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IE3 Global Internships
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During my nearly three months in South Africa, I met many amazing people, gained tons of experience and knowledge, and got the opportunity to do quite a bit of traveling. The following report gives a summary of my time abroad, emphasizing my overall impressions of the country, describing my ten week internship at Idasa, and offering some insight and advice for future students traveling to South Africa.

Impressions of the country

When I arrived in South Africa I wasn't sure what to expect. I did not have a clear idea of what the internship or even the country itself would be like. I spent the first two weeks or so trying to get a feel for my surroundings in my new home. My first impression of the country was that crime and poverty were pervasive. While I was largely prepared for the level of poverty I encountered, I was a little shocked by the severity of the crime issue. Every house and apartment building was surrounded by high walls with barbed wire or electric fencing, and it seemed as though everyone I met talked about the violent crime in South Africa. Adding to this was the fact that I was living in a suburb called Sunnyside, which had a reputation as being a bad part of the city. Because my internship office was about a twenty minute walk from my apartment, I initially made sure to walk briskly and confidently through the busy streets, all the while expecting to be faced with confrontation. After a couple weeks, however, my brisk walk had turned into a light stroll, as I became as comfortable moving around the streets of Pretoria, South

Africa as any other big city I had ever ventured. This is not to say that I was naïve about the situation, because certain dangers were very much a reality, but I had learned how to function in that environment and by the time I departed from my home away from home in Sunnyside, I was perfectly comfortable with my surroundings. It is important to mention that despite all of the stories and cautionary tales given to me over the course of my trip, I never personally witnessed any violent crime while in South Africa.

My internship at Idasa

When I walked into the Idasa office for the first time I wasn't really sure about the kind of atmosphere to expect, the kind of people I would be working with, or even really the kind of work I would be doing. Because this was my first job directly related to my academic background, I was a little unsure about how my knowledge and ability would transfer into a real world setting. Originally I was assigned to Idasa's Political Governance Program and I figured that much of my time would be spent researching or doing typical intern "errand" type work such as making copies, distributing information to staff, etc. As it turned out, my role with the organization became more extensive and substantive than I ever expected.

My first few days at Idasa were filled with introductions and office tours. It was at this time when I had my first meeting with the person originally assigned as my supervisor. He asked me about my career interests and academic background. From this meeting it was decided that I would be much better suited for placement in the organization's Safety and Security Program. Because my academic and career interests are in the field of international security, my new assignment was the perfect fit. So, by the end of my first week at Idasa I was assigned to a

new program, given a new supervisor, and introduced to the project that I would become very much involved in for the next ten weeks.

The project I was assigned to was a comparative study examining the excessive levels of violent crime in South Africa and Mozambique. During my ten weeks on this project, I gained a much deeper understanding for the histories, cultures, and political contexts of not only these two countries but for much of southern Africa as a whole. As my time at Idasa progressed, I became more and more involved in this project and my level of responsibility increased as well. Initially, it took me a couple of weeks to figure out what kind of role I was expected to fulfill on this project. I realized very quickly that much of my work would have to be self-initiated. At the beginning, there were times when I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to be working on. So, in response to this, I began proposing ideas to my colleagues and asking if my doing certain things, such as consolidating literature, summarizing research, etc., would be helpful. I continually tried to find ways I could help keep our project moving forward. I have always been a very task oriented individual and I like having clear deadlines, duties, and goals. Admittedly, one of the most difficult aspects of my internship was adjusting to the fact that tasks and assignments were not always as clearly defined or organized as I am accustomed.

Because of some unexpected changes within our research team, it turned out that for a good portion of the internship my supervisor, Matias, and I were the only two individuals assigned to this project. Needless to say, I was forced to take on a much larger role and become responsible for an increasing number of duties as time went on. As I was repeatedly told by one colleague, interns are not usually given that level of responsibility on a project. Furthermore, I was often reminded that most Idasa interns seldom get the chance to leave the office. But

because of my particular project placement, I was able to travel to Mozambique, Cape Town, Durban, and Port Elizabeth.

