

# Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Byron Bay, Australia**

**Major:** Environment, Economics, and Politics

**Program:** My program focused on environmental problems facing Australia, and possible solutions. We learned about permaculture, the influence of corporations on our consumer culture, sustainable design, and the ecology in the many areas we visited. Many of our classes were in workshop form, giving us an intensive, thorough understanding of a topic. Leaders in various sustainability fields came to speak with us directly, giving us a first hand understanding of the issues and solutions faced by Australia,



and more broadly. SIT programs focus on experiential learning, so many of these subjects were learned on-site at gardens, sustainable buildings, and in rainforests or on top of mountains. By placing us in the setting of the problem and learning about issues directly from the people working to solve them, we came away inspired and with unique depth to our understanding. We stayed in one homestay in a town in New South Wales, specifically chosen to give us a wide array of "typical" Australian families. Our cultural immersion and understanding came from this homestay, but also through our interactions with people in class and on field trips.

**Typical Day:** There wasn't really a typical day on this program because we travelled around throughout the semester. When we were at our home base in Byron Bay, we would have *brekkie* (breakfast) of local organic food from the farmer's market in our apartments, which each housed three of us. Then we would all pile into our bus around 7:30 or 8:00 am and head off to a field trip in the area, such as learning about the natural environment in a national park, or working at an organic farm. We usually packed our own lunches, but the program gave us a stipend for groceries. For shorter field trips, we would head back in the afternoon to hang out on the beach until dinnertime, for which we often held giant potlucks. The night would conclude with some homework and hanging out with friends.

**Highlights:** Some highlights would definitely include our trip to Tasmania. Most Australians don't even get down to the island off the southern coast, but we got to spend 10 days driving through it and hiking the mountains. We also got to hike through a forest with the tallest non-conifer trees in the world with an activist who had lived in the forest for 3 years to stop logging companies from destroying it. Another highlight would have to be our camping trip with two Aboriginal elders. We spent 4 days without any electronic devices, including watches! They taught us their stories, and how to throw spears and boomerangs. We even cooked some local fish by wrapping it in bark and throwing it in the fire!

**Challenges:** The most challenging part of the program was definitely the Independent Study Project (ISP), where we conducted our own research or worked as an intern, and wrote a 75 page final paper. As undergraduates, most have never conducted independent research, and we also were scattered around Australia during this period. It was hard facing all that alone! It was also a huge challenge to meet young, local Australians. We interacted with many Australian lecturers and professionals on our field trips, but since our program consisted of 18 Americans, it was hard to branch out to meet locals.

**Advice:** Some of the workshops and activities were totally outside my comfort zone, and definitely outside what I'd ever done in a college course. Throw yourself wholeheartedly into these new ways of doing things and thinking about the world. It really is a unique experience to get such different perspectives on issues you care about. I found that by letting in new ideas and ways of seeing things, my understanding was broadened, and I was able to solidify some of my own opinions and the path I want to take within sustainability.

