

Here's my Study Abroad Story

Caitlin Highland SIT Multiculturalism and Human Rights Cape Town, South Africa

Major: Government and International Relations

Program: In my program, we took classes on multiculturalism and human rights in South Africa. Aside from our discussion on rights, we focused on three cultural identities: the Afrikaners (the descendants of the Dutch settlers), the Xhosa, and people considered "colored" (to be clear, "colored" is a very different term in South Africa. It means that under apartheid you were not or would not have been considered black, white, or Indian, and is not a derogatory word). Most of our language study was focused on Xhosa, but we learned some Afrikaans as well. We participated in four homestays to complement our language skills and cultural learning: one with an urban Xhosa family, one with a rural Xhosa family, one with an Afrikaner family in wine country, and one with a Muslim colored family in Cape Town. I also did excursions to the Cape of Good Hope, Simon's Town, Johannesburg, the Indian ocean, a Khoisan cultural learning center, and more. The program focuses on "experiential learning." This means that our program's classes were taught in part to emphasize and help us comprehend what we were experiencing in our homestays and our other experiences. Because of this emphasis, we also went on a lot of excursions, to museums, monuments, and places like Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for most of his sentence. Our final month, students arrange for their own housing and conduct an independent study project on an approved topic of their choice.



Typical Day: Because my program traveled so much and focused on experiential learning—such as field trips to museums or important sites—there really was no such thing as a "typical day." However, students all live near each other, and until the last homestay, transportation is arranged and picks you up between 7:30-8 AM. Once students arrive at the program center, we were usually given time to run errands to go to the gym, as some of our homestays were in areas where this was not possible. We typically had classes Monday-Friday from 9:30 am to 5 PM, with plenty of breaks and excursions to keep things interesting. Lunch is on your own, but the program provides a stipend. After class, I would grab coffee with friends or head straight to my homestay, where I would visit with my homestay family.

We would chat, eat delicious dinner, and watch *soaps*—South African soap operas (Be sure to watch *Generations* and *Rhythm City!*). It sounds like a long and early day, but South African families tend to go to sleep earlier than American families, so it mostly just entails an adjustment in sleeping patterns. A few weekends had planned events, such as excursions to Simon’s Town or Robben Island, but most of the time we were on our own. There are some incredible open air markets in Cape Town and Stellenbosch—the Old Biscuit Mill and Green Market square are my favorites! There are also great museums, beautiful beaches, exciting hikes, and delicious restaurants. During my homestays, I would try to go out with my host family and spend as much time with them as possible, but during independent study period I tended to explore these things with my friends, both American and South African.

Highlights: It’s so hard to choose! I loved having four different homestays, though. I feel as though it really helped me see a more comprehensive South Africa. My homestay families were so welcoming as well. My rural host family spoke very little English, but through my minimal Xhosa and their English we formed a much stronger bond than you would expect. I still text one of the sisters! The other families all spoke fluent English, so we were able to learn so much about each other’s lives. I supplemented my homestay experience during independent study period by moving in with a few people from my program and a large group of South African college students. Because I had not yet met other South African college students, I really enjoyed seeing this part of life as well—although you definitely have to be careful when moving into a house of strangers! Another highlight was when Orlando Bloom asked me if I needed help climbing down a steep part of a mountain, but that has nothing to do with the program, I suppose.



Challenges: Although South Africa is not nearly as different from the United States as people may think, there are still certain aspects that were hard to adjust to. Crime rates can be pretty high, and some areas of Cape Town are dangerous. I could never be out past 4 PM by myself, and I always needed to be with guys after dark. Even being extremely careful, I was pickpocketed. You need to learn what areas to avoid. Sexism is also more obviously rampant there. If you are a woman walking alone or with other women, you will get catcalled incessantly, and that is the best case scenario. That could be frustrating at times, but it was also a great learning experience, and the program gave us a lot of advice on how to deal with these issues.

Advice: Don’t be afraid! At the beginning of each homestay or living situation, I would feel nervous, but they were all so incredible and open. I learned so much from all of them, and they served as a great support system when something I saw surprised me. You should definitely try stepping out of your comfort zone as well. I tried so many things I normally wouldn’t, from eating tripe to petting a cheetah. Everything worked out in the end. Finally, be safe. South Africa can be portrayed really negatively in the media, and I want to explain that it is so much more than the crime rates you read about. It is a vibrant, diverse, complex, wonderful country but, like any country, it has its problems. Safety should always come first.