

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

APRIL 2008

The air is muggy and warm and the smell of adventure lingers in the air...the language is not English, and my head is flooded with thoughts and confusion. As we reach further into the Buenos Aires airport I am walking through with 10 other exchange kids from Australia and New Zealand helping them fill out the visa forms, for I seem to be the only one who has travelled overseas before and I'm the oldest so they look to me for help.

All the Aussies and Kiwis try and stick together as we enter the main terminal and a lady in a red AFS t-shirt is calling out to us. We go over, and thank goodness, she speaks English. She asked us where the other 40 plus students are and we are like, we don't know. She asks us to stay put as she continues to look for lost young souls coming from other countries to this distant warm land. I take in a lot at the airport: hundreds of people are speaking but not a word of English. Our group has a mix of horror and excitement on their faces, it gets exciting. Ten minutes later we are with the Americans. Some of the Aussies walk over to me and say they need my help, as I'm over 18 they need me to change their money. That's the law here they say, so I go over with a friend who speaks basic Spanish and we get it done, first real language challenge over with the help of a friend.

I will never forget the bus ride to our camp about 50 minutes away or the feeling of lingering uncertainty outside the airport - policemen with automatic weapons and the humidity in the air. I could have been anywhere at that moment but I was here in Argentina. We get on the bus and we're off, on the wrong side of the road of course. The first thing that hits home is the poverty on the streets. The buildings look so old and I notice the poor condition of the cars driving past. The most overwhelming thing was the pollution; the rubbish on the road was everywhere. The feeling of poverty was everywhere.

As we drive for a distance past the city into the outer rural suburban area, we travel on impassable roads, and passed poverty similar to what I think you might find in the Middle East. Thoughts are running through my head... What have I got myself in to? Thinking this could be heaven for people when it's hell for me. Luckily, I was very wrong and we just happened to go through this area.

The camp was helpful. Students gathered from all over the world. We were split into two groups; one group to a university campus, there goes half the Aussies, well two out of us four staying in Argentina. We make our way to the camp. I put down my stuff and I am a mess with thoughts. The next few days are a blur. A bus ride to Buenos Aires city centre, lots of photos, lots of activities and a lot of anticipation.

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Year Program to Argentina
Commonwealth Department of Defence Scholarship Winner



The bus ride to San Guillermo. Maxi, an Austrian girl and I were sent to Santa Fe a day after everybody else so we got to see downtown Buenos Aires with an AFS girl, more excitement and more confusion. On the bus, it's luxury, try first class plane seats. It's a 10hr bus ride leaving at 10 at night and set to arrive in San Guillermo at 8am. I am too excited and nervous to sleep. Every stop my new home comes closer and closer. Maxi manages a couple of hours sleep, lucky for her...it's 7.30am and the bus driver asks us something. We both look at each other in worry; luckily a man on the bus spoke English and translated him for us. Half an hour later we come to Swarti, the town before ours. I'm thinking it's this one or the next one. Nice houses, small but safe. But it's way too early to make conclusions or anything like that.

We turn into San Guillermo, my mind running a million miles a minute. Get my first glimpse of Eli my host mum, and my sister Gisella - excitement and fear has entered my mind. What happens if they don't like me, etc... in the end I never had to worry? Hugs are exchanged and off we go with Maxi to our house. We drive down the road, our house is the last on the right opposite a gym which it turns out my host mum owns. Walking into the house, my head is flooded with excitement. It's all surreal as it has been the past 5 days, one long dream. I meet Rodo my host dad, he gives me a big hug and welcomes me, as does my brother Joaquim. A sense of anticipation and unease circulates the room as we try to communicate. Luckily Gisella and, as it turns out, my host dad know a little bit of English. Twenty minutes later Maxi's host parents pick her up, and for the first time I really feel like I am on my own.



