



South Africa Experience Report

Marc Petersen

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Preparation

How to avoid camping

My first days in SA were planned to be spend in Cape Town, because I were attending the SAICSIT conference. After that I would somehow travel to Port Elizabeth and stay there until the end of my trip. Therefore I had to find one accommodation in Cape Town and one in PE. I started looking for the one in PE and wrote an email to the international office at the NMMU at the end of July, but they never responded to me. I also had a look at the [Gumtree](#) website – thanks to Greg Viljoen for that awesome advice. By that time it was in the middle of August and I still had 7 weeks left to find a place to stay.

The whole procedure how I got my accommodation in PE is described later. My accommodation in CT was very easy to get. Most of the master students at the NMMU have to visit the SAICSIT and the university instantly offered me to book me into the same B&B as they were. But before you can think of a place to sleep, you have to find a way to get to SA.

How to get to SA

According to Google Maps it is possible to drive to Port Elizabeth with your own car, it's just 15.000 km. Besides the fact that I hardly assume it is not possible to pass all the borders, it would take approx. 10 days and might be at least four times the price as flying, so I preferred to fly. I think you realistically have to choose between two airlines when flying to SA. You can go with KLM, what I did, or Emirates. The difference probably is that KLM flies from Bremen over Amsterdam and Emirates from Hamburg over Dubai. You could also choose Lufthansa from Bremen, but only if you do not care about the money. I think Emirates could be a bit cheaper, but Bremen is probably the first choice for a student in Oldenburg. But in real I do not have a clue about booking a flight. Everything has been done by [Horizont Reisen](#) – thanks to them and Julia Franke.

As you can see in the picture below my flight was from Bremen (6:20) to Amsterdam (7:15). Two and a half hours later I had to take my seat in the plane in Amsterdam and fly eleven and a half hours to Cape Town (21:35). Compared with my flight back to Germany this was kind of fast.

1 KL1750L 02OCT 7 BREAMS*SS1 0620 0715 /DCKL /E
2 KL 597L 02OCT 7 AMSCPT*SS1 1005 2135 /DCKL /E
3 BA6323N 04OCT 2 CPTPLZ SS1 1135 1245 /DCBA /E
4 KL3772T 30NOV 3 PLZJNB HK1 1800 1940 /DCKL*YPDXCX /E
5 KL 592T 30NOV 3 JNBAMS*HK1 2359 1015 01DEC 4
6 KL1757L 01DEC 4 AMSBRE*HK1 1645 1745 /DCKL*YPDXCX /E

Flight Information

The flight back was a 24 hours trip. I was flying from Port Elizabeth to Johannesburg, waiting there for more than four hours and after an eleven hours flight (including one hour time difference) I had to wait six and a half hours in Amsterdam for an actually 40 minutes flight to Bremen. But let us keep talking about the beginning of my trip.

My last 24 hours

It was the 1st of October - by that time my girlfriend and I were together for about five and a half years. And we were living together most of that time. So far, it probably happened only one or two times that we have not seen each other for more than ten days or so. She never wanted me to go away for a long time and I had to spend a couple of hours spread over the last twelve month to explain her why I wanted to go abroad. For me personally it was not such a big thing to be [9846 km](#) away from my girlfriend for only two month. I knew that chance would not come again so quickly and I really had to take it.

My flight would take off the next morning at 6:20 a.m. from Bremen, so I had to leave home at 4:00 to be at the airport before 5:00 in the morning. My dad would give me a lift, because there was no way to get to the airport that early using public transportation and my girlfriend had to work the next day, so she could not drive me to the airport.

Did you ever try to leave home that early to get a plane or train or something else which does not wait for you!? You basically have two enjoyable ways to handle that, stay awake the whole night and sleep in the plane or go to bed very early so you can wake up around midnight. I could not go to bed early because my girlfriend had to work until 8 p.m. and we wanted to spend the last hours together. I also could not stay awake all night, because I was afraid to fall asleep in Amsterdam where I had to wait two hours. So I ended up somehow in the middle, I slept about three hours at night and then got up five

minutes before four. I personally like packing my things in the last minutes but this time luckily everything was prepared - my iPad was fully charged and I got a lot of Big Bang Theory episodes on it. Headphones were also important, you do not want to get punched by annoyed passengers. All my clothes were cleaned and packed. My hand backpack was full of electronics to keep me alive and a few clothes I would need in case my luggage gets lost. I also had two of these transparent plastic bags which were full with hygiene items and pills. I had to take them with me, because my girlfriend works in a pharmacy. But to be honest, I have never used anything of that except the headache tablets after I was drunk. In my opinion, you do not have to care about all these hygiene items, you will not need them.

