

PRESENCE LEARNING VILLAGE



Welcome to the PRESENCE Learning Village at Kouga Dam. In this tiny village of South Africa great and big things happen. You will gain new experiences, meet new people which will require of you to be flexible and open minded. You will have your contribution to implementation of projects and positive ideas happening. Tucked away in the mountains of the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve (Valley of Baboons) on the Eastern Cape, this largely (500.00 ha) overlooked area of South Africa is sure to get in your veins during your stay here. Kouga Dam itself was built in the 1960's and today is a quiet little area situated at the top of the Gamtoos Valley where the biggest excitement is when the dam itself overflows!

Living in the Presence Learning Village!

The Learning Village is exactly as it sounds. Between its location at the Kouga Dam nursery, which can be utilised for experimental restoration horticulture, and its close proximity to the World Heritage listed Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve, we see this area as a hub for education, cultivation and the creation of opportunities which will inform and guide the restoration of living landscapes. This Learning Village is maintained by Living Lands which is an initiative of EarthCollective.



The valley is home to a close-knit community of people living out here at the end of a dirt road 40kms from the nearest town of Patensie. Oom (“Uncle” – this is a respectful term in Afrikaans for older men) Merwe and his son Frikkie, the local farmers; Leon the dam manager and his family; Vicky the nursery manager; Oom Wessels and his wife; Oom Korneels and his wife and the local community of farm workers will all introduce you to that famous South African spirit of generosity and hospitality. Be sure to introduce yourself when you see them around – aside from common courtesy there might be a bag of oranges, cup of tea or the latest fresh produce in it for you! During the hot summers, there is a nice little lake on Oom Merwe’s farm which he is happy for you to make use of to cool down and refresh after a hard days’ work.



Living together

The **housing** out here in the Learning Village is basic but comfortable. Most people will have to **share rooms** and it is certainly advisable to share food and cooking. It is here that we’d really like to emphasise how life out at Kouga Dam is all about **teamwork**. It is extremely important that you recognize your role as part of a bigger project and that you are being in-kind supported by governmental accommodation (housing, transport, etc). Living successfully in a location such as this depends on people helping each other, even when



it may not be particularly convenient for you. Trust us, these things have a habit of coming around, and sooner or later you’ll find yourself in need of a favour too! This extends right across the board, from asking the neighbours if they need anything in town, to having to do that long run into PE to drop someone at the airport.

The closest opportunity for groceries is either in Patensie (40km; 35min) or in Humansdorp which is about one hour (70 km) away! Supermarkets such as Spar can be found here where everything is provided. Be aware that the price of food is very much similar to the European prices! However

there are local stores where food can be bought for a cheaper price as well as fresh vegetables sold along the sides of roads.

For Dutch students who cannot have their stay without drop, stroopwafels and Dutch cheese produced in Holland, don't worry! Your Walhalla is situated between Humansdorp and Jeffreys Bay, greeted with the Dutch flag at the entrance in an open field with the beautiful view of the sea behind it. Your eyes can not miss it as you can see it from a distance.😊

When not many students around it happens a lot that you will find yourself having dinner with your colleagues staying in another house. So often you'll be inviting colleagues to have dinner at your place as well as the other way around! The waste should be sorted in organics and normal waste. Tins and glass bottles are also sorted so everything can get recycled.

Living with others

Don't be surprised if you see some interesting creatures in and around the Learning Village! This includes snakes, frogs, bats, birds, insects, lizards, antelope and baboons. Having said that you won't see them every day, no one has ever been hurt and we have only ever had a snake in a house once. Without harming anyone the snake got captured and released. So when staying here and walking around the Learning Village, it is always important to move with awareness, pure thoughts and to keep windows and doors shut especially when you leave your home!



Living remotely!

We would like to make a point of saying **that this area is remote and sometimes things don't go to plan**. Cell phone reception is patchy, baboons used to swing on the towers and knock out the internet, the wind blows down the phone line and the dam may overflow and keep us stranded for a day or three but that's all part of the appeal! Try to stay open-minded, take it in your stride and adapt – if you wanted an easy ride you would have stayed at home, right? It can actually be quite liberating when you realize things are completely beyond your control and you just have to roll with it. Some may call it active adaptive management.

