

Rwanda: Post-Genocide Restoration and Peacebuilding

Country Overview & Packing Guidelines

Spring 2025

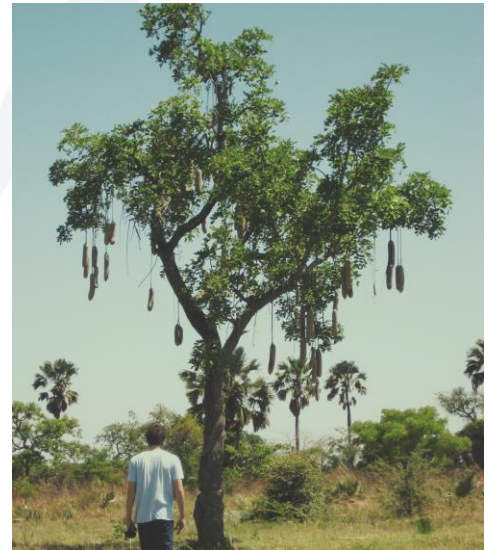
Country Overview

GENERAL INFORMATION

Rwanda, one of the smallest countries in the world, is comparable in size to Haiti or the U.S. state of Maryland, with a population of 13.2 million, making it one of the most densely populated nations. Predominantly rural, over 80% of Rwandans rely on subsistence agriculture, which supplies the food for cities and towns.

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi deeply affected the country, and since then, there has been a deliberate effort to foster a unified Rwandan identity, moving away from past ethnic divisions. The national language is Kinyarwanda, spoken by everyone, with English and French also commonly used. Some people in urban areas may speak Kiswahili. While Kinyarwanda is dominant, English and French are often used in official and business settings.

Kigali, the capital, is modernizing rapidly and is known for its cleanliness and safety. It hosts a diverse population, including people from neighboring countries and Western expatriates. While many Western comforts are available, they often come at higher prices.



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CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Rwanda's climate is temperate due to its high elevation, resembling coastal California. Rainfall typically occurs from April to May and in October/November. The Virunga Mountains in the northwest are colder due to their elevation, while the eastern plains transition into rolling hills. Known as the "land of 1,000 hills," Rwanda's geography is defined by its mountainous terrain, with elevations affecting local temperatures and weather conditions.

KIGALI: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)				
JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
73/66	73/66	73/66	73/66	73/66
SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	
77/66	75/66	73/66	73/64	

LOCAL CUSTOMS

In Rwanda, greetings are highly valued, and beginning a conversation without one is often seen as impolite. Before COVID-19, a light handshake was the standard greeting, with hugs or cheek kisses reserved for close acquaintances. Since the pandemic, social distancing has become more common. Common greetings include "Muraho" (how are you?), "Mwaramutse" (good morning), and "Mwiriwe" (good afternoon). Rwandans generally appreciate efforts to speak Kinyarwanda, and even if your pronunciation is not perfect, people tend to respond warmly.

Rwandans place a strong emphasis on appearance, especially in public. It is important to dress neatly, as shabby or dirty clothes are frowned upon. When walking in Kigali, use designated walkways and avoid stepping on well-maintained lawns. Additionally, plastic bags are banned in Rwanda, so avoid bringing them into the country.

IDENTITY

SIT creates an inclusive and safe space on our programs for students of all identities. Your experience in various cultural contexts beyond SIT spaces may be influenced by how certain identities are perceived locally. We encourage students to do research and utilize resources available to you to better prepare yourself for your experience abroad. Visit our [Identity Abroad](#) page for resources on how to get started.



In Rwanda, cultural perceptions of identity can vary, especially regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals. While same-sex relationships are not illegal, public expression of LGBTQIA+ identities can be socially sensitive, and open displays of affection between same-sex couples are uncommon. Though discrimination may not be overt, there can be subtle stigmas, particularly in rural areas where traditional values are stronger. Resources for LGBTQIA+ individuals are limited, and it is advised to approach these topics with discretion.

For BIPOC students, Rwanda generally offers a welcoming environment, as the country is predominantly Black and has a strong focus on unity and reconciliation. Religious freedom is widely respected, and there is peaceful coexistence among various faiths, though it is important to adhere to local customs such as modest dress in religious settings. While Rwanda is largely inclusive, students should remain aware of these cultural nuances and use available resources to navigate identity-related issues.

DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in country. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.