Most important thing you need is your passport and money, maybe your international health insurance also. You can leave everything else at home, even your electronic devices, because you will have a screen with games and movies in front of you on intercontinental flights.

Cape Town

I am there... not yet

I arrived at the Cape Town Airport around 9 p.m. and after passing the passport checks and getting my bag I changed my money from EUR into ZAR. I thought this was necessary because I only had euros with me and I had to pay someone to drive me to my hotel (read the “Exchange Rate” section to find out more about that money thing). I basically had three choices how to get there: 1) taking the public bus or even the taxi, 2) paying for a cab on my own or 3) joining a kind of a shuttle service. Of course I only had the address of the hotel and no idea how to get there and I did not want my iPad to be stolen in the first night. So, I decided to use the shuttle service, which costs R200 per person, thus is cheaper than a cab and probably very safe because you travel in a normal car, with one driver and a small group of other foreign guys, who just landed. I was sitting in the front seat, which felt very wrong for me, because it was on the left hand side and the driver was sitting on the right hand side, thus the first time in my life driving on the wrong lane (yes, of course it is the wrong lane, because most people in the world are driving on the other side). I arrived at the hotel (actually it was a B&B but I do not like the word) at about 11 p.m. On the way to my room I saw a few older people (not really old, but at least they did not look like students) sitting outside. Actually, I do not like to speak to foreign people, but I somehow had to figure out how to get to the conference the next morning. So, I asked these guys if they know someone from the NMMU and this is how I met Prof. André Calitz, his wife and a PhD student called MC, for the first time. This was also the first time I drank whiskey with water.

Bed and Breakfast

The first night in CT I felt asleep between 1 and 2 a.m. and I had to wake up early, because we had to be at the conference at 8:30 a.m. So, the next morning I met all the computing science master students from the NMMU, we had breakfast and walked down to the conference. After the first 24 hours in South Africa I had a very good contact to most of the guys. So I was very happy, that I stayed at the same hotel, as they did. All the nights after the conference was over, we had a lot of fun, talking shit, eating, drinking and a bit partying. We could even listen to a live concert of Coldplay, because we stayed next to the soccer stadium where they played one night (that evening the city was really really crowded!!).



B&B and Stadium

In case you ever want to stay in Cape Town for a couple of days, the B&B we stayed at is very recommendable – just checkout the [Brenwin Guest House](#) (the B on the map above). Unfortunately we stayed there from the 2nd of October, which means I had to pay R880 per night. Only one week earlier it would still be the winter price with R560 per night.

