

Tennessee State University Summer School-The Experience -UJ Study Abroad



Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) once famously said “traveling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller” and, as I discovered this past Winter, man, was he right! On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2017 a group comprising myself and 7 other students, plus our chaperone-Study Abroad Manager Mrs. Lisle du Plessis, embarked on a near-30 hour long trip, with layovers, that would see us eventually land in the south of the US in Nashville, Tennessee. to attend a summer school programme hosted by the Tennessee State University. This was our experience.

Tennessee State University is one of what they call in America, Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), and is located in a relatively quiet neighborhood a stone-throw away from Nashville’s vibrant downtown area. With a student population of about 9 000, it is far smaller than the 50 000+ or so that we at UJ have spread out across our 4 campuses. At the time of our visit, however, the campus was barely occupied, bar other small groups who were also there for the other various summer programs offered by the institution.

Having departed Johannesburg relatively underdressed-in flip flops, sweatpants and tops, on a chilly South African Winter evening, it wasn’t long after we landed in Nashville that we began to wish we had even less clothing on our bodies. The problem wasn’t the temperature, it was

instead the humidity in the air which averaged. It was so humid that one could get away with not applying body lotion after a shower.

Our initial interactions with the few students that were there was encouraging. Surprisingly enough we didn't get any of the questions we had anticipated, such as whether or not we have lions roaming the streets, which was very pleasing. Instead everyone was just amused to hear we're from South Africa, and eager to find out how life is back here. The same continued when we met our American and Columbian counterparts, with whom we believed we would be conducting our research and presentations, only to realise the Colombians would be working with a different group. But all in all the atmosphere was that of excitement more than anything, but also eagerness to interact. With the introductions out of the way it was then time to get down to business.

Our first lecture felt like it came a bit too soon, when we had barely acquainted ourselves with the reality of being in America. The lecture itself also proved to be a bit of a shock, as did the rest of the lectures that week. Instead of being briefed about our research topics as one would have expected, every lecture seemed to be an introduction of the different faculties at TSU, which left us all a bit dazed. It wasn't all that bad though. In the afternoons we had daily excursions to different surrounding areas just to get a bit a clearer mindset in terms of the way of life and such, which I welcomed. But the afternoons were, in a nutshell, almost all planned out the same. The evenings on the other hand were something else. I'd like to believe the reason I had so much fun in Nashville is purely due to our new American friends, a very outgoing and fun group. Without diverting attention from why we were there in the first place, the group always made sure we had evenings to remember, whether by just sitting around campus and chatting, to random drives around the city, every night had its own story.

Before we knew it the week had gone by and Thursday, the day for presentations, had arrived-a quick dash to breakfast, a bit of running around in search of an iron for our clothes, and a lot of scrambling around to get our presentations done-and almost on queue we proceeded to the presentation venues dressed to impress. The morning groups presented and we adjourned for lunch, after which it was the UJ-TSU groups' turn. Two hours later and everyone was done, finally! Hold the celebrations though, the official academic program still wasn't complete yet.

That evening we proceeded to a local art museum where a small award ceremony was held, with everyone getting their certificates of participation, while my group was also awarded first prize for oral presentation. Now the celebrations could begin!

Fast forward to the next morning, when, at 5a.m. we packed our bags and said goodbye to Nashville, our destination-Atlanta- where we spent the weekend. It was the last leg of our trip, just sightseeing. We visited places such as the Martin Luther King museum, the CNN offices, World of Coca-Cola, to name a few. We even had time to attend a neighborhood market of sorts, and even go to an arcade, all in the interest enjoying our final few days in the US, and we certainly did.

No-one likes goodbyes, no-one likes farewells, they suggest an end to something. It was certainly not a goodbye when we eventually departed that Sunday, as our new friends made their way back home, it was merely a 'see you later' because in just under three weeks later they would be coming to South Africa where it was our turn to play host, and we did not disappoint. From state of the art facilities, to rare experiences actually interacting with South African wildlife, to learning a thing or two about where mankind originated, UJ, through the Study Abroad office, left them in amazement at what a fun and interesting place South Africa is. Unfortunately for me the experience had to be cut short by a day and a half due to other commitments.

I was sad I wouldn't get to see off my friends when they departed, I would've wanted to have been there at the airport to wave them away, but I am happy I got to say my parting words before I left. In the same spirit of no-one wanting there to be any goodbye moments, this was once again a 'see you later'. Maybe we'll all meet again someday, share a laugh or two like we did during the close to 3 weeks we spent together, that is my wish. Until then, I will forever hold onto the memories of the 2017 UJ-TSU Study Abroad Program, a truly one of a kind experience.