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Adventures in the Middle Kingdom: A Semester in New Zealand

Three colleagues from CRP and long time friends had a great time in New Zealand, taking classes at the University of Auckland and enjoying their time in a country of picturesque towns, beautiful landscape, temperate rain forests, giant ferns, cascading waterfalls, and the natural settings used in the Lord of the Rings.

Remember what it was like that first semester in college? Remember how it really was the time of your life, because everything that happened was new and exciting? Well, that's what our semester at the University of Auckland felt like all over again. Our adventure in New Zealand was well worth it to say the least. We made some life long friends and had ourselves a ton of "once in a lifetime" experiences that we will never forget.

When the three of us first decided that we wanted to go abroad, we really didn't know where we wanted to go. We looked into London and Australia, but those programs were too "popular" for our tastes. For those of you who know CRP's professor Paul Wack, you may also know of his obsession with the country of kiwis. He was the one that pushed New Zealand, and got us into contact with universities down there.

When the time came to make the decision about where to go, New Zealand was unanimously the choice for all three of us. We have been friends from CRP for the last 2 years. We all got along, and knew that this would not only be a good opportunity to meet new people, but also to get to know each other better. The ball was rolling finally but the only problem was that Cal Poly didn't really have much information on studying in New Zealand. In fact, the study abroad information center really had nothing to do with our getting down to NZ to study for a quarter. We owe a great deal of thanks to our mentor, Paul Wack, who helped us tremendously in getting all the initial info on the University of Auckland for us. From this, it was up to us to set up the rest of the trip: flights, housing, application, enrollment, passports, visas, etc. The understanding of this process is in and of itself gratifying. We made it down to New Zealand without the help of an abroad program. Although, we hope that in the future it will be a lot easier for CRP and Poly student to go and visit kiwi-land just as we did.

We left for New Zealand on July 10th 2004, and the three of us were anxiously waiting what was in store for us 10,000 miles away. When the plane landed at 7:30 in the morning that first day, we really didn't know what was going on. We had just flown for 13 hours, 10,000 miles, and went from summer to dead winter in half a day's time. We were taken to the Railway Campus, where we would be staying. This was an off campus international dormitory with a twist. It was an old railway station that had been converted into a dormitory, so the whole building had great architecture. Those first few days were a blur of settling in, meeting dozens of new people, and acclimating to the time change.

We spent getting to know Auckland, its streets, entertainment options, and surrounding areas during the first week or two. The Railway Campus is located right on the harbor about 10-minutes walking distance from both the University of Auckland campus and from downtown. We were in close proximity to everything that we needed and wanted: food, school, bars, transit, and friends. As a harbor city, Auckland has the feel of San Francisco with its windy streets, waterfront, and nautically themed character, although it was much smaller in scale. The suburbs of Auckland are quite spread out and are connected by city streets as opposed to freeways like we have in the States. Almost exclusively, our transportation was by foot in Auckland, and by car when we left the city on the weekends.

New Zealand has a temperate not tropical rainforest climate, so if you can imagine a lush prehistoric-esc landscape equipped with giant ferns and cascading waterfalls, then you've got a good picture. Some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world are in New Zealand, and it was amazing. It got to the point that after a while, we had to stop taking pictures, because pretty much every time we looked out the window, it was the most beautiful thing we had ever seen; it would have been ridiculous to document it all. The

Figure 1. The City of Auckland, New Zealand



pictures that are permanently etched in our minds will be sufficient enough. We did, however, manage to accumulate upwards of 3,000 photos and a couple hundred videos.

Fashion in New Zealand was something worth noting as well. The style of dress had the essence of the Euro look; the style was Metro-sexual to say the least. It was obvious as we walked the streets trying to assimilate the culture that our subtle differences would peg us as foreigners. There wasn't too much different about the fashion for woman in comparison to the US, but male fashion was a different story.

Our trip to the South Island during semester break was amazing. We had planned out a trip that would allow us to see all the key features of the island as we drove around in a camper van that we had rented. We had ourselves four days of snowboarding at the beginning of the voyage. The snow was powder, the views were epic, and the crowds were non-existent. One of the days we were there, only 38 people besides us were on the mountain, something that is truly unheard of here in the United States.

Over the course of the two weeks, we managed to see most of what we wanted to see on the South Island. We headed from Christchurch down the east coast, and cut across at Dunedin over to Te Anau. We took a ferry ride on Milford Sound from there (one of the sites of the Lord of the Rings movies), where we saw snowcapped sea cliffs, penguins, and giant mile-high water falls. The place was almost too much to take in. As we headed north up the west coast, we made stops in the picturesque towns of Wanaka, Queenstown, and Franz Josef.

Being the thrill seekers that we are, we participated in some of the legendary activities that New Zealand had to offer. Jet boating, skydiving, white water rafting, and driving the closed single lane gravel mountain passes of Banks Peninsula were just a few of the heart racing experiences we took part in.

Driving in New Zealand was an adventure in and of itself. Being a British colony, the Country is orientated with the driving being on the left side, which made for some interesting road trips early on during our time there. Most of the time we didn't feel that the challenge of driving on

the left was enough, so we added manual shifting to the bewilderment. After a while though, we all really started to become quite comfortable with the driving. New Zealand loves traffic circles and roundabouts. These are very efficient traffic flow measures, but also can be confusing at times for those who don't use them everyday (not naming anyone specifically). At times, we felt like a rally car racing team cooped up in a little egg with wheels, shouting directions and turns at each other as we whizzed around a foreign land. The hardest part of driving was Jamie's tendency to drift to the left, and also the lack of country crossing highways. The road network is inefficient to say the least. Without straight access, we had to jog north to go east, or west to go north, or any other such combination.

The people in New Zealand were some of the nicest we've ever met. With the exception of some Auckland residents, Kiwis are always willing to walk up to a confused looking traveler and lend a hand. We had tons of in depth conversations with the owners and managers of hostels. It amazed us that Kiwis know as much as they do about the United States, especially when it comes to politics. Traveling as a backpacker in New Zealand is a piece of cake. It is legal to park along side the

roads overnight almost everywhere in New Zealand, so finding a place to rest for the night was pretty easy. There are hostels absolutely everywhere, and backpackers are always willing to give tips on where to go and what to see.

Our semester in New Zealand was full of eye opening experiences. We met dozens of people that we will remain in touch with for rest of our lives. All three of us have plans to go back as soon as we can afford it, and have friends coming to visit us this summer from New Zealand, Denmark, and Germany.

We are using our experience as the basis for a senior project to set up an exchange between the Cal Poly CRP department and corresponding departments at multiple universities in New Zealand. It is our pleasure to recommend the study abroad experience to anyone who is interested. Our time there changed our lives, and as we reflect on our experience it will continue to inspire us to "think globally," and "act locally" as our careers take flight.



Figure 2. Brian, Matt, and Jaime backpacking in New Zealand.