

Stanford Lake College, Zhaneen, South Africa

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When I first landed in Johannesburg, South Africa, I thought it looked like any other city. It has tall buildings and large airports. The people in the airport were very friendly and helpful. I spent a few hours there before boarding a plane to Hoedspruit, a small town about a one-hour flight away from Johannesburg.

Hoedspruit felt very different than Johannesburg, but was exactly what I expected from South Africa. The airport was the size of the Chamandy Auditorium and our baggage came to us on a tractor. When I walked out of the airport, I could see impala, warthogs, and many other animals on the side of the road. My exchange family, Luke and his mother, were there to greet me. We drove to their home, located on a big citrus and horse-riding farm.

Within the first 20 minutes, we went for a bike ride on the hilly terrain. Luke asked me many questions about Canada. It was a fun way to get to know him. A few days later, we packed our bags and headed off to his boarding school, Stanford Lake College, two hours from Hoedspruit. The school is on a giant hill. The rugby field is at the top and the lake is at the bottom and the schools and other buildings are located between. I walked into the hostel; everyone greeted me warmly and I met my other roommates, Amir and Mark, soon to become some of the best friends I will ever have.

My experience at the school was amazing and different than LCC. It was much less structured. Students use iPads if they choose, there is a Tuck Shop (candy store) within the school, and on our breaks and after school, we played "hand-tennis," a game we made up, and soccer, and cricket. We spent a lot of time outdoors.

Halfway through my exchange experience, the grade 9s had a seven-day trip into the bush of South Africa. Three days of that was spent in a group, trying to find different checkpoints with a map and supplies in groups, and we slept in tents. The following day was spent solo for 24-hours. The last few days, we did different rotations of activities that ranged from abseiling to chopping trees.

Hoedspruit is a great place to be if you are interested in seeing wildlife. We went on a safari trip (or game drive, as they say) and I saw elephants, giraffes, buffalo, cheetahs, lions, and rhinoceros. We also saw impala, but they are very common there. We came very close to the animals, within just a few feet, and I took hundreds of pictures!

Overall, this exchange was amazing and I will never get a chance to recreate such an experience. I'm glad I decided to do this life-changing trip and it will stay with me always. Even though I did so many great activities and saw many different animals and places, what I will keep the most are the friendships I forged there.

