

New Beginnings

A travel reflection by Jennifer Lee, Coro Youth Fellow, Class of 2008-2009

My name is Jennifer Lee and I'm a senior at Balboa High School. I was born and raised in San Francisco and have never lived permanently anywhere else. I've visited Canada and China, but only as small child with my grandparents. During the summer of 2009, I took a trip to New Zealand for seven weeks with the travel scholarship provided by the MatadorTravel.com to 12 Alumni of the Coro Exploring Leadership Program. To be awarded the scholarship I had to write three essays about why I wanted to travel. I was lucky enough to receive the scholarship and I was required to raise \$500 on my own. I am incredibly appreciative of the opportunity provided by Coro and Matador and all of the people that donated to my trip.

Before I left for New Zealand, I was feeling very nervous about it. At times I actually viewed it as more of a burden than a fantastic opportunity to get away. I had a lot of baggage in San Francisco, and so I felt like I was leaving at a very inconvenient time. Little did I know that New Zealand was going to change my life for the better.

My trip was organized by AFS (a non-profit international exchange program) and I arrived to Los Angeles with eight other American teenagers to go to New Zealand with. When we got to New Zealand we camped together for three weeks and went our separate ways to our host families for the remainder of the four weeks. I learned and grew so much from the group that I traveled with for those first three weeks. "We all take different paths in life, but no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere," said Tim McGraw. Today, I am missing them so much. I met such amazing and influential people and I only wish that I could go back and change things. I wish that I was able to fully let loose, be myself, and sincerely enjoy my experience with them during my time with them.

During the three weeks in which I spent with the other American teenagers, we went skiing, canoeing, bungee-jumping, sky-diving, camping, snow caving, bush-whacking, and so much more. I remember canoeing to be the scariest experience for me in New Zealand. My canoe partner and I flipped over twice on the last day of our four-day canoe trip. We were going through the rapids and as much and as hard as we paddled, we were thrown into the water. I remember the initial feeling of falling in. It was so scary! My friend said that she saw my face turn completely white and I was barely able to talk during and after the situation. However, I know that I have grown stronger from that because the second time my canoe partner and I flipped over again, we were so much more confident and knowledgeable in what we were doing.

Coming back to America, I was in such a culture shock. I remember riding the bus with my friend the second day I got back and saying, "Oh, my goodness! It's so diverse here... I really can't believe it!" My friend looked at me like I was crazy.

Being one of the few Asians in New Plymouth, the New Zealand city I lived in for four weeks, was a strange experience for me. I found students at the high school I volunteered at to be surprised by the fact that I was from America and not countries like Thailand and China (I'm Chinese-American). Being in that type of environment made me so grateful to be in the very diverse America today, where it's not so surprising that different ethnic groups co-exist with one another.

I've changed so much since I came back. In the New Zealand airport, I bought this necklace that had a pendant representing new beginnings. I told myself that I'm going to come back to America with a new outlook on life, people, and myself. I really didn't expect this to happen and I feel as though I was scared of letting change take its course. I thought I was content with my life before New Zealand, but I really wasn't. I never had a close relationship with my mom, but being away from her for seven weeks really made me realize how much I miss all the little things I did with her. I used to be angry at her for taking me places or wanting to spend time with me, but in New Zealand, I was craving all those moments I used to hate. Now, I'm a lot more open-minded with her and willing to make positive changes in our relationship.

There's a quote by T.S. Eliot, which said, "It is worth dying to find out what life is." I definitely didn't die, but the trip was a serious mental challenging for me. Like I said, I was battling with some baggage at home. However, going through the whole experience and making it out alive and better than ever, I found the beauty of life. I remember sitting in the Cancer Society office, the place where I volunteered in New Zealand, having an epiphany. Like a creep, I was grinning from ear to ear. I was just so happy! It didn't matter where I was or what I was doing. I was free and independent and that was all that mattered to me. I didn't care or worry about the unnecessary baggage left at home. I didn't need anyone or anything to make me happy. I knew that happiness is a choice that I have to make myself.

I definitely recommend a trip like this to other students my age. Independence is a really big factor in trips that foreign exchange programs offer. It doesn't matter whether or not teenagers are independent or not before the trip because they are able to grow so much afterwards. If they were never independent before, they definitely will be once the trip ends. Everyday, teenagers are in their comfort zones, fulfilling all the basic requirements. We are rarely put in very challenging situations that help us grow, develop, and learn about ourselves and other people. Traveling provides an opportunity for teenagers to clear their minds and experience something totally new. It was truly a life-changing and unforgettable journey.