



South Africa, a combination of sweet and salt

Before arrival

We applied for the KTH Field Studies travel grant after connecting with Mikael Samuelsson, a Swedish professor at the University of Cape Town, through a friend. He introduced us to Rushka, a former student of his, who had identified a clear need for an improved vaginal speculum in South Africa. She was passionate about improving women's healthcare and saw potential for real impact. As women studying product development, the project felt both meaningful and relevant. We wanted to create something that could make a difference, especially in low-resource environments. We had several meetings with Rushka to discuss logistics and started planning the trip. Our aim was to conduct interviews and be on the ground to better understand the needs and perspectives of healthcare professionals. Since we knew about the field studies grant, we applied to help cover our travel costs. Rushka was a huge help in finding us safe accommodation, which is essential in Cape Town due to safety concerns in certain areas and at certain times. We didn't need a visa, as our stay was under three months. Preparations included vaccinations and some basic health planning, but no language courses since English is widely spoken.

Upon arrival

We landed in Cape Town early January, on a Wednesday. The very next day, we had our first meeting with Mikael and Rushka—it all began right away. The first week or two focused mostly on planning, settling in, and setting up interviews.

Rushka went out of her way to make us feel welcome. She spent a lot of her free time showing us the city and even took us out for dinner. That personal connection made the transition much smoother.



Financials

Overall, living costs in Cape Town were lower than in Sweden. Eating out, groceries, and transportation—especially Uber—were noticeably cheaper. That made everyday life more affordable, even though we were on a student budget. We stayed in Airbnbs, which was the most cost-effective for a semi long stay. We also cooked at home quite a bit and used local markets for fresh food, which helped cut down on costs. I have some tips for future students: Use Uber instead of renting a car—it's cheaper, safer, and convenient, especially since public transport isn't always reliable or safe. Share accommodation if you're going with a classmate, it brings down the cost and makes it easier to stay in safer, more central areas. Plan your stay around areas where you can walk during the day to save on transport while still feeling secure.

We didn't feel like we had to limit ourselves too much, and still managed to do a lot of fun activities without breaking the bank. It's definitely possible to have a great experience in Cape Town without spending a fortune.

Accommodation

Rushka helped us choose good and safe areas to stay. We booked two different Airbnbs, one in Sea Point and the other in Green Point. This was our plan from the start—to spread the risk in case one place didn't work out.

We paid approximately 35 000 SEK for the full stay, and we were really happy with both places. I could rent out my apartment during this time so the accommodation cost were not too dire. These neighborhoods felt secure, even after dark. Still, we usually took Uber in the evenings or if we had a longer distance to go, since walking wasn't always safe and public transport was unreliable.

Project

Our project focused on developing an improved gynecological tool for cervical screenings—specifically Pap smears and liquid-based cytology, which detect cell changes that could lead to cervical cancer. In rural areas of South Africa, outdated metal speculums are still commonly used, causing discomfort and discouraging women from attending screenings. We aimed to create a cost-effective, more comfortable alternative that could be used even in resource-poor settings. The need is urgent—South Africa has a high prevalence of cervical cancer, largely due to high HIV rates and obesity. Obesity complicates the process of locating the cervix and collecting accurate samples. Our tool aimed to address both general and region-specific challenges. During our field studies, we interviewed healthcare practitioners who regularly perform these screenings. Reaching them wasn't easy—emails and calls rarely worked, so we had to visit clinics and hospitals in person. Rushka helped us find relevant places and sometimes came with us to conduct interviews. She also connected us with people from her previous MBA project on speculums. We're still in touch and occasionally share our progress with her. There's plans to turn this into a business, and we might support her as a side project alongside our main work.

Country

South Africa felt more Westernized than I had expected—it reminded me a bit of the US, however this concerned only the "safe" places. The socioeconomic differences were huge, and only by visiting other areas and talking to people could you understand how different life can be in this country. I had visited before as a tourist, but this time was different. Living there, even for a short while, gave me a deeper sense of the place.

One thing that stood out culturally was how every interaction started with "Hi, how are you?" and required a full back-and-forth before you got to the actual question. At first, it felt insincere, but I grew to appreciate it. It made conversations more human and open, even with strangers.

It also felt normal to ask personal questions right away—like whether someone had siblings—which in Sweden might be seen as weird/too personal/prying. That curiosity and friendliness left a mark on me,

and I've tried to bring some of that openness back home. Even though I've dropped the "Hej, hur är läget?" to every cashier, I now feel braver about connecting with strangers.

Leisure and social activities

Cape Town has so much to offer! We hiked Table Mountain, went paragliding off Lion's Head, and enjoyed wine tastings. At the end of our stay, we went on a mini road trip—driving on the left side, staying in remote places, and discovering hidden gems. A highlight was going to a rugby match at the stadium from the 2010 World Cup. The atmosphere was incredible. We even made some local friends that night, and met up with them again later. People were very friendly and eager to make sure you had a good experience of their country. However, building deeper, long-term connections was harder—most interactions stayed casual and short-term.



Sustainability

Sustainable travel was a challenge, mainly due to safety. Walking or biking at night wasn't an option, and there's no safe public transport system. We relied heavily on Uber to get around, even for short distances.

On the bright side, our project was closely tied to the UN Sustainable Development Goals—especially Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being and Goal 5: Gender Equality. By improving women's access to comfortable and dignified healthcare tools, especially in underserved areas, we hope to contribute to more equitable and effective healthcare.

Other recommendations and observations

- Hike the mountains! Table Mountain and Lion's Head are musts.
- You don't need to travel far for good wine—there are plenty of tasting spots close to the city.
- Keep an eye on local events: rugby games, food markets, and pop-up happenings were some of the most fun things we did.
- Make personal connections when you can—people are open and welcoming, and it adds so much to the experience.
- Plan accommodation and safety carefully—some areas are not safe, especially after dark.

