

# Kenya: Public Health in the Tropics Internship

## Country Overview & Packing Guidelines Spring 2026

### Country Overview

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

Kisumu, your program base, is the third largest city in Kenya, after Nairobi and Mombasa. The Luo are the major ethnic group in Kisumu with a large population of Kenyans of Indian origin. English and Kiswahili are widely spoken especially in the metropolis. Like most cities, Kisumu has various social and economic amenities including malls, banks, ATMs, indigenous and foreign restaurants.

#### CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Kisumu lies astride the equator. The main rainy season typically occurs April - May with a second, lesser one in October - November. Kisumu and the coastal and lake areas are hot and humid most of the time.

#### [Kisumu]: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)

MAY	JUNE	JULY
82/63	82/63	82/61

#### LOCAL CUSTOMS

Local customs will be explained in greater detail during orientation and throughout the semester, but here are a few to get you started:

- In Kisumu, greetings are an essential part of social interaction. It is customary to greet people before beginning any conversation. A common greeting is “Hujambo?” (How are you?), with the response “Sijambo.” Handshakes are widely practiced and appreciated.
- Respect is a core value in Kenyan and Luo culture. Younger individuals are expected to show deference to elders through polite language and behavior. Humility, courtesy, and attentiveness are highly valued in social interactions.
- When invited to a local home, it is customary to wash your hands before eating. Meals are often a communal experience, and you may eat using your hands, especially when sharing traditional dishes. Follow your host’s lead.
- It is polite to try the foods that are offered to you as a sign of appreciation. If you do not enjoy a particular dish, you may decline politely and explain that the taste is new to you.
- Food is often shared among family members and sometimes neighbors, reflecting strong community ties. Avoid wasting food, but feel free to ask for more if you are still hungry—this is generally welcomed.

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- If you are staying with a host family, observe and follow their guidance regarding daily routines, including appropriate times and places to go out, especially in the evening.
- Households in Kisumu vary in size, but many include extended family members, reflecting the communal nature of Kenyan family life.

## LOCAL 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.

A staple food in Kisumu and across western Kenya is ugali, a firm maize meal like stiff porridge dish typically eaten with vegetables, fish, or meat stews. Given Kisumu's location along Lake Victoria, fresh fish is a common and important part of the local diet. Fresh tropical fruits and vegetables are plentiful and relatively cheap, so following a vegetarian diet is not too difficult. Veganism, depending on the type of vegan commitment, is difficult but can be upheld. Rice, fish or meat curry, green vegetables (kales, collards, *mchicha*), beans, and millet are also popular staple foods.

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](mailto: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 on your program's [predeparture page](#).

## ACCOMMODATION

Students will be housed in two or three bedroomed apartments for the entire duration of the program. Each apartment has a shared living room and kitchen. Apartments are located within walking distance of the program center.

## TRANSPORTATION

You will likely use public transport such as taxis or minivans called “matatus” or a “tuk tuk,” a three-wheeled vehicle with an enclosed cabin for passengers common in Kisumu. The public transport systems do not have a central governing body or a website. Additional information about local travel will be provided during orientation.



## 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. If needed, during orientation SIT staff can 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 our student code.



## 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 Kenya**. 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:

Student Name  
C/O SIT Kenya  
Post Office Box 7286 – 40100  
Adala Otuko Road (Behind St. Joseph's Catholic Church)  
Kisumu  
KENYA  
[+254 721 989 281]

## MONEY

You will be able to access your cash in Kenya Shillings through local ATMs. Visa Credit/Debits cards are also widely accepted but you should notify your bank about your travel abroad. Dollar bills can be exchanged but they should be larger bills (US\$50 and US\$100 denominations) and be clean, issued post 2016, and be free of any damage and markings.

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.

We suggest that you budget between US\$600 to \$800 for out-of-pocket costs not covered by the Tuition and Housing Fees. 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. Please carefully consider your personal spending habits when creating your out-of-

pocket expense budget. Some items to consider are textbooks, Field Study Project or Internship-related expenses (if applicable) not covered by the program, interpretation services, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Use the average estimates below as a guide to help you plan for out-of-pocket expenses.

