

South Africa: Diplomacy, Politics, and International Relations Internship

Country Overview & Packing Guidelines

Summer 2026

Country Overview

GENERAL INFORMATION

Given the historic events in South Africa over the last 30 years, this is an exciting time to be in the country, witnessing history as the country continues to strive toward facilitating reconciliation and development. In 30 years, South Africa has made great strides in righting the wrongs of an unjust system, but it has much further to go. Cyril Ramaphosa is South Africa's sixth post-apartheid president and his serving a second term of office, and his presidency is proving to be an interesting and tumultuous one. A 'newly' formed Government of National Unity has a monumental task confronting corruption, the massive inequalities inherited from the apartheid era, as well as in trying to match a progressive national constitution with a population much more conservative in political and social outlook. It also has to deliver basic services to all communities, find the resources needed to fight the AIDS epidemic, unemployment and abject poverty and grapple with crime and societal violence, and continue to work through a still uneasy racial divide.



Your program will be based in Durban, which is in KwaZulu-Natal, one of the nine provinces of South Africa. It is a large, modern city with a population of just over four million people. The most commonly spoken languages are Zulu and English. To put its size into perspective,

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Seattle-Tacoma has a population of about 3.4 million, Miami-Fort Lauderdale 3.6 million, Atlanta 3.7 million, and Houston 4.4 million.



Durban has a warm, often very humid climate and many South Africans vacation in the city during South Africa's winter. In Durban, winter months are warm and mild. It also has a significant Indian population with a distinct cultural presence. It was the banning of Indians from purchasing land in central Durban in 1922 that was one of the first laws to sow the seeds of the apartheid legislation that was to follow two decades later. Durban was a center of resistance to racism long before the National Party took over the national government in 1948. Durban and KwaZulu Natal have

a rich history of political activity, with contributions by noted activists like Mahatma Gandhi, former ANC Presidents John Dube and Chief Albert Luthuli, and the foundation of organizations such as the Natal Indian Congress and the African National Congress.

Post-1994, the province was controlled for ten years (1994-2004) by the Zulu ethno-nationalistic political group, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), but is now under the control of a Government of Provincial Unity as the ANC began to lose its political majority and had to form coalitions with former opposition parties, creating interesting political dynamics and tensions. Because of its historical development and present conflicts, many organizations and structures have evolved to address the problems facing the province. These issues fall into two broad categories: development and reconciliation. Obviously, these are inextricably linked, as, without reconciliation and peace, all development efforts will be fruitless. Given this background, KwaZulu Natal, with Durban as its core city, is an ideal base from which to study the extremely interesting political and developmental issues facing the country.

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

South Africa extends nearly 2000km (1242 miles) from the Limpopo River in the north to Cape Town in the south and nearly 1500km (932 miles) from Port Nolloth in the west to Durban in the east. Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Swaziland run from west to east along South Africa's northern border and Lesotho is entirely contained within South Africa's borders. South Africa is the seventh largest African country and twice the size of Texas.

DURBAN: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)

May	June	July
62/74	58/71	56/70

It's position just south of the Tropic of Capricorn makes South Africa a mostly dry and sunny place, but the climate is moderated by its topography and the surrounding oceans. The further east you go, the more useful your raingear becomes, but there are also damp pockets in the southwest, particularly around Cape Town. At 56 feet above sea level, Cape Town has a climate similar to that of California. The coast north from the Cape becomes progressively drier and hotter, culminating in the desert region just south of Namibia. Along the southern coast the weather is temperate, but due to the Agulhas current, the east coast becomes increasingly tropical the further north you go. The northeastern hump gets very hot, and there are spectacular storms here during the summer. In the winter, the days are sunny and warm. Durban's summers are warm and humid; winters are milder. The average annual rainfall is about 484 millimeters. It can get very hot and humid, with risk of sunburn and/or dehydration.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

South Africa is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, it has twelve official languages (sign language having been recently added as an official language) and as many different ethnic groups particularly in urban areas. It is difficult to generalize on South African etiquettes and culture due to the diversity, however, here are a few things to keep in mind.

CULTURAL DOS AND DON'TS

Be polite – Greet people when you meet them. Greetings are leisurely and include time for social discussion and exchanging pleasantries. Thank people when they do

something for you and say goodbye when you or someone else leaves. **Clean up after yourself** – you are expected to clean after yourself in your home stay, in the classroom, in hotel rooms. **Be on time** to class and meetings. **Respect** others, regardless of their viewpoint and respect yourself. **Dress conservatively** – especially when meeting someone for the first time. **Gift giving is important** and wrapping your gifts shows extra effort. **Offer to help** and be prepared to receive help that is offered.

Please do not smell food at the dinner table. Do not smoke indoors. Do not bring alcohol into the hotel, lodge or classroom.

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.