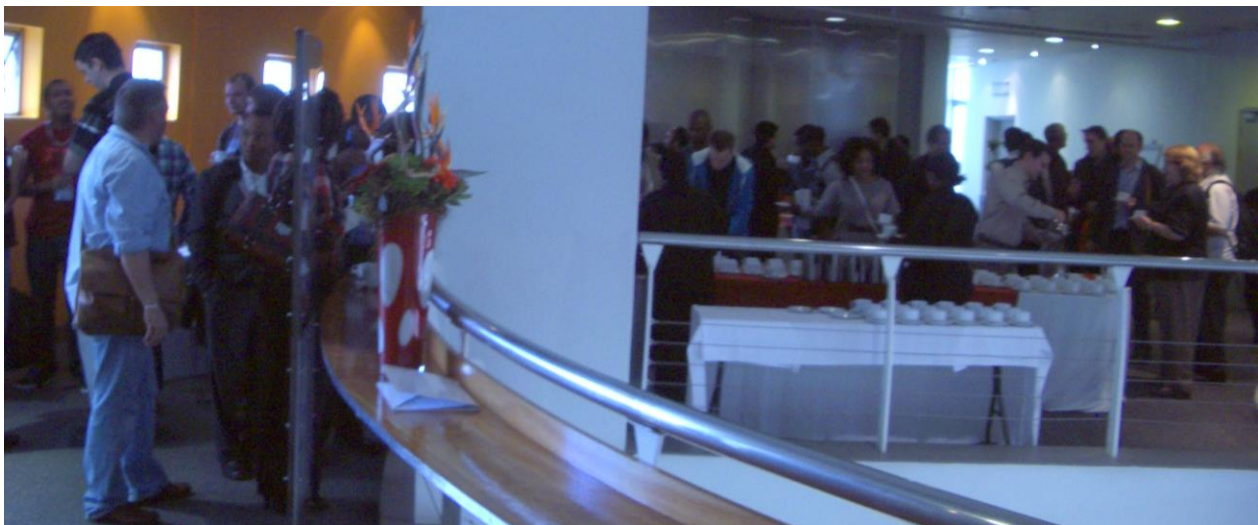
SAICSIT

Of course we have not been to Cape Town to have fun all the time. The reason for our stay was the [South African Institute for Computer Scientists and Information Technologists](#) (SAICSIT) conference 2011 from the 3rd until the 5th of October.

At the first day, all the post graduated symposiums had their presentations, this included my presentation. Requirements to get accepted was to hand in a 500 words abstract of your thesis topic, which probably have not even been read by someone. At least it seemed like that because you did not get a real feedback for it and the acceptance email just looked like a mass email. But however, this was my first conference and I believe there are good reasons for the way they do it.

The first day had four streams, thus four presentations were hold at the same time in different rooms. At least one professor was attending a presentation. The first half of the day I was listening to the Information Systems stream and after that I switched to some presentations of the Computer Science streams. To be honest: 90% of the presentations were the worst presentations I have ever seen in my whole life! It seemed like most people did not understand the difference between MS PowerPoint and MS Word. Some of them were presenting wall of text after wall of text and reading every single word from the slides.

My presentation was located in the Information Systems stream, but whilst listening to the presentations in this stream I realized very fast, that none of them ever thought about implementing something. They all had theoretical work only. It would have been much better if I would have submitted my symposium to the Computer Science stream, because all of them were implementing things. Another big difference, which I found out later is, that master students in South Africa spend two years on writing their thesis where as we in Germany only have six month. This of course affects the size of your work and what you are presenting. But nevertheless I was totally satisfied with my presentation.



SAICSIT Tea Break

The following two days were different from the first one. Now the presentation style was much better and people were presenting based on reviewed and accepted full papers. I guess that is the normal level of presentations on conferences.

By the way, the food at the conference was delicious!

Port Elizabeth

Love your Enemies

I never go to church! That is what my life is in Germany. The only times I have been to church was for my confirmation and two or three times with my parents on Christmas. I do not like the way they do it here in Germany. It is just boring (at least what I have seen so far). In South Africa I have been to church four or five times... voluntary! Most of the people I have met were Christians and nearly all of them go to church at least every Sunday. But I did not know that at the beginning when I thought about going to church. I just experienced that all the people I have met so far were very friendly to me and I knew that my landlord, his family and friends were religious (We prayed every time when I was eating with them). So, I just assumed that religion might be a reason why they are so friendly.

So, one Sunday I went to church with my landlord and his friends. The church was called Harvest Church and my first impression was great, because I saw three flat screens, a video cam, one beamer and a projector screen. All the people were dressed like they like to be dressed and most of the time they were all singing in a way which reminds me to what you see about church on American TV – that gospel stuff. The flat screens were showing the lyrics and some pictures. On the projector screen you could see the priest and everything which was happening in front. I personally had the feeling that this type of church has the target to bring all the people together. And I liked most of the things they did.



That is not the harvest church in PE, but at least very similar ;)

But not every church is like that. One day I went to the old apostolic church with a friend of mine. This was totally different to what I have expected. First of all they are speaking Africans most of the time whereas the Harvest church was English speaking only. But the strange thing was that it was more or less like in school. The priest was asking questions to the youth (It was a Thursday, not on a Sunday and only the youth was there). For me it looked like, that they were forced to learn the religion and everybody was sitting around hoping that he or she does not have to answer a question. They also had no flat screens in this church.



Do you like old apostolic church more than harvest? ;)

Wrong Side and Speed bumps

If you want to drive around in South Africa, think about buying an [international driver license](#). I did not have one, because I had no plans for renting a car. And I more or less never had to drive in SA - only once, when I just met the guy who stayed in a room next to me. On the first day I met him, we drove down to the harbor where he wanted to meet a guy to organize a fishing trip. Somehow I did not realize that he was a bit drunk in the middle of the day whilst driving around with me in his car. At the harbor we had a 'braai' (Africans for barbecue) and a few beers.



