

escapes to Las Vegas. But for a kid young to gamble, the memories of the hotel pool.

So, when the four other students who had also decided to stay surprised we take a trip through Patagonia muzzled the nature-hater within. Then I went out and bought pants with a slip of the zipper turned shorts. That's what overseas experience is about, I lectured myself, step out of comfort zones.

Hauling only our backpacks, four of us took a bus to Puerto Montt where we boarded the Navimag ferry, which crosses the Patagonian Channels. The Titanic, only smaller, with a third-class ticket. We had opted for the cheapest fare, which got us bunk beds in the underbelly of the ship. The restroom was shared. Meals were provided only after all the other passengers had eaten. And we were lulled to sleep each night by either a gentle rocking or a nausea-inducing shake, depending on the water's mood.

When we finally reached Puerto Natales after about four days, we were restless to get moving. We loaded our packs with food from a local store, where we

India is a very color conscious society. You can ask Dad about this. He can explain how they are acutely aware of shades of their own color.

way the rest of my make it, we had no back. Night was appetizer of dehydrated

we ever told the rest we didn't see the towed that they and other disappointment where we sense of accomplishment had made it most of For 13 hours, we had comfort zones.

arrived in Ushuaia my pants were a bit we had made its escape.

I buried its mate out of sentimentality for a trip that had changed me and then spent the rest of the time wearing not Timberlands, but shiny red Doc Martens ankle boots.

Like me, they seemed completely inappropriate for this trip. They weren't made for nature, either.

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Instead, I learned this: Nature didn't like me.

The one other pavement-partial woman in our group and I decided to conquer the hike together, and we did, almost. We walked for hours, straining uphill and holding onto a rope at one point to pass along a mountain-side. We shared a can of tuna, no mayo, along the way, and then, just as we approached the end, we lost sight of the trail markers and the other people. After I slid down a steep unmarked path, screaming to my hiking partner that

# G

**ROWING UP, I HAD AN INTEREST IN DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SOCIETIES.** I had a great interest in seeing this place called India that has such rich history and culture but also seems to have this emerging future that everybody's talking about. Once I got to college, I decided to see it for myself rather than just read about it.

I studied at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. I stayed in a home-stay, where you live with a host family as an adopted member. The first interaction I had with my host mother and father: I walked into the apartment, and, when I was waving hello, she looked at me and said, "What part of

## Color Connection

An African American in India learns that shame is skin-deep

BY AUSTIN THOMPSON, as told to Robin Rose Parker

"Africa are you from? Nigeria?" I said, "No, no, I'm American." And she scrunched her face oddly and walked out of the room. I was taken aback. I couldn't understand initially what that was all about until I learned there is a deep, embedded color-grading in India that's probably been there for centuries. Obviously, as an African American, that was a point of contention for me. Sometimes when I would walk around in the markets, there was a sense of awe, which I appreciated. I guess, in the United States, many times I'll walk around, and I can sometimes feel invisible. But there it was the opposite: There was a sense of intrigue that I noticed in other people's eyes. For many of the people, I was probably the first African American



can they had ever seen. Sometimes I also sensed disgust. I had people spit on me as I was walking around the streets. Once when I was walking, some guy came on his bike and ran directly into me, kind of trying to play chicken with me, and he wound up hitting me. We kind of got into an altercation; he knocked me back, but I wouldn't move. I walked away strong, 'cause a lot of people were giggling and laughing around me. But once I got back in my room, just that sense of humiliation was really difficult for me to handle.

