

*„[...] Sounds the call to come together,  
And united we shall stand,  
Let us live and strive for freedom  
In South Africa our land.“*  
(Fourth stanza of South Africa's National Anthem)

## **South Africa – One must live there to understand it**

### **Introduction**

Other's knowledge about South Africa: Nelson Mandela; eleven official languages and cultures; Apartheid; HIV and AIDS; murder, rape and crime; surfing; the Big Five and the Big Seven (wildlife); Transkei and homelands; FIFA World Cup 2010; Cape Town and Johannesburg; African National Congress (ANC); nice weather; emigration; wine.

These are the main characteristics associated with South Africa by foreigners. Fair enough, if one is only looking at facts and figures and was not able to experience the true nature of this country by him-/herself. "Why do you want to go to South Africa?" "It is very dangerous there, isn't it?" is what friends and family will ask you first. All the time, you are busy with telling those people that you have also heard about all those negative facets of South Africa and that you will be very cautious and prepare your stay accurately, but that you have this strong desire to experience this country by yourself and to understand why things are the way they are.

To me, the FIFA World Cup held in South Africa in 2010 was – first of all - not the reason why I wanted to live there for a few months and to conduct research for my Master's thesis about sustainable nutrition. I have never been curious about going to South Africa until I heard about our partner University (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University – NMMU) and a friend who also went there for her Master's research. It was in the end of 2008, my first Master's semester, when I got curious about this country that seemed like a myth to me. The more I talked to people or informed myself about South Africa, the more confused I got referring to all those positive as well as negative facts about this single country. It seemed to me as if – apart of a gorgeous nature and wildlife – this country should not be one's first choice for living a few month abroad. But this feeling was exactly the reason why I wanted to experience what it means to live in South Africa and to find out if it is possible for me – being privileged to live in a long-rich, secure and social-stable country – to become part of the South African way of live and to understand this country in most instances. I wanted to look behind the curtain and to experience South Africa in my own way. I knew that this would

mean to be highly open-minded, willing to learn, willing to take on risks (although all the people tell you not to) and to be adaptable to all kinds of cultures, places and situations.

This is why the maxim for my stay in South Africa was to mainly *live through my experiences* and *not through other's knowledge*. This did not mean disregarding the most important rule for a good time in South Africa: *Better stay safe than sorry!* Nobody should forget about safety issues, but one should not let them shield the true South African experience.

An extract of my experiences in South Africa: Friendliness and openness; Nelson Mandela; Apartheid; chicken; Braai (Barbecue); Afrikaans; Xhosa; comely dance moves; nice weather; solidarity; South African time (never on time); being patient; gorgeous nature and wildlife; no bicycles; rugby (Springboks); FIFA World Cup 2010; politics and president Zuma; Cape Town and Jo'burg; various cultures: merging and separating; Biltong; using taxis when dusk falls.

## **My stay in detail**

### *Preparation of my stay*

The University of Oldenburg organized a colloquium about South Africa held by a South African (Dr. Ben Khumalo-Seeegelken) who came to Germany many years ago. He gave us all the relevant information about South Africa, it's languages and cultures as well as it's history. The aim of this colloquium was to give an overview on the cultural diversity, the dangers and the customs of this country. It was also a good base to ask questions and discuss fears and prejudices.

An advantage of this colloquium was to get to know the other students going to South Africa and NMMU. This way, information about the host city and University could be exchanged and the students helped each other in, for example, organizing visa or application forms. First friendships for the stay in South Africa were formed which assisted the students particularly during the first weeks of their stay.

As for me, I mainly informed myself by attending this colloquium. I did not study a lot about South Africa before. Additionally, I informed myself about the things that were relevant for my Master's research and this also included a study of the Afrikaans and Xhosa culture as well as South African food habits. But as my studies are based on a practical approach I tried not to have too many assumptions, but to stay open-minded and learn from what the people are actually doing instead of what books are telling you they theoretically do as a result of their cultural backgrounds.

My contacts at NMMU were organized by Jenka Schmidt and Britta Stigge from the University of Oldenburg. They assisted me in sorting out all relevant information and procedures which was quite challenging as I was the first student to go to NMMU via the project "Developing Sustainability". This is also why the application process took quite long (several month), but it might be much easier for future students within the project. I am very thankful to Britta Stigge and Jenka Schmidt for assisting me.

