

Semester Abroad Report

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth
South Africa



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1. Introduction

I was so happy when finally stepped into my plane to Port Elizabeth. The weeks before I had to fill out so much paper stuff and had to send so many mails. Arriving at the airport I knew that my adventure finally starts. After all, I know that all the effort was absolutely worth it. Despite it was really hard to leave the girlfriend, family and friends more than 11 000 km away back home I had an awesome time in South Africa. I've never been there before, but most of the stuff I heard was positive. Sure, everybody knows some horror stories about South Africa but I wanted to create my own picture. It was such a nice feeling when I arrived in Port Elizabeth. When I stepped into the plane it was winter and when I stepped out it was summer. There was only a time difference of one hour, so I had no jet lag and I felt like I'm on vacation. Palm trees everywhere (even on campus), the warm Indian Ocean, the sunny weather and the beautiful beaches made me really feel like I'm in Paradise and not at a location where I have to study.

In the following report I would like to reflect at first the objectives I had when I decided to study one semester abroad. After that I'm going to report about my arrival and my first few days in South Africa. Followed by some information about the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) I'm going to present the lectures I had at NMMU and some general facts about Port Elizabeth and my accommodation I lived. Finally I'm going to report about travelling and what I learned during these five months, followed by a conclusion. In the appendix are pictures included which I made during my stay.

2. Personal Aims

With the decision to study a semester abroad my main goal was to improve my English. A reason for this is that my company is US based and therefore a lot of oral and written communication is in English. Another reason is that English is getting more and more important in the modern globalized world. But despite improving my English I also wanted to experience something completely different. I've never spent such a long time away from home. Some of my friends already studied abroad and they were all enthusiastic about their experiences.

In my choice for the right university a basic requirement was that English is an official language in the country where the university is. I finally decided to go to South Africa because it was not that expensive as the United States and Canada are and that there was summer when I arrived in the end of January. My final decision to go to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) was based on the fact that there is an existing collaboration between the Cooperative State University in Stuttgart and the NMMU and some reports from former NMMU study abroad students.

3. Arrival and Orientation

I arrived in Port Elizabeth one and a half weeks prior to the start of the lectures in the end of January. The biggest difference when I arrived was the weather with close to 30° degrees and sunshine. Back home in Germany we had a lot of snow and it was freezing cold with -10° degrees. Altogether I've never had a summer like this in my life. The first two months we had all the time between 25° and 30° degrees and nearly no rain. So we spent a lot of time at the beach. Unfortunately that was also the reason why it was very difficult to switch from holiday to university mode again when I had to study for the first tests.

In the beginning it was not always easy to understand the English of the South Africans because some of them have a strong accent and mumble. I was not really homesick because eve-

rything was so exiting, despite the fact that it took forever until we had access to the internet and therefore were able to communicate with the people back home. That was not really nice. Making friends was really easy because I stayed in an accommodation where almost only international students lived and therefore when I arrived nobody knew each other. So everybody was really open minded and tried to make new friends.

To be honest in the beginning there was not a real cultural difference for me. The accommodation was in a really nice area in Port Elizabeth, so it looked a bit like in Southern Europe. But time after time I also saw the areas which were not that nice and therefore recognized that there is big difference. The gap between rich and poor is so big in South Africa. Like I said I lived in a really nice area, but only 10 minutes away there was a big township where people lived in poverty, some of them without electricity and running water. That's the reason why I had a cultural shock not in the beginning but a few weeks after my arrival.

Also the university organized a weekend trip for all the international students to the Tsitsikamma National Park which took place a few days after my arrival. This "welcome weekend" was a really nice event where everybody got to know each other. Also there was a good mix between roadshows and action activities within the National Park. All these factors made it really difficult to get homesick.

4. Information about the University

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) was opened in 2005 as a result of the mergers of the University of Port Elizabeth, the PE Technikon and the Vista University Port Elizabeth. In 2012 the NMMU had 26 617 students. Five of the NMMU campuses are in Nelson Mandela Bay, one is in George.¹ I had all my lectures at the South Campus in Summerstrand, which was only a 10 minute walk from our accommodation. A specific characteristic of the South Campus is that the Campus is on a 720-hectare nature reserve. Therefore, you find a lot of monkeys on Campus which was often quite funny. But also with a little luck you were able to see snakes, zebras and a form of antelope's right next to the university building.

Most of the lecture halls were modernized and in a good condition. On Campus were cafeterias, food courts, coffee shops, a book store, a big library and even a bank branch. So in the beginning it was sometimes really confusion to find the right venue because the campus was so big. At NMMU they have faculties from Art to Education, Business and Law to Engineering and Science. We had one person from the international office who was responsible for the European Exchange and Study Abroad students and our primary contact person for all sort of questions regarding the university, accommodation and all kind of problems we had.