In Rwanda, the diet is primarily tropical, featuring staples such as plantains, rice, potatoes, and cassava. A variety of beef and chicken stews, peanuts, beans, peas, steamed vegetables, and fruits are commonly enjoyed. While vegetarian options may lack tofu, there is still a diverse selection available. Meals are typically served at specific times: breakfast from 6:30 to 8:00 AM, lunch from 12:00 to 2:00 PM, and dinner from 8:00 to 10:30 PM. Kigali boasts a vibrant restaurant scene with influences from Indian, Chinese, and Italian cuisines, alongside traditional African dishes, so students should be ready to explore and enjoy new flavors.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform the office of Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing prior to the start of your program (studenthealth@sit.edu). We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience.

SIT recommends you do research prior to departure about the health, safety, and security specifics of the country(ies) you plan to visit. Consult the [U.S. Department of State](#) website and search their [Countries and Areas Archive](#) for international travel information and current travel advisories for each country. Search the Center for Disease Control [Traveler's Health](#) page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country(ies) you plan to visit.

SIT recommends doing research ahead of time to stay up to date on It will be critical that you educate yourself about the potential health and safety hazards that may exist in your areas of travel and make informed decisions about what preventative measures to take prior to departure. You should also reference the Health, Access, and Identity information on your program's [webpage](#).

If you have any questions, please reach out to the [Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team](#).

Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, health and personal property insurance, and general program tips, please read the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document and [Student Handbook](#).

HOMESTAYS

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what

constitutes a “home” may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities, and expectations.

The program’s homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**

We seek to foster increased cross-cultural understanding in students by immersing them in local culture through daily life in a new family and community. Students are expected to assume roles as family members, respecting and following host family norms around communications, visitors, and activities of daily living.



On this program, you will be staying in one homestay family around Kigali city. You will be given your individual room, but you are likely to share a bathroom with other members of the family. Also, some families do not have free wifi and those who do, it may not be strong enough, that’s why students are assisted to get alternative internet connection.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Students should expect to share a room with one or more students during orientation/launch and while on excursions.

During excursions, students can expect to stay in basic and clean local hotels. Accommodations will vary, with options including single rooms, twin rooms, or dormitory-style arrangements. Some accommodations may feature self-contained rooms, while others will have shared bathroom facilities. During orientation week and the

Independent Study Project (ISP) period, students will reside at the SIT apartment, which provides a comfortable and convenient base for their activities.

TRANSPORTATION

While in Kigali, students will primarily use public transportation to commute between their homestays and the program office. This may include private hires, referred to as special hires or "tagisi vatiri." Orientation will provide essential information about navigating the local transportation system, with additional support from homestay families, guesthouses, hotels, and local bus operators. Typically, passengers pay their fare to the operators before departure, and vehicles wait until they are full before leaving. Students can expect their daily commute to class to take between 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the distance from their homestay to the program office.

COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

Visit our [Contact & Communication](#) page for practices on program communication, emergency communication, and home institution communication.

PHONES AND INTERNET

[Cell Phone Policy](#)

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from wi-fi. During orientation SIT staff assist students in purchasing a local SIM card and acquiring minutes for calls and texting. Failure to maintain a working phone capable of making and receiving calls/texts will be considered a conduct violation and a breach of SIT student code.

PHONE RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Timing:** It is advisable to arrange for your cell phone and data plan during orientation.

- **General Costs:**
 - **Local SIM Card:** Typically costs around \$1-\$2.
 - **Data Plans:** Prices may vary; expect to spend approximately \$15-\$30 per month depending on your usage.
- **Pros and Cons:**
 - **Pros:** Local rates are generally more affordable, and having a working phone ensures better safety and communication.
 - **Cons:** If you rely solely on a phone plan without Wi-Fi, costs may add up.

INTERNET ACCESS

SIT provides Wi-Fi access during posted hours at the program center. Additionally, students can access the internet at various cafes and internet cafes around Kigali, where rates are quite affordable (approximately \$0.50 per hour). Some coffee shops also offer free Wi-Fi with a purchase.

- **USB Modem:** Students may consider purchasing a USB modem for internet access on the go, costing around \$30. However, be aware that the internet speed may be slower than what you are used to in the US.
- **Email Recommendations:** Establish an email account with a webmail service that is not graphics-heavy to ensure better performance.
- Please keep in mind that internet access can be unreliable, particularly in rural areas or during your internship, where connectivity may be limited or non-existent. Therefore, it is essential to inform family and friends that you might not be able to check emails daily, and they should not be alarmed by delayed responses.

