

RETURN TO THE RUT



PHOTO BY STEFAN FORTMANN

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FRENCH & ENGLISH LITERATURE

The cold January wind whips through your lungs as you lift a night table from the trunk of your old Volvo station wagon and turn to face the door of your unfamiliar West End apartment—your new home for the spring semester since having returned to Elon from studying abroad. You're excited to be back at school, excited to see your friends and excited at the prospect of driving to Cook Out every night for the next three weeks of Winter Term (for some reason, you never saw one Cook Out in Copenhagen, Geneva, Istanbul or wherever you were. Not one.)

The way you feel right now about being home again—that happy, giddy, thank-the-Lord-I'm-back-in-the-land-of-the-free thing? Well, that might not last forever. The Elon Study Abroad webpage calls the initial reaction many undergraduate students experience upon arriving home or back at school the "Honeymoon" phase. It's when you can't wait to be reunited with friends and family you haven't seen in months, and when they can't wait to have you tell them all about your travels. Unfortunately, the "Honeymoon" doesn't last very long, and soon you might find yourself in what the Study Abroad office calls the "Alienation" phase.

Claire Mayo, a Junior at Elon from Knoxville, Tennessee and a double major in French and History writes in her essay "Reverse Culture Shock" about her own "Alienation" phase after returning to school from being abroad in Montpellier, a city on the southern coast of France.

"Because of the differences between France and America, I find reentering the 'bubble' of an American university more difficult than I had anticipated... For instance, the ethnocentricity of the United States shocks me. My peers are more interested in relationship drama rather than the suffering humanity in Somalia or Syria. I find myself seeking out individuals who can hold

intellectual conversations, and the few results from my campaign are hardly encouraging."

Wesley Anne Barden, a junior from Jacksonville, Florida and double major in International Studies and Political Science, experienced similarly resentful feelings upon returning to school, but noticed differences between Elon and her place of study in Cape Town, South Africa that were particular to her personal transition back to life at college.

"My living situation was so different and I lived in a city...it was Cape Town, which is nice, but there are bad parts and I didn't live in a luxurious part. There are homeless people on the side of the road as you walk down the street, and you had to be careful because you could get mugged... Just coming from that and then (being) here (at Elon)... my surroundings were just such an intense part of my experience and here they're not as much."

Barden also commented on how much she missed the people she had met in Cape Town upon arriving back to school.

"I wasn't with Elon students, I was with other students from other schools, and when you're out of your comfort zone like that for so long, you get to know people a lot better more quickly. We got to be really close. Those people (I met) live on the West Coast, but then also I made friends in Kenya and Zambia who, chances are, I'll never see again. When you see them every day, and you talk to them throughout the day and then suddenly they're gone...it was really hard."

Many students who have just re-entered the country or returned to college find themselves grappling with the wide disparities between their American universities and the foreign cities they lost themselves in for four long months. Everything seems less exciting, and everyone else's perspectives on things seem narrower. You start to feel as if none of your friends or family can ever

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truly understand your experiences abroad; like they don't even really care. You feel like you've left something behind, like you're in some weird time warp.

Luckily, it gets better. At least for Mayo and Barden, it has. Mayo concludes at the end of her essay that she has found "home" in several different places, including Elon and Montpellier: "There are people whom I love in each place, and in each location, I have a place where I can settle and construct a very comfortable, happy life." She goes on to admit that she "can never call a single place 'home.' Instead, (she maintains) the viewpoint of a sojourner, who can pick up and move throughout the world with confidence and security."

Barden says it's her fellow Elon travelers who have ultimately helped her to get back into the swing of things. "I think I've readjusted...It was a little weird at first coming into Elon just because of how different it is, but it helps having a friend here who went with me...she kind of went through the same thing. A lot of my other friends studied abroad too in other places and still had that same amazing experience. It's tough to adjust at first, but having people who are experiencing the same emotions makes it a little easier."