

5 Takeaways from Cape Town

By Max Loar

Introduction

I have been living in Cape Town for 6 weeks now and it has been one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I am interning with a material testing/consulting company called One-Eighty Material Solutions, through the internship company VAC. While I expected a change in scenery, I didn't expect a lot of cultural changes that have now become synonymous with Cape Town for me.

1. African Time in the Lab

The pace of work here is extremely slow, and nobody is in a rush to get anything done. The samples we need to test are typically pretty quick, and each set of samples can be completed within a day if needed. The thing is there is limited equipment for almost everything. There is only one microscope, and it is needed for almost every sample. It makes it so there is usually an hour or more wait on the microscope at any given time, and everyone is totally fine just waiting, and the people using it lollygag all the time and are in no rush to pass it off.

I think knowing the general cultural trends of South Africa this reflects the broader culture where time doesn't have a chokehold on every situation like it does in the US, and in general things are much less punctual. To a lesser extent though I also think part of it is the cost of labor in comparison to the cost of equipment. Labor is a relatively smaller percentage of most businesses' costs here, to where inefficiencies are tolerated more, and equipment like a new microscope is a bigger investment.

2. America Through a Cape Town Lens

As soon as anyone hears your accent they immediately want to talk to you about the US. Most people I have talked to have a very limited view of what living in America is like but know almost everything about American companies, food, politics, and trends. One example of this is someone asked me a question about the mayoral race in New York City and asked if I liked Cuomo, Adams, or Mamdani. I understand it's the biggest city in the US, but that is still a lot of knowledge to have about politics. The same person, knowing I was from the San Francisco area, asked me if I see fentanyl every day and if people come up to me and ask me to try it. He also thought that 50% of San Francisco does fentanyl, and you couldn't walk anywhere without seeing someone on it.

The same person who knew three candidates in a mayoral race also thought that 50% of San Francisco was addicted to drugs. The perception of the US is almost solely based on the media they see, which for most young people is Instagram and TikTok. This explains why they have so much knowledge about companies and politics, but can be really out of touch when it comes to what it's actually like to live in the US. This was an extreme example, but in general, people are more curious than assumptive and just want to hear what it's like from someone who actually lives there.

3. Embrace the culture

As I spoke about everyone loves to talk about the US and are excited to meet and talk to Americans. One of the only things I have found South Africans get more excited about than

talking to me about America is when they get to talk to me about South Africa. I think the key topics to focus on for any South African to get excited are rugby and food.

The Springboks, South Africa's rugby team, is consistently one of the best teams in the world, winning the World cup in 2019 and 2023. This is a huge part of South Africans culture and pride. When they are playing, you can tell, days that they play you can't go anywhere without seeing a springbok jersey. There is a lot of great food, but the absolute must is attending a braai. A braai is essentially just a barbeque so on menus you will see like braai chicken etc., but just like a BBQ in the US, it often is more of a social event than just a food. Often these two exciting South African cultural staples combine on Springbok game days which if you're lucky like me you can experience.

4. Language That Pushes Boundaries

I was setting up a corrosion test with a senior chemical engineer and the lab manager, who is my boss. For this corrosion test, two fluids were given to us by the company that hired us labeled 'Mixtard' and 'Insulatard.' After reading these labels, both my boss and the other engineer proceeded to have a roughly 15-minute conversation telling stories and talking about mentally disabled people, referring to them as 'mixtards' and 'insulatards' exclusively.

When first hearing this, you might, like me, be shocked. However, I think this general view on language is a lot more relaxed here. People swear more frequently, especially inside the workplace, and sarcasm is also much more common. Words and language in general are taken less seriously, which leads to hearing some less-than-politically-correct stories, phrases, and words.

5. Cape Town's Uneven Edges

There is so much to do here, and so much to see, but it is still a fairly dangerous place if you aren't careful. Although nothing bad has happened to me yet, I have heard many stories and have friends that have gotten robbed. There are areas, like Khayelitsha and Cape Flats, that should be completely avoided, but most areas you just shouldn't walk alone in the dark and in the daylight should be present and aware of your surroundings.

Like many big cities, there are safe areas and more dangerous areas, but Apartheid and political corruption have led South Africa to be unstable and rampant with inequality. The unemployment rate has been between 30–50% for years, which leaves a lot of people desperate. While criminals in most areas are not typically violent, extra energy needs to be spent on being aware of your surroundings and extra precautions need to be taken, I wouldn't consider it serious enough to where you should consider not coming because of the safety, but the longer you are here the more you realize the vast and drastic inequality and the lasting impacts of the Apartheid regime, and how it effects so many parts of South Africa and Cape Town.

Conclusion & Reflection

Living in Cape Town has challenged many of my assumptions, not just about South Africa, but about myself and the impact of America on other cultures. Although I have traveled abroad before, I have never lived abroad, and these experiences and differences have provided a lot of insight into how other parts of the world live. That being said, it also makes

me reflect much more on South Africa and the other parts of the world as a whole. I have only seen the upper sliver of what it is like to live in Cape Town, as roughly 60% of residents in Cape Town live in townships, which are informal settlements established during Apartheid. These areas often come with extreme poverty, violence, overcrowding, and lack of education. The reality is that although Cape Town is beautiful and there are amazing people and areas, the life for the majority of people is well below the standard of living seen by the average Cape Town tourist.