

New Zealand: Come Visit Us Down Underer!

By Jeff Henebury '11

I should preface this letter with a confession: I missed my booked flight to New Zealand. I showed up at Boston's Logan Airport on a Wednesday, all cheerful and excited and ready for some meaningful worldly experience, only to be told that my flight had left on a Tuesday. A Tuesday that was a full twenty-four hours earlier. When the check-in counter lady informed me that the ticket would probably not be refundable, I learned my first important lesson about traveling: no one wants to see a 21-year old boy cry at the airport.

Thanks largely to my tears the airline relented and booked me a new flight for later in the day. But in many ways this incident is emblematic of my time here. I am not an adept study abroad-er. My progress towards achieving basic human competency in a foreign country has been slow. A ten-second attention span combined with a complete lack of common sense has gotten me lost down more dimly lit back alleys than you would think could exist on such a small island. I can now manage to drive on the left side of the road without hitting any curbs or old ladies, but I consistently stumble down sets of escalators—these move in the opposite direction, too. I also continue to hold doors open for people. This is apparently both uncommon and unwanted: by the unanimous looks of contempt I receive, Kiwis seem to rank unsolicited kindness somewhere alongside slugs and public indecency. New Zealand is a small Western country that is physically nowhere near the Western world: young people here watch and emulate American television, but they are too far away to visit and realize that American life is not as exciting as *Jerry Springer* and



Jersey Shore make it out to be. “How many guns do you have?” and “Have you named your abdominal muscles like ‘The Situation?’” are viewed as legitimate questions to ask an American.

But the physical remoteness comes with a major perk. New Zealand is beautiful. Jaw-dropping-ly, silence inducing-ly, “How-the-hell-can-I-capture-this-on-my-camera” beautiful. There are rain forests and glaciers and mountains that have just the right amount of snow on top. Rainbows and waterfalls show up sporadically, seemingly out of nowhere, making already much too pretty scenery almost comically over the top gorgeous. It's almost as if nature is trying *too hard* here: after the twelfth rainbow or so, you start being reminded of the nerdy third grader who always shot for “A++” instead of boring old “A+”. At a certain point, it's just showing off.

As for classes: they are quite different. New Zealand has developed what they call ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome.’ The ‘tall poppies’ are any individuals who try to express themselves differently or assert individual talent. In such a circumstance the rest of the population is kind enough to cut them down to regular size. It is homogeneousness gone mad-- American high schools

look tame by comparison. For young Kiwis this applies to sports, fashion, hobbies, and above all, school. A typical exchange in my American Fiction class:

Professor: ‘The sixties were a very important time in American history. Can anyone tell me what happened in the 1960s in America? Anyone?’

Class of nearly 100 upperclassmen:

...

Professor: ‘Anyone? Anything at all?’

Class: ...

Professor: ‘...Please?’

Me or some other American, raising a tentative hand: ‘Hippies?’

Professor (nearly in tears of joy): ‘Yes. That is exactly right. Hippies happened. Thank you. Thank you so much.’

So while extremely good for my self-esteem, the level of dialogue is a little below what I've grown to expect and appreciate at Mac. Equally interesting are the Creative Writing courses. The class consensus of my Playwriting course is that if time travel and murderous robots are not involved in a story, that story is kind of wasting everyone's time. I am trying to adapt to this

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New Zealand: Come Visit Us Down Underer! (cont.)

new standard: I haven't gotten much past the title yet, but everyone in my class agrees that "Murderbots IV: FROM SPACE!!!" sounds much more interesting than any of my previous works.

One piece of advice for future study abroad-ers. A totally predictable but still unfortunate fact is that no matter how much fun you are having, you are occasionally going to feel homesick. And not just a little homesick, but a serious, sudden, sucker-punch-to-the-belly hurt at just how *different* everything is, even if everyone speaks English, even if you can still watch *Oprah*. Or sometimes it's just an unexpected

reminder of how alone you are. A fellow student from Texas had been in Dunedin (our city) for nearly three weeks and was dealing with everything just fine. She decided to celebrate her successful settling in by getting a public library card. But when the librarian asked her for the address of an alternate contact, and she realized that she couldn't name a single address besides her own in the whole country—scratch that, the whole *continent*—she had to excuse herself to go cry in the bathroom. She hasn't been back to the library since.

To avoid this, stay busy. Sign up for the University's free Yoga N' Medita-

tion club. Take that flyer for Beginner's Salsa lessons, and then actually force yourself to go to the Beginner's Salsa lessons. If someone tells you that they're hitchhiking to an Exotic Cheese festival halfway across the country, ask them, "What time are we leaving?" Grab that monstrosity of a novel that you've always eyed but have always been way too busy or intimidated to start: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Perhaps all three if you're a *really* cool kid. And if all else fails, go ask nature to see a rainbow or three. You might be surprised by the response.

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