

RETURNEE OF THE MONTH

NOVEMBER 2019

RAEVEN MATAYA

Program: LONDON FIRST, fall 2017

Background: 3rd year from New Orleans

Studies: Sociology with minors in

economics, leadership & public policy

Affiliations: VP of public relations for QSU;

Vice Chair of advocacy for the Minority

Rights Coalition; multicultural peer

educator; Alpha Kappa Psi, co-ed business

frat.



WHY DID YOU GO ON LONDON FIRST?

I had never really traveled before, in either the US or abroad. I come from a low-income background so traveling was never really a thing at my house. I've never been anywhere! So when I got an email about this program saying "Go to London for your first semester," there really wasn't any hesitation. A lot of people said to me, "aren't you going to miss your first semester? I'd be so scared of missing out!" To me, it was like, I'll never get another chance to start my college career in another country.

So I knew I had to go on that program, because, coming from a low income background, being a person of color, we don't really travel. We don't really get passports. You don't see black and brown students traveling, you don't see low income students traveling. So I knew I had to do this – not for other people – but I knew that it meant more if I traveled abroad. Plus its London! Who wouldn't want to go to London their first year? It's an amazing opportunity! I knew I would regret it more if I didn't go. It was just a no brainer to me!



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WHAT WAS IT LIKE ADJUSTING? WAS THERE ANYTHING THAT DEFIED YOUR EXPECTATIONS? WHAT WORKED?

I've never gone on international flights or been out of the country – I had to get a passport specifically for this – so there was a lot of new territory for me in terms of traveling by myself. I had to get used to navigating a foreign country and being my own person in a foreign space. Almost everyone else on the program had traveled before, and some of them had gone to school internationally. They had all had international experiences except for me. I was like, "can we go to Paris this weekend?" and they would say "oh, I've already been." That was new for me. I was discovering who I was in terms of being a global citizen and knowing what that meant. It took a lot to be comfortable with that.

Otherwise, there was never really unmet expectations because I really didn't know what I was getting into. Not really. I mean I knew about London, but in the way that everyone knows about London. So I didn't really have too many expectations, but I knew it was going to be such a moment, because it was my first time out of the country, and my first semester of university! I was just taking it all in one day at a time, one country at a time.

In terms of what worked and didn't work, honestly just going into it with an open mind was probably the best thing. I'm a very adaptable person anyways, but going into this and dealing with flights getting delayed, or a hidden fee popping up out of nowhere at the airport really teaches you that you just have to roll with the punches. And there were some people who felt more homesick than others and tried to stay more inside their little bubble. So I made it a point to go outside that bubble. I was the only one on the program to join a club at the university. I did theater

there and I joined student government. I made sure to hang out in the common areas so I could be friends with local students. I made so many friends from all over the world, and now I have so many international networks and connections. And I think that helped my transition. I made it a point to try to be international in every sense.



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WAS IT HARDER THAN YOU EXPECTED?

Honestly, no. I don't think it was really that hard. The academics were not as hard as here. The lifestyle itself wasn't that hard to get used to. It really wasn't too much. I think that London is a good first step honestly because it's different, but it's still very Western culturally and they speak English, so it's similar to America. For my first time in a different country, and for an extended period of time, it wasn't as difficult to navigate as you might expect, and I think, honestly, the most difficult things were microaggressions here and there, the sudden fees for traveling, and navigating that space, but it wasn't that hard for me personally. I think because I knew going in that I wanted to have this experience, I didn't really want to miss UVA. I went in with a good attitude and an open mindset and that set the tone for the trip. I wasn't missing home; I didn't care, I was in London!

DID IT HELP YOU CLARIFY ANY ACADEMIC OR CAREER GOALS?

I was pretty much undecided since...forever. I just now declared at the beginning of third year. So in terms of academic goals, I would say it didn't help me know "I want to major in this" or anything like that. But it helped me realize that I definitely want to be more international and be really present in a global sense. I realized the importance of being a global citizen and having an international perspective, and I want to apply that to my career and life. Overall it helped me realize what I want, who I want to be, and what I care about.



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WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A STUDENT WHO IS CONSIDERING GOING ABROAD?

Do it. Period. Do it. Don't get caught up in the FOMO, because the experience you'll have over there is worth so so much more than what you're gonna be possibly missing here. If you don't have anything pressing holding you back – if you are able to go, you should. Because you will have such a good time over there that you can't replicate here. And spending a semester abroad on any of the programs – you carry that experience with you. It sets the tone for the rest of your time in college. And why not set that tone in abroad? If its little things like FOMO, if you're scared, that's fine. That's normal. You can have those feelings. But you can have those feelings in London while you're booking a plane ticket to visit France, Morocco, and Germany! You can have those feelings over there! And there will still be college life! Unless you have something in your life serious and pressing – go. If you are able to go then you should do it. Point blank, period.

ANYTHING ELSE TO ADD?

It's important to know that the study abroad opportunities here are not limited, in terms of who can go. You might see all these people studying abroad, and they might not look like you sometimes. But you are able to study abroad, even if you're low income. My household is very low income, but I was still able to spend a semester abroad in London, I did a J term in India and Dubai, I'm going to Singapore next semester, and I'm hopefully gonna do a J term next year, probably in Ghana (fingers crossed). And you, too, have all these opportunities! There's so many scholarships

out there. If you get financial aid, you can often use that to travel. That's something I want to encourage everyone to do. If you've thought "oh, I can't study abroad, I don't have the money." UVA has the money! There's all these opportunities out there. Take advantage of them! If you're low income, if you're a person of color, if you're just afraid, if you've never traveled before, those are things you'll have to deal with, but try dealing with them in a different country! Go abroad. The UVA experience is an experience, but I think the experience you get abroad is worth more. There are opportunities for you, even if you don't think there are!