As the application process took very long and was only finalised when I already was in South Africa, I decided to organize the most important things on my own. This included an accommodation and the pick-up from the airport. I rented a guest house via the internet and made sure that it was secure and close to NMMU and all important places (Boardwalk, town, shopping centre). I lived in Torquay Cottage (1 Torquay Street, Summerstrand, 6001 Port Elizabeth) in a two bedroom and one living room house. I had my own bathroom and kitchenette and shared the garden and pool with the landlords. The guest house was gorgeous and I fully enjoyed my stay there. I paid around 460 Euro per month, but this was a special arrangement with the landlady because I stayed for 2,5 month. A single day usually costs 45 Euro per Person. I can fully recommend this place as it is very central, secure and gorgeous. The landlords are very friendly and helpful and picked me up from the airport. They also drove me to NMMU at my first day.

As I knew that applying for a student visa would be very complex, I decided to stay in South Africa for less than three months so that I did not need to apply for a visa, but could enter the country and get a visitors visa (no costs or documents needed) at the first South African airport I entered.

### *Experiences with NMMU*

At NMMU I worked as an intern at the Department of Development Studies (Head of Department: Prof. Dr. Richard Haines). I was welcomed very hearty and felt comfortable from the first moment on. I was sitting in one office with a few other researchers and student assistants and was provided with a computer and work station.

In the beginning, Bernadette (Berny) Snow (lecturer, coordinator of the Developing Sustainability Project at this Department) showed me around and made sure that all administrative as well as personal matters were sorted out as soon as possible. She supported me in issues that were arising while dealing with NMMU's International Office. At this point, it is necessary to point out that the student/intern registration via NMMU's International Office took 3 weeks because things had to be sorted out, like my visitors visa,

my self-organized accommodation (which had not been accredited by NMMU so far) and the fees I had to pay. In the end, it turned out that there were no problems with what I had decided and organised on my own. In my case the registration took that long because I was the first student to make a placement via the project “Developing Sustainability” and hence, the International Office was not familiar with the procedures and specific arrangements. I am sure that it will be much easier for future students within the project as things seem to be sorted out now.

My work at the Department began on my second day at NMMU. I was mainly working for Sakhile (Sakhie) Phiri (Associate Lecturer and Programme Co-ordinator, PhD-Student) who also assisted me with some issues concerning my Master’s thesis. The project I was working in dealt with income, expenditures and well-being of the Nelson Mandela Bay area. Using questionnaires, two township regions (Motherwell and Ibhayi) were studied by five colleagues (student assistants) and me. During three Saturdays we were interviewing households and pedestrians in different streets. I was the only white person within our research group and as we sometimes were not going in groups of two, but by oneself and most of the time, we were entering the houses, this procedure might seem dangerous to outsiders. But Sakhie advised us to always stay safe and only do what we felt comfortable with. There were only a few situations in which I did not feel comfortable, but most of the time, I felt respected and safe and I fully enjoyed the time in the townships. Almost all residents were willing to answer our questions, told us about personal stories and invited us to take a seat in their houses for the duration of the interview. I got deep insights into the life and structure of townships and getting the answers on income, expenditures and well-being, I am now able to get my own idea of how life in townships looks and feels like and which issues the residents are facing. I am very thankful for this experience and I made very good friends within my research group.

Besides interviewing the township residents, I designed an Excel coding scheme for recording and analysing the generated data. After designing this scheme, I filled in the data of all questionnaires. I gained the knowledge for this quantitative empirical research (coding schemes etc.) through another project I was working in at the Department. This project was run by Dr. Sandra Perks (Senior lecturer at the School of Management Sciences) and Prof. Haines and it dealt with youth entrepreneurship. Within this project, pupils had to fill in questionnaires which I recorded within a coding scheme that was designed by Dr. Sandra Perks and me.

Prof. Haines invited me to join some meetings and he involved me into some of his research projects. I got a sound overview on different research projects and got to know several actors within and beyond NMMU. Prof. Haines also helped me with contacts for background information on my Master’s research. Although he was quite busy and had limited time at his

office, he always tried to assist me and give me the feeling to be part of the Department. I am very thankful that he showed such a positive and caring attitude towards me.

The Department tried not to give me too much work so that I could focus on my Master's research. Most of the time, I was at the Department for around six hours daily (Monday until Friday), but during that time, I was also able to conduct the research and interviews for my Master's thesis. I was also able to take some days off in order to travel along the Garden route in direction to Cape Town. Moreover, my colleagues tried to give me work that was appropriate for my scientific and professional background, so copying or preparing coffee were never part of my tasks.