During my ten weeks at Idasa I was responsible for a variety of tasks, which included researching and compiling numerous desktop reviews, assisting in organizing and contacting individuals for roundtable discussion groups, helping formulate interview questionnaires, keeping typed records of roundtable discussions, meeting with stakeholders and members of the security sector in Mozambique and South Africa, and also various other tasks, some of which were unrelated to the violent crime project. In the end, I feel I was very fortunate to be assigned to a project for which I was able to be so involved. Not to mention the fact that the project was so closely in line with my academic and future career interests. I gained such a wide range of experience during my internship, which I will undoubtedly find useful in the next stage of my education and career. I think I was just lucky to come along at the right time to get assigned to a project that allowed me to serve such an active role.

My ten weeks at Idasa helped give me the confidence that I do in fact have the knowledge and skills necessary to enter into this line of work. I knew that I was capable in an academic sense, but I wasn't sure how this knowledge would apply in a real world setting. Now I know that I am ready and able to pursue a career in my desired field. This internship also helped me to see what kind of work is done by an NGO and what kind of job I might have if I followed this path. I gained a deeper understanding for what this kind of job would entail and what it would be like to work internationally. In addition, I learned a lot about the political and social makeup of southern Africa and many of the problems that are hindering development in the region. It also gave me further insight into some of the challenges and obstacles that exist for young transitioning democracies.

To be sure, not everything I learned in South Africa came from my time in the office, but it was also from the people I met and lived with during my three months. To begin with, I could not have had better roommates. Two of my roommates, Vitalis and Chikhu, were from Zimbabwe and Malawi, respectively. I originally also had a roommate that was from South Africa, but she left after only a few weeks and was replaced with another girl, Nadia, from Germany with whom I became fast friends once she arrived during my final three weeks. Vitalis and Chikhu worked at Idasa and they really helped me get settled in at the office and with my surroundings in general. They were great guys and I can't describe how fortunate I felt to have met and lived with this caliber of people. These two taught me so much while I was there. And because Vitalis was from Zimbabwe and had friends and family occasionally coming to visit, it really gave me some insight into the current crisis afflicting their home country. During my last two weeks in South Africa we had one more roommate from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was visiting briefly to work on a project at our Idasa offices. Through all of my interactions with roommates, coworkers, and others I met during my trip, I was able to forge relationships with people from many different countries. By the end of the trip I had created contacts with people from Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, DRC, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Norway, Germany, Denmark, and obviously South Africa, many of whom I will certainly stay in touch with.

Information for future interns

There is various advice that I can offer to future interns living in South Africa or Pretoria. Firstly, based on some initial struggles I had, I might suggest waiting to buy a cell phone once you arrive instead of going through the process of getting your regular phone unlocked, buying a South African sim card, having to keep track of all the unlock codes, etc. Because of some

difficulties I had, I was actually unable to use my cell phone for the first few days I was in South Africa. It is very simple to walk to one of the many cell phone shops and buy a cheap phone that is already set up and ready to go.

I would also suggest getting a certain amount of local currency before departing for your study abroad or internship. It just makes things easier in case you have trouble withdrawing money when you first arrive, which once again, was something I experienced. Normally though, it's pretty easy to withdraw some local currency from an ATM at the airport, but I would suggest bringing a small amount just in case.

As far as transportation goes, it is possible to rent a car while you are there. Personally, I didn't have a car, and in retrospect, I was glad I didn't. Being forced to move around the city by walking or riding the local minibuses or taxis really gives you a chance to get a feel for the culture in which you are living. If you rely on a car to take you everywhere I really think you will miss out on getting the full experience of the people and country. On the other hand, having a car does make it much easier to travel around to various tourist destinations on the weekends. To get the best of both worlds, I think it is better to make friends with someone else who has access to a car if you want to take longer trips during your free time.

Even without a car it is pretty easy to hop on a minibus to go to one of the local malls or shopping centers. There are a few really nice malls that were only a short distance from where I was living. Some of the malls, Menlyn in particular, are as nice as any mall you will find in the U.S. Also, if you know which stores to shop at, you can find clothes that are quite a bit cheaper than in the States. If I could do it over again, I would have brought fewer clothes with me and simply bought them at the local malls. This way you can get a relatively inexpensive new wardrobe that can also serve as nice South African mementos/souvenirs.