COMMUNICATION AND TIME CONSIDERATIONS

During the program's orientation, specific details regarding communication methods will be discussed. Be aware of the time differences and daylight-saving changes, which may affect when you can contact home for safe arrival confirmations. [The SIT program center provides internet access.]

MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible



for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged. Mailing prescription medication abroad is illegal.

For this program, **DHL, FedEx, UPS** services are available in country. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

If it is necessary for someone to send you mail then posted letters and packages should be sent to the following address:

SIT c/o [Student Name]
KG 653 Street, No. 3
Kimihurura Sector
Gasabo District
Kigali
Rwanda

MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any, and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only, based on the cost of living at the program base. **Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP are the students' responsibility.** Please plan accordingly.

Rwanda's currency is the Rwandan Franc (Amafaranga), with the highest banknote being 5,000 Francs. Cash is primarily used for daily transactions, while checks, traveler's checks, and credit/debit cards are rarely accepted. However, due to COVID-19, the Rwandan government encourages cashless payments, primarily through Mobile Money services. Program staff will assist you in registering for Mobile Money to facilitate payments.

- **Cash and Traveler's Checks:** Traveler's checks are rarely accepted and often yield poor exchange rates. Small bills (up to \$20) also face similar issues. It is advisable to have multiple sources of funds: a credit card (preferably VISA or MasterCard) and cash for emergencies. If you need additional funds sent while in Rwanda, Western Union is a reliable option.
- **Cash Storage:** You can keep your cash in a safe at the SIT office in Kigali.

Check current exchange rates: <http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, ISP/Internship-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages**.

The suggested total amount of personal spending money to budget is about \$1300. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned ISP or a specific personal expense.

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending (from past student suggestions): 350 USD

Books, printing, supplies:	100 USD
Up-front medical costs:	500 USD
Potential ISP travel expenses:	200 USD
Visa:	50 USD
Typical Internet café usage:	100 USD
Estimated total:	1300 USD

Please note that up-front medical costs can vary widely. Though you are completely covered by SIT's travel insurance GeoBlue, which you can read more about on our [Participant Insurance](#) page, you still may need to pay up-front for medical care and then file for reimbursement.

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the [Attendance and Participation Policy](#).

If a visitor does come while a program is in progress, they must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Please read our full [Independent Travel](#) policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Please note that independent travel is only allowed during program free time and students will not be excused from program activities to travel. SIT is not responsible for any costs of student independent travel including logistics, preparations, cancelation fees, change fees, and any other costs associated with independent travel. We highly recommend you wait to book any independent travel until AFTER arriving on program and receiving the final academic schedule from your program.



During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist.

CODE OF CONDUCT AND POLICIES

SIT maintains a [Code of Conduct](#) and clear institutional [policies](#) regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. Visit the policy page for detailed policies around academic integrity, alcohol and drug use, anti-harassment and non-discrimination, attendance and participation, credit hours, equal education opportunities, grading, housing, independent travel, prohibited activities, religious holiday observance, sexual harassment and misconduct, and withdrawal among others.

Packing Guidelines

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad. We recommend a small daypack, which will also be useful for short excursions when on the program.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the “General Health Tips” section in the Safety, Security, and Health pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (<http://www.tsa.gov>) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Rwandans pay a lot of attention to how they dress. Therefore, sloppy clothes or clothes with immodest pictures or writing on them may generate unwanted attention or negative judgments towards one's character. Revealing clothing, such as shorts or shirts with a low neckline, is inappropriate for both females and males. All clothing should be modest: shirts should cover the waist (no crop tops, sleeveless shirts, or bikinis), skirts should cover knees, and clothing should not be see-through. Flip-flops made of rubber are for bathroom use **ONLY**; people don't wear them on the street. The key guide to acceptable and appropriate dress is business casual. Night temperatures tend to drop especially at higher elevations. Therefore, you will need a light coat or fleece, and waterproof rainwear. An umbrella is absolutely recommended!

It is **not** acceptable to attend lectures, meetings with government representatives, memorial sites, or other official functions in shorts and t-shirts. Men should pack collared shirts and slacks as well as nicer jeans. Women should bring skirts that cover the knees and blouses or other shirts that respect the guidelines above, smart casual pants and jeans are also acceptable for women. Please note that you may buy additional clothing after you arrive, but clothing may be more expensive than in the US. For shoes, you are advised to bring comfortable but nice-looking shoes since you will always have to do some walking from the guest house to the program center or other places. During the rural excursions, shoes that completely cover your feet are always recommended.

COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is recommended that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft (SIT insurance does not cover personal property).

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters.
<http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>.

GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in.

Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

Be aware that families in Rwanda might have as many as six children, some might be young children and others might be teenagers. It is NOT expected that you bring a present for each single person; you might want to think of gifts that can be shared – like a soccer ball for example. Also, you will be able to buy items in Kigali.



WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Personal items such as tampons, sanitary napkins, soap, body lotion, shampoo, contact solution, deodorant, and face wash are available but they may not be quite suitable to your needs and may be somewhat expensive. You may wish to bring a sufficient quantity for your entire stay or use what is locally available. Plan to bring hand-washable clothes. Bring an extra pair of your glasses or contacts lenses. Be sure to bring contact lens solution to last the semester. In addition, bring your prescription in case you need it.

Please try to produce as little trash as possible. Therefore, unwrap anything you bought new and leave the wrappers back home. Also, think about the environment in regards to your personal hygiene – for example, mosquito repellent wipes or baby wipes pollute the environment and are better left at home. **Don't bring plastic bags as they are prohibited in Rwanda.**

ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: <https://studyabroad.sit.edu/admissions-aid/application-process/contact-a-former-student/>. Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

Packing List

These packing guidelines are **based** on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

CLOTHING

- 3-4 nice outfits (including skirts with hemlines below the knee but not necessarily too long; dresses; slacks; dress shirts; ties; blazers)
- 4-5 pairs of lightweight casual pants, trousers, khakis, or jeans
- 1-2 pairs of comfy pants for cold weather
- 4-6 light fabric blouses/polo shirts/collared shirts
- 1 pair of nice shoes
- supportive tennis shoes or sneakers
- 1 pair of comfortable sandals (not flip-flops)
- 2-6 pairs of socks
- 1 wedding appropriate dress/clothing
- Leggings
- 2-4 t-shirts/conservative tank tops (it is ok to show shoulders)
- 1 pair Knee-length bottoms/capris
- pullover or light sweater
- light, waterproof jacket and umbrella
- one-piece bathing suit (no bikinis!)
- underwear (one or two-week supply)
- medium-weight wool/polar fleece sweater (for cool nights)
- shower shoes
- 1 “workout” outfit (optional, could include sports bras, t-shirt/conservative shorts for jogging/sports)
- pajamas or similar sleepwear

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- Yellow WHO Card (see the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document for more information. Please note that you can also take the yellow fever vaccine in Kigali)
- Proof of COVID-19 Vaccine encouraged
- Three photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Photocopy of visa (*if applicable*)
- Note: pay close attention to permits documents

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- medication/prescriptions used regularly
- good quality thermometer for taking your temperature - important for those who have chronic health conditions and need to check their health status often. (Please note that the program has one that can be used during excursions or while at the office site)
- aspirin or other pain reliever, cold medication/decongestant
- anti-diarrheal medicine (e.g. Imodium)/laxatives

- eye drops and eyewash
- travel sickness medicine if you are prone to motion sickness
- sunscreen/Solarcaine spray and Aloe Vera
- band aids/antiseptic/antibacterial cream
- preferred ibuprofen brand
- preferred hair products
- Feminine products (can also be found in Kigali)
- Laxatives
- Tums
- deodorant, soap, and shampoo (for the whole semester or bring a small quantity and plan to buy more locally)
- mosquito repellent (one bottle)
- vitamin supplements (if you take them)
- hand wipes and/or antibacterial hand wash
- malaria prophylaxis (enough for the entire semester)
- allergy medicine (bring enough since you might not find them in local pharmacies)
- dental floss
- tissue
- mouthwash

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- water bottle
- student ID from your home college/university
- daypack or book/shoulder bag
- light raincoat—something that folds up small
- contact solution (expensive in country)
- money belt large enough for passport
- homestay gifts (For day visits; please note that Rwandan adults don't like sweets)
- Umbrella

OPTIONAL

- photos of your family, friends, and small portable book about your state (for day visits with homestay families)
- pocket sewing kit
- sunglasses, if you use them
- snacks
- lock and key
- Make up
- Ziploc bags (a few)
- Camera
- Mirror
- small sound recorder for practicum/ISP (if you think you may want to record things)
- granola bars/energy snacks
- powdered drinking mix
- flash drive
- converters/adapters
- pens (several) and notebooks that suit your writing needs and style