Braai and Beer

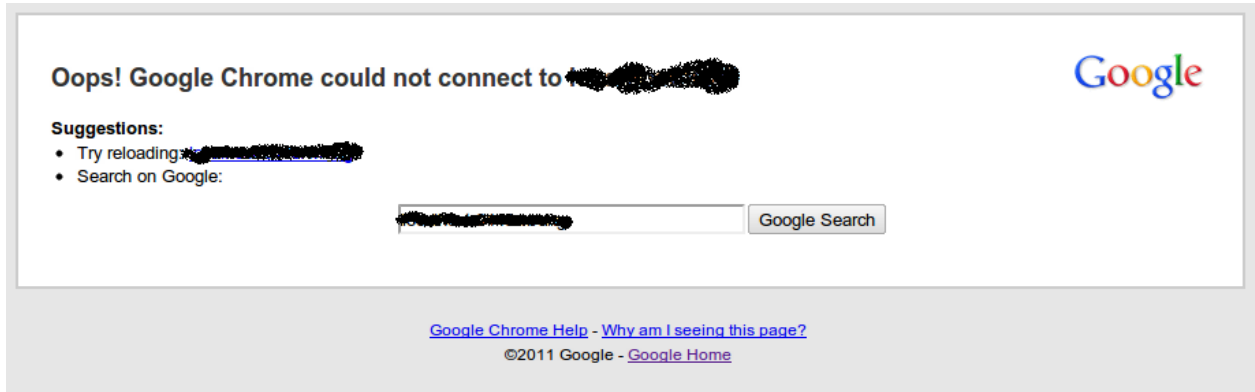
When we wanted to go back home my neighbor was totally drunk and I had to drive us home. Besides the fact, that his car only had one side mirror, I experienced how it is to have speed bumps on the streets – it totally sucks! I really do not know which idiot invented speed bumps, it totally destroys the fun and it is definitely not good for your car. But nevertheless, it is not really difficult to drive on the other side. The only problem I had for the whole two month: walking over the street is damn dangerous because I was always looking to the wrong side first.

SA has better internet connection than Germany – NOT!

In Germany it is quite normal that everyone has internet through a cable connection at home. In SA I have not seen a single person having wired internet connection at home. Most of them are using a dongle or their BlackBerry for surfing – this was really strange to me.

First of all I hoped that it would not be a problem for me not having internet at my accommodation. I thought I would be at university nearly every day and of course I would have an internet connection there. My first two days at university, we were wondering why the internet connection was not working properly - then we got an email from the network administrations. The problem was that somehow an undersea cable was broken and they need to send a ship to fix it. The problem with that ship was, due to some laws it could only depart after one week and would then need up to two weeks to reach the broken cable – yeehaa! During the next 8 weeks the ship somehow never reached the cable and the internet was damn slow the whole time. The university was using a backup connection and – this is no

joke – I had to reload every page at least ten times to load it properly. It seemed like the university had a limit about 100 requests per minute at each student was sitting in front of their screens pressing F5 as often as possible until getting through.



Internet at the NMMU

The result was that I did spend about 100 Euros in 2 month for prepaid internet. Luckily I took my dongle with me and just had to buy a simcard and airtime. I bought one from 8ta which is one of the local providers. Spending 100 Euros in 2 month means I had approx. 4 GB data traffic during that time. Just check what you have used TODAY – it can easily be more than 4 GB. At least my normal daily traffic in Germany easily reaches 4 GB. Just a few tips in case you ever have to use prepaid internet: 1) Turn of windows update. That did cost me about 10 euros! 2) Remove dropbox from startup. Another 5 Euros! 3) Say good bye to youtube and all of these funny movie websites. 4) Walk around and watch out for people sitting at a café with their laptops. You have found a survival point – free wifi!!

Fortunately I have heard, that the telecommunication companies started to lay fiber cables everywhere, which could mean, that someday SA might have better internet connection than we do.

