

# Here's my Study Abroad Story

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**Major:** Government and International Relations; Leadership Studies Sequence

**Program:** Overall, my program consisted of seminar classes, multiple home-stays, many excursions and an independent study project that all revolved around multiculturalism, narratives of identity and issues of human rights in South Africa. The program began with excursions in Johannesburg and Pretoria, the economic and executive capitals of South Africa, to learn about culture and society in the country. Once we settled into Cape Town, "experiential learning" began! SIT's focus on experiential learning meant that classes were more supplements to help us put in context the social and cultural issues and dynamics we encountered through our homestays and every day interactions. Our classes examined issues in contemporary South Africa through the prisms of three distinct cultural identities: the Xhosa, the Afrikaners (the descendants of the Dutch settlers), and people considered "colored". "Colored" is a term unique to contemporary South Africa. It is not necessarily a derogatory term. In its basic form, it means that under apartheid, you were neither white nor black. We had rigorous language courses in IsiXhosa and some for basic Afrikaans. I stayed with four distinct home-stays where I saw, heard and was a part of real-life issues concerning the cultural groups and people. I stayed with an urban Xhosa family in Langa, the oldest township in the Cape Town area, a rural Xhosa family in Tshabo, a village near East London in the Eastern Cape, an Afrikaner family in Stellenbosch, world famous wine country and a Muslim-influenced colored family in Bo-Kaao. The program also had numerous excursions, both for fun and for additional experiential learning. We took a trip to the Cape of Good Hope (the most southwest point in the African continent), toured the District 6 museum, spent a weekend in Simonstown (home of the African penguin!), camped in Khwatuu, a cultural center for Khoisan culture, toured vineyards in Stellenbosch and Franschoek, boated to Robben Island (where Nelson Mandela was held for most of his imprisonment) and so much more! Things culminated with an independent study project on an approved topic of my choice. Because I was there during the 20th anniversary of democracy in South Africa, I did my project on the upcoming elections and interviewed Cape Townians on issues important to them as well as public leadership.



**Typical Day:** Because our homestays were so distinct, there was no such thing as a typical day! During my stay in Langa, the most ordinary day began around 7:30am, where after breakfast with my 7 and 9 year old host brothers and mother, I was picked up for school and the day's programming. Around 5:30pm, I returned to Langa for dinner with my host family. I played with my host-brothers and their friends throughout the township, watched *Generations* with my host-mother and chatted with my older host-brother and his friends. In Tshabo, I helped my host mother with various chores, such as feeding the chickens or tending to the garden, and visited different residents throughout the village. In Stellenbosch, after classes and programming at University of Stellenbosch, I often grabbed lunch with a friend at different cafés to do schoolwork together and frequented the bars and pubs with my neighbor and his friends from the university. Because Bo-Kappi was so situated in the city, I often went into town with my older host brother and returned home for a late dinner of chicken tikka from the local street vendor with my rambunctious younger host-siblings! My host-mother also was a guide for visitors and tourists into Bo-Kaap, and I helped her with her cooking demos. During the weekends, we would go catch the local Bo-Kaap SKW rugby game at Greenpoint.

**Highlights:** There are way too many to list, but if I had to name one, it would be my independent study project (ISP). During ISP, all of the students are cast-off on their own to pursue a research project on an approved topic of their choice. I decided to do my ISP on the upcoming elections and Cape Townians' perceptions of their public leaders and issues. As a result, I traveled back to the neighborhoods and rekindled relationships with my host families and the friends that I made. I reconnected with the communities that I have fallen in love with. Traveling independently for independent study also allowed me to master the taxi ranks and trains and explore the different hole-in-the-wall places in each area. It also freed me to enjoy the pleasures that only Cape Town can offer such as hiking up Table Mountain or having a *braai* with friends.



**Challenges:** South Africa was, unsurprisingly, very different from the U.S., so I had to adjust. This was especially true with "things that are there but not really there". For example, internet access is widely available in South Africa, but not as widely accessible or as equipped. This frustrated me when I was researching or just catching up on my emails and blog. It really forced me to appreciate just being unplugged for a while. Furthermore, despite being one of the wealthiest countries on the continent, poverty is extremely widespread. Because I was clearly American, those on the streets would be more persistent and desperate in asking me for alms, even for job opportunities. Although I wanted to help, I struggled with the impact that I could have during my relatively short stay. More broadly, I had to keep in mind that my singular experience in SA was not reflective of how everyone lived and experienced the country. Because I was a man of east Asian descent, I was lucky to not be as concerned when I was staying out late and was able to be somewhat above the fray from the country's racial tensions. I had to realize that this wasn't the case for everyone and I had to be more cognizant and open minded.

**Advice:** Try everything! When I landed, I had absolutely no idea what to expect, so I aimed to be open minded and to put myself out there. Having this attitude really was the smartest choice I made. It didn't just push me to try new things, like taking a bite out of a "smiley" (broiled sheep's head that is eaten during certain Xhosa occasions) or to go pet wild cheetahs. It also allowed me to ask blunt questions and connect with the South Africans I encountered on an interpersonal level. Of course, safety is a concern in Cape Town, but don't let fear prevent you from fully experiencing the beauty of Cape Town!