Students will largely be in their homestays at dinner time and at breakfast. Expect to eat some form of starch (cornmeal is the local staple, but most people eat rice and bread as well), and a meat-based stew or curry. Additionally, please note that in the cities of South Africa, water is normally clean and potable out of the taps. Concepts of veganism and vegetarianism are still a little unknown and may limit what is served. Serving meat is culturally seen to be a sign of hospitality and respect. Plant-based alternatives to meat and dairy and gluten-free products are extremely expensive. While you will not be expected to eat meat if you would rather not, students with specific diets should not expect program staff to purchase expensive items to cater to your individual needs. You will need to be flexible and sensitive on such matters when interacting with South Africans.

We do have a fridge at the program center and you are welcome to stock up on fruits, vegetables, and yogurt during the day. Vegetarian students are also advised to bring or purchase locally a small supply of protein bars to supplement your diet and to make sure you get the necessary daily protein requirements. Students wishing to follow a Kosher or Halal diet generally have success if they switch to a vegetarian diet for the duration of the program.

Halal foods are generally easily accessible though.

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: <https://studyabroad.sit.edu/programs/>

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](#).

HOUSING

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.

Each 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. Your homestay will be with Zulu-speaking families in Cato Manor, a township about 10km from the center of the city. Each

student will have his/her own family but will be within a few hundred yards of other students and within a mile of the whole group, as the program staff select families from one neighborhood. All houses will have cell phone reception, flush toilets, and electricity, and they are constructed of cinder brick. The Cato Manor homestay will be approximately two weeks in duration.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Other accommodations are at backpacker hostels. These are usually situated in town or in suburbs and provide dormitory-type accommodation. They have showers, flush toilets, and electricity. Showers in backpacker hostels are shared; students can expect to share bathroom facilities with all SIT students of their gender in addition to other same gender guests residing at the respective hostels.



During Internship, students stay in a variety of settings, depending on need and preference. Some stay in apartments with other students, some stay at backpacker dormitories, and some choose to stay with a homestay family. Please note that self-catering apartments sometimes require a deposit, which is the student's responsibility. If you feel you may want to stay in an apartment setting with other students, bring approximately an extra US\$300 to specifically use for this purpose. If all goes well, much of the deposit should be refundable at the end of your stay (different landlords will have different policies).

TRANSPORTATION

The program has the use of a minibus for daily shuttles between accommodations and the program center. The commute from Cato Manor to our classroom takes about 10-15 minutes. For excursions and day trips, the program uses an additional 10-seat vehicle. The longest

drive during the program is from Johannesburg to Durban, which takes seven hours. There is also a lengthy trip from Johannesburg to Mozambique.

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.

For our program we recommend that you bring along your phone. Do ensure that it is unblocked/unlocked so it can be used on WiFi in South Africa and a South African sim-card can be inserted, if needed. One can also acquire an e-SIM, or embedded SIM, that allows you to connect to a mobile network and use your phone without a physical SIM. It is always useful, and recommended, that you purchase a reasonable data package (in the US) that allows you access to the internet when not in a WiFi zone in-country. Do note that, if needed, a phone can be purchased in country for approximately \$40.

On arrival in SA, you have access to WiFi at the airport; and at the hotel for the initial stay. This makes it easy to communicate your safe arrival. In addition, the AD will send a safe arrival notification to SIT. The SIT program center provides internet access during onsite periods at the learning center during weekdays from 08:30 to 16:00 hours. While there is generally WiFi access at coffee shops, it may be a challenge while

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.

We discourage the sending of letters by mail as these have tend to arrive after students have left South Africa.

Packages should be sent to the following address via **DHL, FedEx, or UPS**:

Student Name
c/o School for International Training
The Atrium
430 Peter Mokaba Road
The Office Tower Suite 409
Overport, 4001

MONEY

It is advisable to bring your funds in various forms so that if there is a problem with one option you will still have access to money. The local currency is the South African Rand (ZAR). The exchange rate usually stands at approximately R19 to US\$1. ATMs are widely available in cities. Please ensure that you have notified your bank that you will be in South Africa and update that information when you go to Mozambique and return. Please do not accept assistance at an ATM if it is offered randomly by a stranger without you requesting it. Most banks have uniformed security personnel and uniformed staff to assist should you require assistance. Avoid drawing large sums of cash at a time and carrying all of it on you. Restaurants do take payments by portable points of sale meaning that you can swipe your card to pay. Try to get insurance in case your ATM card is lost, and your PIN has been observed. Each student is assigned a locker at the learning center which is lockable with a padlock, but you must provide your own padlock. There is a safe on the premises for the safe keeping of important documents.

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\$1,330 to \$1,530** 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.