5. Course Information

At NMMU I took the following courses:

- *Risk Management*: The lecture itself was really interesting but in my opinion the lecturer was not the best one. He made a lot of mistakes when we made calculations together and also often had problems in answering questions asked by students. But still it was together with Macroeconomics my favorite lecture.
- *Macroeconomics*: Back home I already had an introduction lecture in Macroeconomics but I was only able to take an advantage of that in the first weeks. After that I had to

¹ Cf. NMMU (2013), <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/www/media/Store/documents/courses/general/2013-General-Prospectus.pdf>, retrieval: 24.07.2013

study a lot of new stuff because the lecture was made for students who already had an introduction lecture in macroeconomics. The lecture itself was really interesting because the lecturer often gave practical examples of the South African or the world economy.

- *Labor Law*: I also had to take on lecture in law. We had a good lecturer and the exam was fair. Most of the time the stuff we had to study was really practical but I'm afraid I'll never practically apply the gained knowledge in the South African labor law.
- *Organizational Behavior*: This lecture was not my favorite one because most of the time we just had to memorize as much as we can in order to get a good grade without really understanding connections.

There were a lot of differences which I observed to the classes in Germany. For example I was used to get lecture notes from the lecturer in the beginning of every semester. At NMMU they only recommended a book which we had to buy for each lecture. Then during the semester we worked through the whole book. Then for tests and exams we for example had to know everything from Chapter 3 to 12. But there was also a difference with the way my final grade was determined. I had per lecture two semester tests plus in some lectures one or two assignments (in total 40% of final grade) and in every lecture one final exam (60% of final grade). At the DHBW I only have the final exam which counts 100% of my final grade. Therefore, I had to study more during the semester for tests. On the other hand I only had 10 hours a week of lectures at the university. All in all I would say the workload was less than back home but maybe resulting from the fact that the semester was five months long compared to three months at the DHBW.

6. Port Elizabeth

Port Elizabeth is well known for its sunshine and sandy beaches. Sometimes Port Elizabeth is also referred to as the "Windy City", "Friendly City" or just "PE" (that's how every South African calls Port Elizabeth). In terms of the population the city is with 1.1 million people the fifth largest in South Africa.² The famous garden route starts in Port Elizabeth and ends in Cape Town. Around Port Elizabeth a lot of game reserves and the famous Addo Elephant National Park are located. So it is possible to see the big seven of South Africa (lion, leopard, rhino, elephant, cape buffalo, great white shark and the southern right whale) in the area I lived. PE is the city in South Africa with most guaranteed days of sun per year. Also you can find a lot of parks and old buildings of Port Elizabeth's period of promoterism.³

But tourism is not the only source of income. There are also big factories of Volkswagen and some other industries located in Port Elizabeth. This is the reason why PE also has a big harbor where you often were able to see huge cargo ships. In 2010 PE was one of the cities in South Africa which was allowed to host games for the FIFA World Cup in the Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium. Germany lost in the first stage there against Serbia and won in PE the game for the third place against Uruguay.⁴ Also the Ironman South Africa is every year in Port Elizabeth. Very popular in South Africa is rugby. For the games of the Southern Kings (PE's Team) nearly every game was sold out in the Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium and the atmosphere was amazing. In comparison we went to the Africa Cup of Nations Soccer Game for the third place between Mali and Ghana and the stadium was not sold out. Rugby and Cricket are for the South Africans way more important.

During my stay I had twice the opportunity to visit the townships with the university. Both times it was just shocking to see that people live like that. Still, in my opinion it was important to visit the

² Cf. w.a. (2103), <http://www.portelizabeth.org/>, retrieval: 24.07.2013

³ Cf. Philipp, C. (2011), p. 336

⁴ Cf. FIFA (2010), <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/southafrica2010/teams/team=43948/index.html>, retrieval: 24.07.2013

townships because it is also historically an important part of South Africa. As a consequence of the apartheid all colored people had to live in the townships.

7. Accommodation

It was no problem to find an accommodation in Port Elizabeth. During the enrollment process the university asked me to name two preferred accommodations in which I would like to stay. I read through some reports of former NMMU students and took a look at the overview of accommodations offered by NMMU on their website. I decided to stay in an accommodation called "Annie's Cove" which is probably the best known student accommodation in Port Elizabeth. Nearly everybody knew where "Annie's Cove" is. The accommodation was a 10 minute walk away from the university and a 15 min walk from the beach. Like most of the houses in South Africa we had our own Security Service, security gate and an electric fence around the housing complex. The whole housing complex was built up of nearly 30 small houses in which four people each house lived. In the middle of the area was a pool and a barbecue.