I remember when I went to down to the state of Kerala. A group of stu-



**The author in the Hindu holy city of Haridwar along the banks of the Ganges River last spring in India. Above: a waiter serving coffee in Bangalore.**

dents in my study-abroad program would often go on excursions to visit other parts of India. There was a darker guy there; he was a hotel employee, and he would serve us food at lunch and dinnertime. He would also help carry bags from the rooms. He was a Tamil. The Tamils are

a minority ethnic group in India. You find the Tamil people basically doing a lot of migrant labor and some of the menial jobs in different parts of India. They have a history of being socially excluded and are darker in complexion than the dominant group in Indian society. I have a tendency to always smile and carry myself in such a way that I'm friendly to everyone, even the people who are serving me food. So, I think as I was going through the food

TOP PHOTOGRAPH BY ALIAZ RAHI / ASSOCIATED PRESS; BOTTOM COURTESY AUTHOR

line, I made a point to really make eye contact and smile and ask him how he was doing. He would see me and just smile and serve me a little extra of the chickpeas when I would come through with my plate. By the third day, he looked at me and said, "I like you."

Me, being the American I am, I was like: Hey, what's he trying to say? Is he hitting on me? The amount of affection that men show men in America is quite different than they show in India and other parts of the world. But I said, "You know, I like you, too, man," just being a nice guy.

The day before we left, I was leaving my hotel room, and he stopped me. I saw that he had tears in his eyes. And he said, "Same face, same face," pointing to the fact that we were both dark. He started crying, and I started crying, too. The tour guide, who was what you would consider part of the dominant Indian group, told me afterward that people who are my complexion don't dress the way that I dress; they don't exude much confidence. He said, "Austin, you have to realize that here the darker your skin is, the less opportunities, the less ac-

cess [that you have] and the less confidence that many of them display as a result of it." I never saw the guy again; I just hugged him and left. But that image stuck with me, in that my experience wasn't only my own personal experience — that there was someone else who was experiencing what I had experienced, and I think it was vice versa for him.

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## Giving and Receiving

A student in Senegal accepts the gift of a musical instrument and then wonders what he has to offer in return **BY BEN HUBBARD**

**Y**

**ORO BA OWNED ONLY TWO NICE SHIRTS**, but they were always clean and well-pressed. He knew mountains of jokes and was an adept raconteur — whistling, clapping and gesturing as he built to the punch line. He appeared eternally entertained, whether arguing with university colleagues about how to develop Africa or dancing salsa in some seedy nightclub.

Yoro sat down next to me in the cafeteria after he arrived at the Université Gaston Berger in northern Senegal, where I spent my junior year in college. Three hours later, we were still talking, and he became my best friend on campus. I was one of six Americans studying there; he was one of the 3,000 or so Senegalese who had studied their way to the top of their class to earn spots at the university, a smattering of buildings in the desert with shaky plumbing and spotty electricity 30 minutes outside of the former capital of Saint-Louis. The local students wondered why we had

traveled so far to be at their university when they would have sold limbs to go to ours.

Besides class, there wasn't much to do, so we hung out in Yoro's dorm room and listened to music — sometimes mine, sometimes his — talking while he brewed round after round of strong, sweet Senegalese tea. Our conversations often reflected yawning cultural gaps, such as when I tried to explain why I liked Billie Holiday (my music) but not Céline Dion (Yoro's music). They both sing well, Yoro said, but Céline Dion's recordings aren't scratchy. "Yeah," I said, "but Céline Dion is cheesy." Yoro's brow ruffled.

"What is this 'cheesy?'" he asked.

I taught him the word, but he found the concept hard to grasp. What was it that made, say, Phil Collins "cheesy," but not Bob Dylan? I did my best to explain this strange sensibility that I and the other Americans had. He listened, but he never really got it.

Other discussions were more serious,

like when he asked why I and the other Americans had chosen to study in Senegal, of all places. We had our reasons. One woman wanted a fun year before medical school. Another man loved African dance. I had seen the film "The Gods Must Be Crazy" as a kid and had been fascinated with Africa ever since. Together, we sought experiences that our middle-class backgrounds and universities — and American life, in general — couldn't offer.

Again, Yoro listened and asked questions, but I never got the feeling our explanations made any sense to him.

Yoro had other reasons to be at the university. He had left home because his father hoped a degree would help Yoro support his sprawling extended family. In Senegalese culture, Yoro said, family comes first, and one's resources are valued for how they enrich one's community. That community includes friends, we were to learn, who often ask each other for money to fund weddings or build homes.