<b>Personal spending (from past student suggestions):</b>	100-200 USD
<b>Up-front medical costs:</b>	500 USD
<b>Estimated total:</b>	600-800 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 internship. 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

Casual dress can include jeans, sneakers, and occasionally T-shirts, as long as they are clean and free of holes. More formal occasions (of which there will be several) call for neat, pressed, dark colored slacks, pressed, button-up shirts (long or short sleeve), and leather dress shoes (penny loafers or lace-ups) or dress sandals. Flamboyantly colorful, Hawaiian-style shirts or guayaberas can be worn semi-formally in Kenya, so long as they are clean and pressed, and have a collar and buttons. A variety of colorful slip-over shirts are available here. Kenyans consider shorts to be appropriate for schoolboys and playing sports, but not for casual wear by adult males. Shirts with sleeves, whether short or long, are required. Ties and jackets are not required but it is a good idea to have one of each.

Whatever you do not pack, you can probably get in Kenya.

## EQUIPMENT

Mosquito nets are available in Kenya and cost about \$10 USD. But should you decide to bring one, it should be of the self-supporting variety. One recommendation is a Skeeter Defeater, though some students prefer a net that wraps around you, so you do not have to tuck in the edges. Both are available through Travel Medicine, Inc. at [www.travmed.com](http://www.travmed.com). You only need to bring a sleeping bag if you plan to camp on your own after the program. If you plan to climb the mountains or travel through cold countries, you will need a heavier bag. These are usually available in Nairobi either retail or secondhand but there is no guarantee that you will get the bag you want, at the time you need it.

The program provides bottled water during all excursions and clean bottled water can be purchased nearly everywhere in Kenya. However, if you wish to avoid the use of plastic water bottles for environmental reasons, you may bring a portable water filter, which can be used in Kisumu and during excursions. The brands past students recommend are the 'system pack' which you can find at: <http://www.steripen.com> and the MSR Miniworks EX water filter which can be found at [www.msrgear.com](http://www.msrgear.com). If you purchase the SteriPEN, be certain to bring spare batteries for it because you might not be able to find replacement batteries in Kenya. You should also bring a small travel towel. If later on you need a big towel, you can buy it in any supermarket or *mitumba* markets.



## COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is strongly 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/>. Kenya's voltage is 240 and has the electrical outlet that uses the Type G plug adapter.

## 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.

Former students have recommended calendars, picture books, postcards, music, or souvenirs from your college bookstore as gifts.

## WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Items readily available in Kenya include: soap, shampoo, toothpaste, tampons, pads, moisturizers, deodorant, most prescription medications and some familiar over-the-counter medications. However, particular brands of certain toiletries may not be available. One example is deodorant; most brands available in the US are not available here.

## 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

- 1 waterproof raincoat and umbrella (poncho is recommended).
- 1 outfit for hiking/outdoorsy activities.
- 5-7 pairs of socks.
- 4-6 sports bras and 2 or 3 regular bras.
- Chacos/Tevas/athletic sandals.
- 1 pair of sneakers or other casual good walking shoes.
- Hiking boots if you plan to hike, but sneakers are sufficient.

### TRAVEL ITEMS

- 1 Duffel bag that can fold for storage or
- 1-2 large, checked suitcase
- 1 Backpack
- 1 Carry-on size bag for trips
- 2 Towels.
- 1 Sim or non sim compatible phone.

### STATIONERY

- Notebooks that fit in your dap pack or fanny pack.
- Good pens that you like to write with.

### NUTRITION AND HEALTH

- Travel size toiletries unless you care for brands.
- Snacks you are used to, e.g. good granola bars.
- Dark chocolate.
- Protein bars.
- At least 3 bottles of SPF 50 sunscreen even if you have dark skin.
- 2 canisters of bug spray
- General cold medicine (1 DayQuil and 1 NyQuil)
- 1 box of decongestant.
- Pepto Bismol or other digestive relief/acid reflux
- Hydrocortisone cream.
- Antibiotic cream.
- Band aids.
- Tylenol and Advil (bring one acetaminophen and one ibuprofen.
- Menstruating products for your comfort as needed.
- Durable water bottle without straw; don't worry about bringing a water filter or a water bottle with a filtration system.

## OTHER ESSENTIAL ITEMS.

- Laptop computer.
- Headphones or earbuds or ear plugs.
- Items to make you feel comfortable sitting on an airplane, for example, book, crossword puzzles, sudoku
- A pillowcase is recommended if you feel you need one suited to your needs e.g. if you have sensitive skin.
- A good sleep mask. Test it out before coming!!!
- Portable charger.
- Power adapter (UK).
- Bandanas.
- Students are encouraged to bring a **battery-operated carbon monoxide detector**)