Internet bandwidth is limited so you will have to cut back on your Facebook/Skype/YouTube usage. Although there's no problem with keeping in touch with home, remember – you're in Africa for a limited time so try to make the most of it! See this time as not just being about completing your thesis/internship. View it as an opportunity for personal reflection and discovery. Meet the locals, plant some vegetables and 'spekkies', explore the mountains on your doorstep, put the lush park in the valley bottom to good use with sporting games etc. Twice a week u get to play soccer with your colleagues. In Patensie we have access to a tennis court. Tennis rackets are available there, so you don't need to buy your own.

Bear in mind that you are a bit out of the way. The closest pub is 40km back into town in Patensie and while sampling the local nightlife is certainly an experience, the nightclubs in nearby J-Bay (the surfing Mecca of Jeffrey's Bay) might appeal more to your taste. Most cultural activities such as film, nightclubbing, theatre, shopping etc. are more likely to be found in Port Elizabeth (an hour and a half's drive away) but even those are few and far between.

Moving around

In terms of **transport**, the project has access to a 4x4 Toyota Hilux and Toyota Avanza. These vehicles are strictly for work/research use only. Before leaving for South Africa, ensure you have a valid **International Drivers License** for use of this vehicle. South Africans drive on the right hand side of the vehicle/left-hand side of the road and some roads require serious four wheel driving, (such as the 90km road through the Baviaanskloof, which takes about four hours to drive!). So if you haven't had a lot of experience with right hand sides and four wheel driving – you're about to get some! But don't worry, everyone gets the hang of it sooner or later. A Living Lands mini-van (combi) will also be available for hire on weekends etc. for personal use. Loading up and taking off to one of the myriad of beautiful beaches along the coast for the weekend is definitely worth considering!



The nearest **post office** is in Patensie (40kms away), to where you can have your post directed. Merlyn in the post office is very efficient and keeps a careful eye out for parcels addressed to Kouga Dam.

Forget almost everything you've been told about the **crime** in South Africa! Although it is an unfortunate part of life in many other parts of the country, you're headed for an area where you can still sleep under the stars outside your house or safely walk down the streets of Humansdorp and Patensie. Of course you must always exercise a degree of vigilance. Houses and offices are still locked up; however this is more to protect nursery staff from being blamed when something is actually mistakenly misplaced by us (which is usually the case). And like you would in any developing country, try to be sensitive about flashing expensive/valuable belongings around, anywhere you are. These may prove to be too tempting for those who have much less than we do. However, all up, you will find this little pocket of SA to be refreshingly low in the crime stakes so try not to let any horror stories from the foreign press influence your mindset too much before you arrive here. Having said this, it is extremely important that when you leave the valley, you take the same precautions that you would anywhere else in the world. Avoid travelling alone off the beaten track, don't walk around towns and cities (e.g. Jeffreys Bay) after dark, heed local advice on where is safe and where is not safe. The unfortunate reality of life in South Africa is that, in some areas, it *can* be a dangerous game. But if you play by the rules, you are sure to see the true spirit of this remarkable country, and have the experience of a lifetime here.

Getting here

So you've made the decision to come to South Africa for your thesis, internship or volunteer work? Now to just get here!

Our advice on the most ideal way to travel to Kouga Dam would be to avoid Johannesburg if you can manage it and fly directly to Cape Town where it is safer and easier to travel around. Perhaps take a day or two to acclimatize in what is arguably one of the world's most beautiful cities and then either fly or catch a bus to Port Elizabeth, a mere 800km across the southern cape. From here, someone from the Learning Village will be able to make the 90min drive and pick you up without a problem.

Cheap flight tickets in South Africa are;

<http://www.1time.com.za>

<http://www.kulula-air.com>

<http://www.flysaa.com>

Bus tickets can be booked at:

<http://www.computicket.com> (under Travel > Bus)

Note that you will need to collect the tickets from a Checkers or Shoprite supermarket!