But as the South African mentality differs from the German one in some cases, it is important to mention that fixed appointments, times and agreements are not adhered to the way we are used to in Germany. It happens quite often that people are not around although they promised you to have a chat or a meeting with you. This is the same with documents you are expecting to get from people. For us Germans - being very structured and sticking to agreements - it is important to understand and respect this mentality. We are the foreigners in this country so we need to adjust to their system. This does not mean that we have to accept not getting documents or having meetings, but one needs to stay very patient and polite and take into account that things take longer than we are used to. It is necessary to talk to the relevant people and remind them about arrangements. Furthermore, we should not be angry at them if they miss agreements because within their mentality, it is usually not meant as a harm or insult.

I am extremely thankful to the people at the Department of Developing Studies (whom I gladly can call friends) as they contributed a crucial part to make my stay in South Africa amazing and to be able to conduct all relevant research for my Master's thesis. They had a sympathetic ear for my entire private as well as scientific issues. I always had the feeling to be part of the team and to be involved in all private as well as business matters. I can fully recommend a placement or work at this department. Furthermore, the placement in conjunction with my research activities helped me to understand sustainability in a broader global context, to accept differences and to work with them. I also think that my stay contributed to a process of understanding and merging of cultures on both sides: mine and that of my colleagues and other South Africans I met.

## *Experiences outside the university*

South Africa is not just one single country, it is more like a bunch of countries merging in the same geographical and political area. 50 Million inhabitants speaking eleven official languages and hence, having different cultural backgrounds: That creates a dynamic, but also challenging atmosphere. Globalisation, immigration, westernization and similar trends lead to a merge as well as a confrontation of these cultures. Prejudices, expectations, hopes, misunderstandings, religious disagreements and language barriers are just a few of the issues that arise in a country that is as diverse as South Africa. And just recently, in 1994, South Africa got confronted with uniting the different beliefs, values and expectations. Some parts of South Africa are culturally more mixed up, like the Western Cape, some parts still struggle with getting used to each others customs and lifestyles, like the Eastern Cape. Although there are still racial prejudices and barriers, South Africans strive to become one nation in which cultures merge to a certain point, but also need to be respected at points where merging does not seem possible. South Africans are still on their way to handle cultural and racial issues, but it seems to me as if they have learned their lesson and as if the new generation (the young 20s and below) is far more open-minded and unbiased compared to the older generation. Still, Apartheid is ever-present and as you can imagine from thinking back to Germany in the 1930's and 1940's (although the happenings are not comparable), it will take it's time to understand, to forgive, to learn and to change. I got the feeling that South Africa is well on the way to become a role model for the world in uniting cultures and respecting differences. Actually, the problems South Africa is facing are the same the world is facing in a global context: Uniting differences. In a world of globalisation, this seems indispensable and South Africa should be respected, paid tribute and supported for its quest of uniting differences.

To get back to my actual experiences, I can say that I have not experienced strong problems in communicating with the different cultures. Most South Africans are able to talk in English, whereas I only have been to the Western and the Eastern Cape. This may be different in other provinces. Even in the townships, most of the people could talk to me in English and were able to understand my English. Nevertheless, if you wait in the main NMMU building for the elevators it is very likely that the people around you are talking either in Afrikaans or Xhosa. I enjoyed this multicultural spirit and got fascinated by it.

Whilst driving through the townships it was very fascinating which local businesses exist and how they are run. For example, many women are sitting along the streets having a pot in front of them and cooking sheep heads – a black South African delicacy. There are also many hair studios along the streets and although some of them seem not to be more than a nut shell, they are quite busy in terms of clients.

It seems to me as if you can get everything you are used to in South Africa, like the main make-up brands, various kinds of fruits and vegetables, fashionable clothing, convenience and fast food, internet access, mobile phones or medicine. Although some products are more expensive compared to Germany which is mainly due to the fact that they get imported, they are available in most of the shops.

