

Studying in Mali with SIT: An Unforgettable Semester Abroad

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When I was considering studying abroad, SIT was recommended to me by many people because of its emphasis on cultural immersion, the homestay element, and the first-hand experience gained by the ISP (Independent Study Project). After completing the SIT Mali program in the spring of 2010, I can say that these characteristics are in fact the ones that resonated with me the most.

Throughout the unforgettable semester, I gained invaluable cross-cultural insight, formed deep bonds with the other students and my host family, and was also able to give back to the warm Malian community that welcomed me so completely.

The bustling capital city of Bamako is nestled on the banks of the Niger River and is home to many ethnic groups whose heritage and intertwining relationships go far back into the past. The climate is mainly hot and dry except during the rainy season in July and August, when it is wet and slightly cooler. Most people speak French as well as multiple local languages and can be seen in droves navigating the streets on



motorbikes or in large, hollowed-out green vans called *sotaramas*. Mali is 90 percent Muslim, thus men's rhythmic ablutions and the enchanting calls of the muezzins are common observations.

The SIT school is located in a small converted villa that overlooks a large portion of southeastern Bamako. For the first two months of the program, we had three classes scheduled each weekday

which varied between French, Bambara, the Field Study Seminar, and the interdisciplinary seminar that focused on the program's theme of health, gender, and community empowerment.

The interdisciplinary seminar lecture was on a different topic each time and was given by either visiting teachers or SIT staff. **We studied topics related to the course theme as well as topics that were essential in giving our**

studies in Mali a context, such as history, economic development, globalization, and the arts. There was a lot of flexibility in the assignments, which could often be tailored to our individual interests. On top of all this, the academic director had a great sense of how we were doing as a group and was always there for us when needed.

Most people in Mali don't speak English, so almost all my communication was in either French or Bambara. My French skills improved exponentially from the first day on, mainly due to speaking it out of necessity with everyone I met, especially my homestay family.

On the first day we learned how to greet people in Bambara (a very important and often complex activity) and then were set free to go practice. People would get excited and invite us in for tea or begin to ask questions about who we were and what we were doing there. There was always an immediate and friendly connection when we used our Bambara.

The homestay in Bamako was one of the most memorable facets of the entire program. Upon meeting my host family, they gave me a Malian name which I would



go by for the duration of my trip and would help me in cultivating a slightly new identity for the following three and a half months. In Mali, first and last names carry a lot of meaning: they can signify an ethnic group or a caste or a trade. My name was associated with blacksmiths, so when I met someone from another blacksmith family, we were immediate friends.

SIT places a huge importance on matching students with families so that the student feels welcome and has a brother or sister that is close in age and interests. All of the students stayed in the same neighborhood, Kalaban-Coura, so we

could easily visit each other. I shared a room with my host brother, and he introduced me to his friends in the neighborhood who quickly became my own friends. One day we discovered that we had read many of the same authors (he was also a student) and could talk about them from our different perspectives! This was the first of many connections made throughout the program.

The whole family treated me as one of their own and always made sure I had

whatever I needed. I ate most of my delicious meals with them and they took me to neighboring towns to visit their relatives. I'm still in touch with them and send them letters from time to time.

The excursions were one of the most fascinating parts of the program and were academically relevant as well as relaxing. **The 12-day “grand excursion” took us far from the hustle and bustle of Bamako out into the Sahel and to the lip of the Sahara desert.** We saw new ecosystems, heard new languages, shopped at lively markets, and seriously bonded as a group. We had free time to explore and relax while also doing planned activities such as hiking through Dogon villages, researching uses of the Niger River, and touring the great mud mosque of Djenné. We stayed in relatively nice hotels each night and shared our experiences of the day over dinner.

The last month of the program was reserved for the ISP, which was by far my favorite time of the program. During this time, students could either remain at their homestay or move temporarily to a different town if their research required it. There was a lot of freedom, but our academic director provided helpful guidance and was always available for any kind of assistance throughout the ISP period.

I am an anthropology and music major, and **I chose to do my project on the history, development, and gender roles regarding the 21-stringed harp-lute *kora*, a musical instrument that has deep cultural roots in West Africa.** I stayed with my host family in Bamako and went everyday to *L'Institut National des Arts* in the heart of the city to do most of my research. In the Field Study Seminar, I learned responsible and effective fieldwork practices specifically tailored for Mali that proved to be invaluable during the ISP.

Along with our studies, the other students and I found many things to do for fun such as going to cafés and dance clubs, going to shows at *Le Centre Culturel Français*, shopping at the *Artisanat*, going out to eat, and visiting each others' compounds to play games or watch movies. Internet cafés were everywhere and cheap, so it was easy to keep in touch with people back home.



The other students during my semester had many different majors including international studies, African studies, anthropology, women's studies, and biology. We all could offer perspectives from our different fields, and I think it's safe to say that we all took home invaluable experiences to contribute to our overall college careers, not to mention our lives back home.