We recommend travelling with either Intercap, Translux or Greyhound companies. (You can also book directly on the Intercap website.)

Visas

Unless you are seriously into masochism, we strongly recommend that you avoid the South African Department of Home Affairs and organize your visa before leaving home (though it must be said that some of us have had positive experiences as well). If you contact the South African High Commission in your country of residence, you will find information on applying for a student/study visa which you will be eligible for over the duration of your stay. Usually this is the far quicker and easier route to take. Students should apply for a research visa in their home country. Some students staying for shorter periods of time (e.g. 3-4 months) have taken tourist visas which, whilst usually much easier to arrange, is obviously technically not 100% legal and therefore not something which we officially recommend.

Holidays/ Vaccination

Many students plan a **holiday** during their time over here, something that we actively encourage, **provided your research/internship planning is up to date and on track and you have allowed sufficient time for this.** While past students have ventured as far away as southern Mozambique, we do recommend that you consider the incredible diversity of places in South Africa, rather than trying to cover extremely large distances for a couple of days only to have to turn around again! Over the course of several weeks in South Africa you could cover the cultural hub of the Western Cape with winelands, good restaurants, beaches and music, before crossing the windswept, aptly named Wild Coast along the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, then heading up to tropical KwaZulu-Natal with its remarkable people, cultures and reserves, or hike up into the spectacular Drakensberg Mountains ('Dragon mountains') in South Africa's mountainous interior. If you have the time, other 'must-see's' include the ultimate wildlife experience in massive Kruger National Park, hooded horsemen amongst the snow in Lesotho and the vibrant, interesting culture in Swaziland. And even within just two-three hours of Kouga Dam you can reach Addo Elephant National Park, vibrant Grahamstown, the stunning Nature's Valley, Tsitsikamma National Park, gorgeous Knysna and Plettenberg Bay with its whales, dolphins and seals and of course the beautiful Baviaanskloof. You also have amazing multi-day hiking trails like the Otter Trail, Wild Coast and the Amatola Mountains.

Some things to consider when planning holidays – although public transport (bus) is cheap and accessible to the main cities, it usually won't get you to the more remote spots...unless you are adventurous enough to take the mini-bus taxis. Hitchhiking is not usually recommended. Car rental is probably your best option and will give you more independence and there are some good deals to be found. Remember when crossing international borders you will need all the relevant papers for the car and some rental companies don't permit their vehicles to cross into other countries. Check first. Of course it's up to you where you venture if you decide to do some travelling – either way you will certainly find it an ultimately rewarding and memorable experience.

For vaccination the usual recommended injections are Hepatitis A and B, Tetanus and tuberculosis. There is no malaria around in Eastern Cape but likely you would be travelling around so you should be aware that there is malaria in the north of South Africa – especially during the summer. Planning your holiday before you come here is recommended so you and your vaccination clinic can go through your holiday plans and you can be advised what injections you should get when travelling through these areas.

Randoms to Remember Checklist:

- International drivers **license** – if you don't have a driving license please let us know
- **Laptop** (contact us if this is going to be a problem)
- While Internet bandwidth is limited the usage of **downloading** is restricted so make sure you have a playlist of **music** and **films** downloaded on your laptop before your arrival at Kouga Dam!
- Usual recommended **injections** (Hep A/Hep B, Tetanus and Tuberculosis). There is no malaria in the Eastern Cape any time of year. Further north in South Africa – especially during summer – malaria is around so investigate your options.
- Simlock free **phone** – pre-paid sim cards are cheap and cell phone coverage is very good everywhere in South Africa (except at Kouga Dam!...**where only MTN works** in the right places)
- **Books** - to inject some diversity into the Kouga library
- **Sleeping bag** – bedding is provided in your accommodation but a sleeping bag is handy for weekend camping trips
- **Good hiking shoes** – but shoes, the sleeping bag and clothes can usually be bought cheaper in South Africa so that might be better than having an overweight!

Have a nice flight!