Imagine you could have two years for your thesis

There is a big difference between studying at the NMMU or SA in general and studying in Germany. At least at the NMMU (I am not quite sure about the rest of SA) they have bachelors for 6 semesters, honors for 2 semesters and masters for 4 semesters. So, they have something additional between bachelors and masters. After finishing their bachelors' degree with their bachelor thesis, the students can start doing honors, which contains hearing lectures and writing another thesis in 2 semesters. But the biggest difference exists between masters at the NMMU and masters in Germany. We in Germany have six month to write hour thesis and we spend the first 3 semester on hearing lectures. The master students at the NMMU do not hear any lectures during their masters – they spend the whole 2 years on

writing their master thesis. There is one masters' lab at the university where round about 10 students have a place to work and write their thesis. Most of them are sitting there every day. Ok, of course they have to write more pages than we do. We probably have to write about 80 to 100 pages whereas they have to write something between 200 and 260 pages or so. There is also a big difference between the way they work on their thesis. In Germany we are more or less left alone on writing our thesis (which might not be as bad as it sounds). At the NMMU most of the master students have weekly meetings with their supervisors (Thanks to Janet Wesson for reviewing my work!) – they have to report their progress to them and discuss about current topics. Their thesis basically consists of six chapters (according to a book from Eric Hofstee called Constructing a Good Disseration) and after finishing one chapter, they have to hand it in to their supervisor. Then they get feedback from their supervisor on how to improve their work. That might sound good for you now, but most of the times the feedback results into the fact, that the student has to rewrite or restructure a lot of the chapter which could mean you spend a few weeks on rewriting. This feedback cycle of course results into a research work full of quality content and your supervisor has read every sentence of your work at least two or three times. But now, after having the comparison, I probably like the German way more – it is easier for the students.

Accommodation

When I had to organize my accommodation I always thought that people want to steal money from me. I thought, I would arrive at a given address and they will rob me.

Based on those thoughts, this is the way how I got my accommodation without being robbed. As written earlier I have organized the accommodation in Port Elizabeth by myself. I wrote a few requests to short-term offers on the Gumtree website. The website provides a “stay safety” guide with rules and advices you shall follow to avoid being robbed. After I read a few of the guidelines that of course did not make me feel better.

I got one fast response for a good looking room. It was a private room for short-term rental only, in my preferred area (2km to the university, 2km to the casino and 200m to the beach). The landlord's names were Martin and Lisa and their response on my request included that the room is free and they would charge R3500 a month including water, electricity and servicing the room once a week. The room has a private entrance, en-suite bathroom, a TV, unfortunately no kitchen but they were happy if I want to use their kitchen.

The mail came from martin@blueberrylife.co.za, so I took a quick look on their website which looked like a catering service (right now the website is not working anymore). Based on this information I answered, that I am very interested and I asked if they have an internet connection at the room or at least a desk. I did also ask for the exact address. Their response was, that they unfortunately do not have internet, but there will be a table and chair in my room. The address was [26 Bournemouth Summerstrand Port Elizabeth](#) – have a look at Google Maps (you can use street view nearly everywhere in SA, but the pictures from this area are a bit old and their house looks better now). So I decided to rent the room and asked how to proceed, in order to find out how and when I have to pay. The answer was, that they need some information from me what they should write on the invoice and they asked me how I would like to pay. I responded that the best option for me would be to pay cash when I arrive. They said it is ok and if I could transfer something as a deposit to secure the room in the meantime. THAT made me thinking!! Of course it is a problem for both of us that we only agreed on the deal through email, but I did not want to transfer money to private unknown people. This would also be exactly against the advice from the Gumtree website. Due to that question I started to find out as much as I could about them. I started googling their names, searching them on Facebook, having a look at the email headers and I also did a whois lookup on their website and had a closer look at the registered postal address. I could not find anything bad. They really had a lot of Facebook friends, Google did not find anything about them and every piece of information I could find seemed to be true. After having all that information I was somehow really trusting them and I think I would have even transferred the complete R7000 without having ever seen them (nevertheless, please never do it!). Of course all that information could be fake, but then it would have been a perfect story and they would have deserved to steal money with it (everything about them was true! They are one of the best people I have ever met! ☺). At the end we agreed that it would not make any sense to transfer a small fee for reservation. I asked my bank about the costs and time duration of such an international bank transfer. I do not remember the details but it was approximately up to 30 Euro per transaction and the money could take up to two weeks from my bank account to theirs (hopefully that is not true!).

