

STUDYING AT VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

By Dawn Voon

I am currently on a student exchange program with the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. So far, I have spent about four months living and studying in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. My time there has offered me the wonderful opportunity to learn about and be immersed in the Kiwi culture and way of life.

The first thing that caught my eye was the impressive building housing the law faculty at the Victoria University of Wellington. What's so impressive about it? Though the grand building was an old government building, it is the second largest wooden building in the world (the largest being a temple in Japan). Although ironically, the building gives the false impression that it is made of stone. Together with the few exhibits including wax figurines and a vault display, the building has become a tourist attraction.

The law faculty building is situated in the most expensive area in Wellington. One could hardly get more downtown. It is located right next to the highly controversial "beehive", the name of the parliament building, and the supreme and high courts and other lower courts. It is also a stone's throw away from malls and cafes.

At Victoria, lecturers employ the Socratic teaching method. Lecturers teach by questioning the students, hence it is vital to do at least the foundational readings before each class. It is quite nerve-wrecking speaking from the top of one's head in front of more than fifty other students, but it certainly helps to build courage.

In my first four months in Wellington, I lived in a homely student hall called Victoria House. Even though the house looks small, it provides accommodation for around 175 students. Students living at Victoria House are extremely fortunate to be looked after by a caring but firm warden, a few student deputy wardens who live at Victoria House and are available round the clock, and kitchen staff who cater three meals daily. Although Victoria House is roughly half an hour's walk (at medium speed) from law school, it is only 10 minutes away from the supermarket (it's essential to stock up on snacks during the wintertime when one feels hungry all the time) and cinemas.

One of the upsides of living in a crowded student hall that caters food in a communal dining hall is that one makes friends quickly and easily. This is particularly important for someone like me who arrived in a foreign country not knowing anybody there to begin with. There are several lasting memories that I have of Victoria House. One of them is the irritating but hilarious false alarms. As Wellington is an earthquake zone, most buildings there have hypersensitive fire alarms. At Victoria House, we had two false alarms, one of which occurred at 4 am in the morning. As the alarm is deafening, we had no choice but to drag ourselves out of bed and gather outside the House in the freezing cold. Some of the more unfortunate ones amongst us would sleepily pad around barefoot or be wrapped only in a towel because they were caught in the shower. We would then have to shiver outside groggily while waiting for about three fire engines to pull up and for the firemen to verify that it was only a false alarm. I will also remember indulging in weekend brunches where fried eggs and bacon, and the fluffiest pancakes (with as much maple syrup as you desire) are served in the dining hall.

I was blessed to be introduced by a professor at NUS to two of his friends in Wellington. We would catch up sometimes and they would make sure I was doing all right. They were very kind to drive a friend of mine and I up to the Singapore High Commission in Wellington for a luncheon commemorating Singapore's National Day. It was a very enjoyable afternoon: singing the national anthem and saying the pledge, and meeting other Singaporean students. Another highlight, though, would definitely have to be the spicy Singaporean food we missed so much and were so looking forward to. There were cold, winter days when my Singaporean friend and I would fantasize about spicy, oily and aromatic Singaporean food. Needless to say, we really let ourselves go that day!

My time abroad has certainly opened my mind, inculcated independence and made me appreciate things that I have not before. My short time in Wellington has also caused me to develop something of a sentimental attachment to that place. The space and leisure pace makes it a sweet little place to be.

Dawn is one of our SLA scholars. She is currently pursuing a Law degree at the National University of Singapore



The old government building now housing the law faculty of Victoria University of Wellington.



The Beehive, the controversial New Zealand Parliament building



The breathtaking view at the Singapore High Commission. Pictures are (from left) Diana (the only other Singaporean living at Vic House), Angie (one of the kind friends who drove us up to the Singapore High Commission) and I.



A gathering at my favourite restaurant in Wellington. This is just one of the many Malaysian restaurants in Wellington.