I lived together with two Germans and an American. The accommodation itself was ok. We had everything we needed. I really loved that there were so many people from different countries. Most of the people in "Annie's Cove" were from America and Germany but there were also students from France, Netherlands, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia and many more countries. In general the living costs in South Africa are lower than in Germany. Compared to what we got the paid rent for the accommodation was expensive. But I think that was due to the fact that we had the security company and the electric fence. In the supermarket the prices were nearly the same but going out for example in restaurants, bars and clubs was way cheaper. The price for gas was close to 1€ per liter and therefore also way cheaper.

8. Travelling

South Africa offers so many beautiful things to see and to do. Sometimes it was so hard to prioritize between different locations I wanted to travel to, because my time was limited due to the fact that I had to return back to work nearly one and a half weeks after my last final exam. During eastern the university was closed for 8 days, so I travelled with some other international students from Port Elizabeth all way down the Garden Route to Cape Town. This trip was a highlight of my stay. Travelling itself is cheaper than back home. For example like I already mentioned the gas is cheaper. But also for sleeping one night in a hostel you usually pay around R110 (8,5€). That was the reason why it was possible for me to travel around as often as I can to different destinations when I was not busy with work I had to do for university.

During all the travelling I experienced so much: Cuddling with lions and cheetahs, riding on an ostrich, riding and feeding elephants, diving with seals and with white sharks in a cage. Also I did bungee jumping, sky diving and made my diving license. Not to forget the breath taking Safari's through national parks and game reserves and all the landscapes and cities I visited. On my final trip before my plane left I travelled to Lesotho, which is small mountain kingdom within South Africa. It is one of the poorest countries in the world and nearly 23% of the people living there have AIDS/HIV.⁵ The country is also called "Roof of Africa" because the lowest point of the country is on 1400m and the highest on 3482m.⁶ The landscape there was amazing and we even saw one of the very rare ski resorts you can find in Africa, which was weird to see because

⁵ Cf. Mwale, B. (w.y.), <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/lesotho/>, retrieval: 25.07.2013

⁶ Cf. Philipp, C. (2011), p. 480

when you think about Africa you don't think about skiing. Despite the people were so poor and lived in rural houses, they were so friendly and helpful like I never really experienced before.

9. What I learned

In the beginning it was hard for me to study completely in English. Sometimes I had to read one sentences three or four times until I got it. But like with most things you get better and better with practicing. So I recognized time after time that I improved and in the end it was quite normal to read trough the English economics literature.

Also I was impressed by the people in Lesotho. They were so poor but still just happy people. The first night in Lesotho we were confused because we couldn't lock the door of our small house where we slept. We really were already used to all the security measures in South Africa and therefore afraid that during the night someone comes in the house to steal our stuff. But as we talked to the owner he affirmed that Lesotho is different and we should not worry too much. And he was right. The people there are not really materialistic. So they would probably steal our food but not the laptops.

I think I already was open-minded to new things, but because of my stay I think I'm even more now. Making so many new friendships and experiencing so many thinks really influenced my personality in a positive way. I also recognized how good we have it in Germany. When people in Germany are complaining about problems then this is most of the time on a very high level. Seeing the townships and how the people lived there was shocking.

10. Conclusion

I'm so happy and grateful that I had the opportunity to study one semester abroad. I don't want to miss all the experiences and friendships I made during my stay. Also to live five months in another country with a different language and culture really formed me and was in my opinion really important for my further development within my studies. Furthermore, I would recommend every student to study one semester abroad, no matter where the final destination might be.

South Africa really is a country with two faces. On the one side the beautiful and breathtaking landscapes, cities and all the animals you can find there and on the other side all the problems with crime and security. For me the nice side outbalanced the ugly one despite my cell phone got stolen in a bar and we had several times problems with burglars in our housing complex. Also I couldn't walk around at night because it was too dangerous. Sure, there were situations when we drove through certain areas when I thought that right now I don't really want to go out of the car but still I was never really scared of my belongings or even my health. There are certain rules you have to stand to and then you are safe. For sure there is always a residual risk you can't control, but you have that in my opinion everywhere in the world.

I'm pretty sure that at some point I'm going to return to South Africa. Probably not within the next few years because first I'd like to see some other parts of the world. I really felt in love with that country and will always remember the great time I had.

List of literature

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