There are a number of tourist destinations that I would recommend, provided you have the time and or money. The first of these is Kruger National Park. Visiting Kruger was one of the highlights of my trip, and there are plenty of amazing things to see, as several hundred pictures I took can attest. Also, if given the opportunity I would suggest taking a trip to Cape Town. Even though I was only able to spend a few days there, it was one of the most beautiful places I have ever been and there are plenty of touristy things to do. Some local things to check out, if you're living in Pretoria, are the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park. Freedom Park especially was one of my favorite places. There is also a zoo in Pretoria in case the game parks aren't an option.

Your choice of living arrangements in South Africa really depends on your personal preference. I would suggest doing a little research about the different areas that you are looking for accommodation, because the living environment can change rather quickly in South Africa. For instance, in Pretoria, Sunnyside and Hatfield are only about a five or ten minute drive away from each other, but these are two very different areas. Sunnyside has a reputation of being a little "rough" as far as crime and safety goes. Hatfield, though, is where the University is located and a little more upscale and is actually very similar to any college town you might find in the U.S. Personally, I ended up being very happy that I lived in Sunnyside. I enjoyed being in an environment that wasn't familiar and actually felt like I was in a foreign country. Yes, I may have stood out quite a bit because I was one of only a few white people, and often times immediately recognized as a foreigner, walking the streets of Sunnyside, but this was something I never had a problem with. I think it really depends on the individual. There were other interns that were not comfortable living or even walking through Sunnyside because of its reputation as

a “dangerous” place. For me, I felt completely comfortable there and in hindsight was glad that I lived there instead of some other area.

Even though I never witnessed any violent crime first hand while I was in South Africa, it is something you definitely have to be aware of. You just have to be conscious of your surroundings and use common sense. Also, act like you belong. When you are walking around the streets, act like you know where you are and where you’re going, and don’t look timid or fearful, because that in and of itself can make you a target. Ultimately, don’t let yourself be imprisoned by fear. If you are living in South Africa be prepared for the fact that pretty much everyone you meet is going to talk about the violent crime in the country. You are going to hear many stories from colleagues and strangers alike about their encounters with crime and violence. You must remember, though, that you can’t stop living your life because of this. On just my third day at Idasa one of the employees was robbed at gun point in the parking lot and in the subsequent weeks a couple cars were stolen from the same parking lot. This is the kind of stuff that can really have an effect on you if you let it. There are some interns that become so terrified that they are not able to live a normal life while they are there, maybe even missing work because they are afraid to leave their apartment. While there are definitely precautions you need to take, you cannot let yourself be completely consumed by the stories and perceived dangers of the situation. I think my roommate put it best when he said, if you allow yourself to be consumed by fear to the extent that you are no longer living a normal life, then you are already a victim.

In terms of the internship itself, I would recommend just trying to get as much from it as possible. Honestly, the amount of work that you have is very much dependent on you as an individual. Much of it depends on how proactive you are willing to be and how much you want

to get involved with the organization. By showing that you are willing and capable of handling greater responsibilities, you may find yourself suddenly swamped with assignments and duties, all of which serve as valuable experience and good resume builders. Personally, I enjoyed having this level of activity. On many days, I arrived to work early and left late, and there were even times when I had to take my work home at night or for the weekend. It might sound strange, but I feel very fortunate to have been so busy during my internship. I was fully aware that I only had ten weeks to try and get as much experience and learn as much as possible.

Final reflection

During my final exit interview I was asked to give one sentence that described my internship at Idasa. I said that “this experience has made my world bigger.” What I meant by this is that I now not only have friends and connections with people in various other parts of the world, but I also have a deeper understanding for South Africa and southern Africa as a whole. I gained an understanding that I don’t think I could have gotten without living and working there. There is only so much you can learn from a book or a map and I now have a desire to travel and experience other cultures around the world. One of the things my faculty advisor, Dr. Pettenger, encouraged me to do during my internship was to make as many connections as possible, because you never know when that network will come in handy at some point later in life. I heeded this advice and I am confident that I created relationships that will be useful for me somewhere down the line. I truly feel as though my world is bigger now and I look forward to expanding it even more in the coming years.

In conclusion, there are so many other things that I could write about but I think this report has given a pretty good summary of my time in South Africa. My time abroad really

allowed for a lot of personal and professional growth. I truly feel I will be able to use this as a transition towards the next stage in my education and career. I trust that this is only the beginning of my foreign travels and I can only hope that my future endeavors will be as rewarding and fulfilling as my time in Pretoria, South Africa.