It is important to live in a safe environment as there are thefts everyday and everywhere. As foreigners are not familiar with criminal activities in South Africa, they should prefer to live in places that have an alarm system, a wall around the house and lockable doors as well as windows. These precautions seem to be exaggerated, especially if you want to come over social exclusion and prejudices, but as there are too many things to learn in a foreign country in the beginning it is better to stay safe than sorry. Furthermore, I heard of some thefts in my friends' places. Nobody got injured, but in order to make your stay as nice as possible it is important to feel safe and to have a place where you can relax. You will be busy with keeping yourself safe all the time (which is again due to the fact that you have heard so many warnings at home) so that it is important to have that one place where you can fully be resting.

While travelling there is no need to stay in expensive hotels, but youth hostels (backpackers) are very comfortable, safe and cheap in South Africa. I was travelling along the Garden Route in direction to Cape Town all on my own and I stayed in backpacker's every time. They were mostly clean and had all facilities that one needs to feel comfortable. Furthermore, you get to know many people from various countries. Most backpacker's use the Baz Bus to travel around, but I preferred to use coach buses as they were cheaper in my case. Very often I used the City-to-City bus which is the cheapest one and hence, carries many poor people. Every time I was the only white person travelling with this bus line and some white men (e.g. security persons) were very concerned about my well-being and safety when they saw me waiting for the bus or heard about that. It might not be the safest option for travelling and I would also advise people to use the Baz Bus if it is a comparable option, but I felt comfortable every time I travelled with the coach buses and I would use them again. Besides, there are other coach lines, like Greyhound or Translux, which are more comfortable and clean and seem to be safer.

In general, I can say that the living expenses in South Africa are much lower compared to Germany. Watching a movie at the cinema is 2 Euro on Wednesdays, a beer costs around 1,50 Euro and using the Minibuses from NMMU to town costs 0,60 Euro. The only things that are more expensive are food and drinks in the supermarkets, but as these are quite cheap in Germany compared to most other countries, the South African prices do not seem to be

overexpensive. Besides, going out for a meal is very cheap in South Africa. Renting a room is similar to Germany in terms of prices.

### *Do's and Dont's – a short overview*

As in every country and culture, there are Do's and Dont's. Facing the fact that South Africa consist of a variety of cultures it seems to be difficult to give general advices. Based on my experiences, the most important Do's are the following:

- Greet back, don't worry that someone wants to harm you, most people are just polite. Or better: Be the first to greet someone – even foreigners on the street. And have a smile on your face then others smile back at you.
- Tip people where possible as salaries are quite low.
- Lock the doors of your car while driving.
- Stay on the left side while driving.
- Protect yourself from infections (particularly HIV).
- Talk about Apartheid and ask the locals what they think about it.
- Keep your belongings safe.
- Try to learn and use some Xhosa and Afrikaans words (or of other languages where applicable).
- Use a taxi at night.
- Buy local food and try local dishes (e.g. Cook Sisters, Bobotie, Mealie Pap).
- Keep patient with South Africans.
- Say “pleasure” instead of “you are welcome” or “no worries” as this is really South African.
- Try Skydiving in Plettenberg Bay!!!

Based on my experiences, the most important Dont's are the following:

- Don't be afraid of too many things. Keep relaxed and stay open-minded.
- Don't stigmatise people with HIV or AIDS.
- Don't stigmatise people of other cultural backgrounds or with a different skin colour.
- Don't show your valuables around.
- Don't walk alone at night.
- Don't judge about things only because they are not familiar to you.
- Don't hesitate to talk to people in all circumstances.

- Don't forget to write down or save all important phone numbers (friends, police, ambulance, taxi).

As I got many impressions during my stay in South Africa it seems to be impossible to tell you about all of them. If you have further questions do not hesitate to contact me.

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Host country: South Africa  
Subject: Sustainability Economics and Management (Title of Masters thesis: Sustainable nutrition in urban middle-class Port Elizabeth (South Africa): Analysing and evaluating alimentary practices on consumers' level)  
Duration of your stay: 15/04/2010 – 30/06/2010  
Type of stay: Research, placement

I agree that my email address can be given to prospective exchange students within the project:

Email address: [Mareike.Michel@web.de](mailto:Mareike.Michel@web.de)

I agree that this report on my experiences abroad within the project Developing Sustainability may be published on the project's homepage.

Date, Signature: Oldenburg, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2010



# *Some photographic impressions of my stay in South Africa*

## Research in Townships





**Our research group**



Andrew, Pas, Sakhie, Babalwa, me, Unam (Amahle is absent)

**My accomodation**



**NMMU South Campus**



Diverse impressions