We have a conversation, I ask the typical AFS questions from a sheet which was a challenge, considering I was asking about washing, cleaning etc..all within 30min of me meeting these people, me speaking no Spanish and they having only limited English. Then they suggest a brief sleep which I accept after they have shown me around the house. All looks promising to me - nothing to write home and complain about. I wake up 4 hrs later at 8pm to dinner. I remember a strange voice in another language waking me up; it was my host mum. The first few days I eat slowly and talk a lot. It's all a bit of a blur those first weeks, but feelings of excitement have never once left me.



It's been almost three months, and I go to Spanish classes 4 days a week for an hour a day. It means more to me than school for I learn a lot with this teacher. She speaks fluent English and is the one person I don't have to think twice about when I am trying to have a conversation. Thank God for her, I don't know where I would be without her, when it comes to the language I can now understand a lot more than I can say and I can read ok too.

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I go to the gym 4 to 5 days a week and now I am eating more than I have ever done before. My aim is to get fit and also try to gain some weight while I am here.

First day of school and I am still a celebrity. I walk in and meet my class of about 30, 20 or so girls and 10 boys. I have met maybe half already but now I meet more. We go to a school assembly and I am welcomed by the principal. He says welcome and he loves me and everyone laughs. I just wave and have no idea what is happening. Ha ha, good times. As time goes on school is boring and I hardly understand a thing. I talk

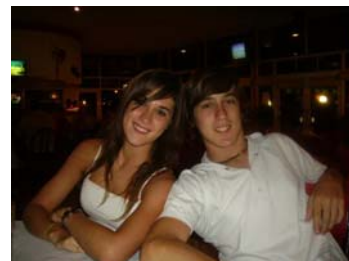


or sleep. School starts at 7am and finishes between 11am and 12 .30pm five days a week. To be awake and at school by 7am is a challenge for anyone. Lucky for me, I can just wake up slowly, in my mind as everyone else has to jump straight into work after we hear the national anthem. At recess I walk outside and 5 people who I barely know will come up and try to talk to me. Communication is via the one of 4 people who can translate my slow English to Spanish and vice versa. It's all good times. After I finish school, I come home to lunch then have a siesta. I go to Spanish lessons from 3pm till 4pm. On Monday and Wednesday, I go to a gym class or play soccer for an hour. I also go to the gym every week night at 8pm for an hour and half and sometimes a run before that with a friend. After the gym I shower, and eat dinner with the family at 10pm. I go to bed around midnight and wake up at 6am. It's crazy but with two sleeps a day manageable.

Before school started I was on holidays for 3 or 4 weeks. My routine was sleep till 12 noon, get up for lunch, watch TV, hang with friends then eat dinner at 10pm as we do every night. Stay up with friends till 3am and repeat. Except for Friday when we go to the local club Axis, where all the young people go to dance. It's weird, here people don't enter the club until at least 2am and we leave about 6am. On Saturday night I will often go out again to another club and may not get home until after 8am but that is considered normal, even during school term.



Friends here are great. I have a couple of good mates and we often hang with my sister and her girl friends. Then there is my brother and all his friends. I must have 40 plus people I would call friends that I see on a daily basis. Then there are hundreds of people in the village where I live who know me. I walk down the street and constantly hear, 'Holá Nick'. Everybody knows me and I am horrible at remembering names (even when in Oz), so here it's just ridiculous. I have bought a mobile phone with a camera to take pictures and write names of people. Sneaky but it works.



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Food here is good; it's basically Spanish and Italian. No Asian, no Indian, nothing other than Spanish and Italian which is a tad repetitive and tedious at times since I love food from other cultures but it makes me appreciate how lucky we are at home. But overall it is very eatable and often tasty especially the ashtos or bbqs, the best meat very yum yum, delicious. I'm still dreaming of a meat pie, sausage roll or a chicken stir fry but I am getting by very well without them...

I am still to this day finding things out about my house, routinely meeting new people and am constantly challenged in more ways than I can every imagine. I could go on writing but I will save more news for next time.

A big thank you to the Royal Australian Navy, Department of Defence and AFS for giving me this most amazing opportunity. I will carry these memories with me forever.

Greetings and best wishes from Argentina,
Saludos y recuerdos

Nick Bayly-Jones

