. I came back home to find everything the same, and that was kind of hard for me at first. I definitely missed my home and friends and family, but there was also a part of me that missed having new and exciting things in my life. I will continue to keep in touch with the friends I met abroad and will be saving up my money to go back there someday. I can't stress enough how every person should be able to have the experience to study abroad. There's something about leaving home all by yourself and going to new places that makes you stronger and helps build character. I hope that everyone someday gets to visit Australia.

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia
Fall 2007

Making the decision on whether you should go to Australia or not is a simple one, as long as you are willing to accept one simple statement.

Do not go to Australia unless you are willing to fall in Love.

Before I left for my 4-month exchange program at Flinders Uni in Adelaide, South Australia my mom jokingly told friends that the one worry she had was that I would fall in love with a boy and never come home. But in the end she shouldn't have voiced her worries so lightheartedly. The end result is much worse than she feared— I fell in love with the entire country. I fell in love with this strange bouncing marsupial I still can't manage to stop being amused by. And with the landscape that so easily ranges from grapevine covered rolling hills to steep rocky cliffs perfect for mountain climbing to endless kilometers of coastline. And being a person who doesn't generally like cities, I was surprised that I even fell in love with Sydney—a city with a population of 2 million that still maintains the warmth of a small town in southern Georgia.

But to sum all of my feelings for Australia up neatly, all that I can tell you is “no worries.” No other place that I've ever been to has had the ability to adopt a simple pair of words that appears simply to be a cultural stereotype into a mantra to live by. One of the many lessons I learned during my stay in Aus is to not let things bother me as much. Not just the small things either, but “big” things as well. And if you ask why, the only response I will be able to make is “no worries.”

So let's assume you've already chosen to go to Australia. Let's assume that you are completely willing to fall in love, and that you are willing to take the risk of having a small part of you never want to come home, even though you love it there too. So what next? Looking back I don't think I would have done anything differently, but I suppose there are a few things I wish someone had told me. For starters, I can guarantee you that you won't need as much stuff as you think you will. Pack everything you think you might need, and then (I'm fully serious here) leave at least 1/3 of it at home. The coldest Winter day there is comparable to our average Autumn day in Virginia, so keep that in mind too. And have you heard Baz Lurhman's song "Wear Sun screen?" If you haven't, it's really good and you should listen to it. But seriously, wear sunscreen. Australia is much closer to the ozone hole than we are. So wear sun screen.

If you're going to Flinders Uni in SA, I recommend living on campus in the flats. The townhouses on campus are pretty old, and the dorms are...dorms. The flats are nice though and it will be easier to stop by to see friends. Or you can do what I did and live off campus, there are plenty of share houses within a short walk or bus ride to campus and Flinders has a website that can help you find a place too, even while you're sitting here at your computer in the states.

You won't be able to see everything in Australia that you were hoping to, so just be content with what you can see. I could give you advice on where to go, but the truth is that it is all just so amazing. Watch the sun set over the ocean, it will be gorgeous every single time, without fail. Eat salt & pepper squid and prawns. Buy a pair of thongs. Wear your bathing suit everywhere you feel like it, and wear your shoes only to the places you feel like it too. Listen to triple J, it might actually be the best radio station the world over. Call home, your family actually does realize just exactly how far it is from here to there.