When I arrived at my accommodation in PE, my landlords welcomed me heartily, they were only a few years older than me and we understood each other from the first minute. They also had two dogs (I love dogs!) and a little baby. They took me with them to their family and friends and I could not imagine any better place to stay! Thank you Lisa and Martin for the awesome time!

If you ever want to stay somewhere in Port Elizabeth do not hesitate to ask them or even ask me for more information. They have two rooms for rent. Their contact details are:

Lisa and Martin Rentzke
26 Bournemouth
Port Elizabeth
martin@blueberrylife.co.za
Phone: 074 186 9948

In case you only want to stay in PE for a few days you can also book into their parents' guest house. It is called [First Avenue Lodge](#), looks pretty nice and is located next to the Boardwalk. I have been there a couple of times with them. Once we had a [braai](#) there at 7 in the morning watching rugby.

Exchange Rate

How can I get South African Rand (ZAR)? Below you can see the EUR-ZAR exchange rate over the last five years. So the time I was there, one Euro was worth about ten Rand. I do not want to dive into deep discussion of the following graph or currencies in general. Let me tell you about the way how I changed my money from EUR to ZAR and the other way around.



EUR-ZAR – last 5 years (finanzen.net)



Feeling rich

So this is what I have experienced:

- 1) **Changing money at the airport in Cape Town** was more or less the first thing I have done in SA (except peeing and fetching my bag). They changed 300 EUR into 2839.85 ZAR. Based on finanzen.net (10.84) that should have been worth 3250.83 ZAR. So let's see how they robbed me: They sold the rand for an exchange rate of 10.1009 which is only 3030.27. After that they took 106.06 ZAR as commission (3.5%) + tax of 14% (14.85), so I had about 2909 ZAR left. In addition to that they charged an administration fee of 61 ZAR + tax = 69.54 ZAR. I do not know for what, but it seems to be a fixed amount they take per transaction. So this is how they have stolen 38 EUR from me in my first 30 minutes in South Africa (12.6% fee!!).
- 2) **Paying with Credit Card** seems to be the best way. Once I bought cinema tickets for R 79.25 and had to pay 7.17 EUR. Based on finanzen.net the exchange rate was 11.07 and based on my bank it was 11.16 (in this case only 1cent difference). The good thing is there are no transaction fees.
- 3) **Drawing money at a cash machine** was what I did most of the times. Just use your normal debit card and go to any cash machine you like (my bank is the Kreissparkasse similar to LzO). I paid 3 euros per transaction and got the money based on the actual exchange rate. Only problem with that is, that the maximum amount of money you can get at cash machines in SA seems to be R2000, so I had to pay about 1.6% fee. Real example: I drew money on the 11th of November. Based on finanzen.net the exchange rate should have been 10.86 but my bank changed for 10.68 (I do not know why, but it does not matter, because 10.68 was better for me). So I got R2000

worth 187 EUR and paid 190 EUR. By the way: in Germany I am allowed to draw 500 EUR in 24 hours. The limit is the same when you draw the money in SA – just draw three times in a row.

- 4) **Drawing money at a local bank** did not work for me. I only tried it once at Absa and at FNB, because I wanted to get more than R2000 in order to have less than 1.6% fee. Both did not let me draw money with my German debit card (I somehow did not try to use my credit card). I actually do not understand the real reason, because it is no problem to use the card at the cash machine.
- 5) **Drawing money at a casino** did come into my mind too late. Please try it for me and tell me how it works. It was in my last week when I thought about drawing money with my credit card at the cashier of the [Boardwalk Casino](#). I just know that you can of course get money with your credit card there, which means: you do not pay fee to your bank. But I hardly assume that you pay a transaction fee to the cashier at the casino. The good thing is you should get as much cash as you want in one transaction or at least as much money as your credit card allows.
- 6) **Changing money at the airport in Amsterdam** is how they robbed another 20 Euro from me. I had 1270 ZAR left when I arrived in Amsterdam on the 1st of December. Based on the finanzen.net exchange rate (0.09) that would be 116.83 EUR. The rate at the airport was 0.7855 (wtf!) which means 99.76 EUR. The transaction fee was 3.25 EUR, so I had 96.51 EUR left (17.4% fee!!).

Thanks for your Support

Overall my trip to South Africa was one of the best trips I had so far and it was definitely life changing. I can recommend this trip for everyone.

I would like to say thank you to all the people who made this trip possible!

Thank you!