

flyboy7@uvic.ca

My name is Graham. I am currently in the 4th year of UVics Geography program. I recently got back from an international exchange to James Cook University in Cairns, Australia. I attended school at JCU for the February to June semester.

To be perfectly honest, I did not do too much in the way of extensive preparation for my departure. I have several friends from Australia, and I talked to them about things such as cost of living, and did rough budgets, as well as going on Gumtree, the Craigslist equivalent and looking at housing options. As I was leaving at the end of December to Europe for a month of backpacking, then flying from there to Australia for another month of travel before arriving in Cairns, I had just 13 kilos of stuff with me, mostly clothes, my netbook, and cameras.

My arrival in Cairns was smooth. I had selected to use the universities arrival service, where they book a hostel for you, and arrange transport from the airport. I ended up staying in the hostel for almost two weeks while I arranged for my apartment to be sorted out, and actually considered living there the whole time actually. I went online when I arrived in Cairns and found a few places to look at around town which were in my price range. I ended up at the first one I looked at. I took over the last 4 months of a lease on an apartment in a really nice new building. I had one aussie flatmate, my own bathroom, bedroom, a nice kitchen, a pool, gym, ect, and was right near a beautiful beach. I ended up paying \$150 AUD a week, which is very reasonable compared to many of the other housing options available.

I am a geographer, and had spent a lot of time on Google earth before arriving, so I kinda knew my way around already when I arrived...The university is about 20km north of the city of Cairns, about 30 mins on the bus. I lived further out of town by another few kilometers, but rarely actually needed to go to town except to go to restaurants and such.

JCU Cairns is a small campus, just a few thousand students. It is set against the escarpment going up to the tablelands, and is surrounded on several sides by tropical rainforest. There are some creeks running through the campus with beautiful nature corridors around them. I saw many creatures from wallabies to snakes roaming around, and apparently there is a Goanna which lives under one of the bridges, but I never saw it.

The University has several campuses, so many lectures are video linked to other campuses which is alright if the prof knows how to deal with it, but annoying if they don't. The classes were all very small. The largest around 25 and my smallest was 2. There was a great community culture at the uni both with exchange students and internationals, but also with aussies. I helped start a volleyball club, and was in the ultimate club, plus the social club. There was always something interesting going on. Almost every day there was a sausage sizzle somewhere on campus, or some other free food. Overall, it was an amazing place to learn.

Far North Queensland is hot. Stinking hot in fact if you are there in the summer months of dec, jan or feb. The temperature itself was not that high, usually around 35 , but the humidity was also at about 90%, routinely bringing the humidex over 50...Pools are very nice. By the end of the exchange, it was

going down to about 17 at night, which felt really cold. It was still hot during the day though, in the high 20s, though the humidity had dropped.

Now, Australia is known for its deadly creatures, Northern Queensland in particular. If you go there, make sure to follow the signs, and don't do anything the locals don't do. For example, don't stand beside rivers, there are crocs (averaging about 5 meters), don't swim outside of the stinger nets at the beach as again, there are crocs, but also sea snakes and jellies. Don't stick your hand in dark places as there are spiders, don't walk in long grass with exposed skin, there are snakes and spiders...you get the idea. If you keep it all in mind though, you can do amazing things! It doesn't detract from the experience at all!

As for social stuff, I helped start a volleyball club, played on the ultimate Frisbee team, among other things. I had a nice group of friends from Australia and abroad, and was able to keep myself busy most of the time!

Where to visit around Australia, Cairns is great, but you have to get out of the city. Head up to Clifton Beach or Palm Cove, out to the reef on a liveaboard trip, up to the tablelands and their waterfalls, Granite Gorge, Mossman Gorge, the Daintree, Port Douglas, Chillagoe, and many other places. Around Australia, check out Melbourne for sure, and try driving the great ocean road to Warrnambool.

Coming back from the exchange, I have not had any real problems. I have come back from big trips before, and had issues, so I knew what to expect. I launched myself into doing things right away. I was working the afternoon I got home hucking hay bales for some cash. I started out just doing things all the time. Be it work around my parents, house, meeting friends, geocaching, just something, and gradually slowed down. It is nice to be back still.

Overall it was a wonderful wonderful wonderful experience!!! Thanks for the opportunity! For pictures, I kept a blog for the duration of my exchange, feel free to check that out. It is called "A Geographers Wet Dream" and can be found at geogwd.blogspot.com