

Here's my Study Abroad Story

Louisa Dunwiddie SIT Uganda: Development Studies Kampala, Uganda

Major: Philosophy, Politics, and Economics

Program: We spent the first several months of my program studying development in and out of the classroom. Like all SIT programs, my semester was focused on experiential learning; as such, we complemented our lectures with excursions and site visits. In Kampala, we visited factories, the Parliament building, waste facilities, wetlands, museums, and slums. As a group, we also traveled both to Western Uganda to do a rural homestay and visit sites like the Millennium Village Project and Queen Elizabeth National Park, and to Rwanda to compare development practices.



Typical Day: I truly had no "typical day" because of the way SIT programs are structured. While we were living in Kampala, I was in school from about 8:30 to 5. My family woke up for prayers around 6:15, so I would get up with them, leaving for school around 7 am. We had Luganda class until lunch, when we were free to get food on our own. After lunch, we usually had a guest lecture on Ugandan history or development theory, or our Academic Director would run a discussion to prepare us for our Practicum and conducting research in Uganda. After school, I took a taxi home, and spent time with my family. A usual evening included hours of soap operas dubbed in Luganda, a little homework (usually my 9 year old sister would help me with it), and a late dinner before bathing in my bucket outside and going to sleep. During the last six weeks when I was writing my practicum, days varied drastically. I lived in a national park for three weeks, conducting interviews and exploring, and I lived in an apartment with some friends on the program for the other three weeks.

Highlights: I loved my entire experience in Uganda which makes it difficult to pick one thing, but if I had to choose I think it would be the homestay experience. My family was unbelievably welcoming; my parents would introduce me to others as their daughter, and treated me the same way they treated their other children. We spent a lot of time with my extended family, going to birthdays, engagement parties, and weddings. I was so much more immersed in Ugandan culture because I lived with them and I know that I learned much more Luganda than I would have otherwise. When I moved out, they called every couple of days to check on me, and I had dinner with them at least once a week.

Challenges: Living in Uganda was extremely different than living in the United States, and some of these differences made it uncomfortable or challenging at times. I didn't usually have access to a shower or toilet, and I hand-washed all of my clothes. When walking on the street, I was constantly yelled at and stared at, and often approached or followed. I could never "turn it off" or blend in, and while it was usually fun, it was also exhausting and sometimes frustrating. Theft is common; while the program provides guidance on how to avoid these problems, nearly all of the students had something stolen at one point or another. I also got sick, as did many of my friends. Ugandan health care leaves much to be desired, so dealing with those issues was also a low point of the semester. That being said, I came out of all of these experiences with much more self-confidence. My program provided great support when I needed it, and I'm really glad I went through everything I did.



Advice: Everything will be fine. I was incredibly nervous before leaving, largely because of the "unknown" aspect of study abroad – I felt like I had no idea what my life would be like. Although moving so beyond your comfort zone is scary, for me, it was the best part of studying abroad. I was surprised by my own ability to adapt to challenging and new situations, and to live and travel on my own, feelings that I simply couldn't have gotten any other way.