Personal spending (from past student suggestions):	500-700 USD
Books, printing, supplies:	50 USD
Up-front medical costs:	500 USD
Mozambique Border fee:	50 USD
Mozambique visa for Non-US citizens	200 USD
Typical Internet café usage:	30 USD
Estimated total:	1,330-1530 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, cancellation 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. 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

South Africans tend to dress very similarly to Americans, though there is some variation among different ethnic groups. Neat, somewhat conservative, comfortable clothes will help you to avoid the typical untidy American tourist stereotype. Many South Africans have a stereotype of Americans as “slobs” in relation to dress, so do what you can do dispel this myth. As such, do not bring sloppy clothes or clothes with immodest pictures or writing on them.

Revealing clothing and very informal clothing are not acceptable in most situations. In general, tops should cover shoulders and waists, skirts should cover knees, clothing should not be too tight or see-through, and plunging necklines are not acceptable. However, do remember to carry your swim wear and your sneakers and shorts for exercise. Durban is a well-known triathlon city, so the city has a huge running culture, especially along the beach.

Please note that tank tops and shorts will only be acceptable in certain limited settings. For your rural visit, you will need to bring one or more long (mid-calf length) skirts or sarongs. Be aware that some places are dusty and likely to stain light colors, and that fine fabrics may not be durable enough. The clothes that you bring should be washable and breathable and preferably made of drip-dry cotton and cotton- blends. Students will be required to conform to dress expectations of the program, and we reserve the right to institute a specific dress code should that become necessary.

EQUIPMENT

You will NOT need to bring items such as a sleeping bag, mosquito net, or water purifier, unless you desire to do so and/or to travel areas and situations where these would be necessary post-program.

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). SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country.

Students in previous semesters have noted that having your own laptop provides you with a great deal of flexibility when completing assignments. Our wireless internet connection at the SIT program center makes conducting research from your own laptop fairly easy (at least in the South African context). You may need to make use of internet cafés during the semester – after hours – so please bring additional funds depending on how frequently you expect to use email at Internet cafés. If you are unable to bring a laptop with you, students have been able to rent them for all or part of the semester for approximately US\$140 per month. Digital recorders are useful. Your phone can also be used for recording. Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters.

<http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>.

Do not bring any 110-volt electrical appliances without a step-down transformer from 220 to 110 volts. The standard voltage in South Africa is 220/230volts AC. Many electronic goods these days can handle both 220 and 110 (and other) voltage; refer to your owner's manual for your devices to investigate what will likely be needed. Please note that power surges are common here and you are advised to plug your items into outlets with surge protection only (these can be purchased locally at student expense).

Again, we suggest insuring your belongings should you bring cameras, drones. Keep them locked in your locker at the SIT office when not in use. The flying of drones is governed by rules: [Drone Laws in South Africa | UAV Coach \(2023\)](#)

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

If you do not already have these items, they can be obtained in South Africa. Generally, prices for most items are reasonable. Toiletries and personal care items can also all be purchased in South Africa at similar prices to the US. However, if you require any form of medication, bring sufficient supply to last the duration of the program, as prescription drugs may not be mailed into South Africa. Remember to bring a spare pair of glasses or contact lenses if you wear them.

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.

Packing List sample:

GENERAL

- 1 nice outfit which is business-casual suitable for a social event or Embassy visits
- Lightweight clothes including pants, long-sleeved shirts, light T-shirts
- Underwear and socks (10-day supply)
- Warm pajamas or nightgown
- Slippers or flip flops (for use inside house. Flip flops not recommended for use outdoors because of the cobble stone sidewalks and roads.)
- 1 pair comfortable sneakers
- 1 pair sandals
- 1 pair nice shoes
- Rain gear (waterproof jacket, poncho, or umbrella)
- 2–4 pairs pants or jeans
- 1 skirt and/or dress
- 5–6 mixed long and short-sleeved t-shirts
- 2–3 blouses or button-down shirts
- Sweater
- Jacket or fleece
- Scarf
- Bathing suit
- Optional – workout clothes

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Photocopy of visa

- 2 passport photos
- Photocopy of visa (if applicable)

SHEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Adequate supply of any prescription medications you use regularly
- Over-the-counter medications as approved by your doctor (note that these are available locally):
 - Pain reliever/fever reducer
 - Cold medication/decongestant
 - Laxative
 - Anti-diarrheal medication
 - Motion sickness medication
 - Malaria prophylaxis (Note that you will be in a medium-risk malaria zone for approximately four nights.
- Small first aid kit (most supplies can be bought here)
- Extra eyeglasses and/or contact lenses
- Sunscreen (at least SPF 30)
- Sunglasses
- Wide-brimmed hat or baseball cap (for sun protection)

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Medium-sized day pack (to pack clothes for 3–4 days for excursions)
- Small, quick-drying towel
- Beach towel
- A notebook and pens
- Flashlight
- Reusable water bottle
- Small luggage lock
- Laptop computer (*please insure it*)
- Students are encouraged to bring a battery-operated carbon monoxide detector