



COUNTRY

OVERVIEW

& PACKING

GUIDELINES

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UW Society, Culture and Business in Senegal

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SENEGAL OVERVIEW

GENERAL INFORMATION

Senegal is located on the Atlantic coast of West Africa, at the western-most point of the African mainland. In 1960, the country's population was just over three million inhabitants. Today, that number has more than quintupled and is growing increasingly younger, with 42% of the population under 15 years of age. It is also estimated that 52% of the population is urban. Of the country's 17 million inhabitants, about 39% are Wolof, 16% are Serere and 27% are Pulaar/Fulani. The rest of the population is composed of thirty other ethnic groups, such as the Diola, Mandinka and Soninke. An important number of expatriates from Europe and North America, and other African countries live in Senegal as well.

In terms of religion, Senegal's population is approximately 95% Muslim, 4% Christian and 1% includes Indigenous religions. Yet, most Muslims and Christians also follow, albeit privately, some Indigenous traditions. This is so pervasive that Leopold Sedar Senghor once claimed that in Senegal, we are 90% Muslim, 10% Catholic and 100% Animist. It is therefore widely considered factual that religious pluralism is one of the foundations of the Senegalese culture.

Archeological findings throughout the area indicate that Senegal was inhabited in prehistoric times. Stone tools and other artifacts date human habitation in the area of Senegambia from around 10,000 years ago. Islam established itself along the Senegal River in the 11th century. Europeans started settling later, in the 15th century. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to trade in Senegal, followed by the Dutch and the French. In the 19th century, the French gradually occupied and administered the interior regions and in 1920, Dakar became the capital of all French West Africa. After the 1958 French constitutional referendum, Senegal became a member of the French community with virtually complete internal autonomy.

Senegal gained access to independence in 1960. Leopold Sédar Senghor, a world-renowned poet, politician, and philosopher was elected as Senegal's

first president in September of the same year. He remained in power until 1980. After his resignation on December 31, 1980, Abdou Diouf became the second president of the young country. The new president encouraged broader political participation, reduced government involvement in the economy, and widened Senegal's diplomatic engagements, particularly with other developing nations. Abdoulaye Wade, Diouf's longtime opponent, was elected president in March of 2000 after a run-off with Diouf. He was reelected again in February of 2007.

In 2012 Macky Sall was elected and he served as president until 2024. In 2024, Bassirou Diomaye Faye was inaugurated as president, having won his election with over 54% of the vote. Incumbent president Macky Sall was ineligible to pursue a third term due to term limits in the Constitution of Senegal.

Politics in Senegal operate within a presidential democratic republic framework. The country has a reputation for transparency in government operations, with little economic corruption. Today Senegal is known as one of the most successful democratic transitions in Africa.



CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Senegal is mainly a low-lying country, with a semi-desert area in the north and the east, forests in the south and the Savana in the center. Two well-defined dry and humid seasons result from northeast winter winds and southwest summer winds.

The climate is pleasantly tropical with Dakar ranking as one of the coolest, breeziest spots in West Africa. In the north and central parts, the rainy season lasts from July to October. The dry season, which makes up the rest of the year, tends to be very hot and humid, except in the coastal regions, such as Dakar, Thies, Saint Louis, and Mbour where the temperature and the humidity are modified by ocean breezes.

AVERAGE HIGH / LOW TEMPS (°F) DAKAR

DEC
82 / 73°F

JAN
78 / 69°F

FEB
77 / 68°F

LOCAL CUSTOMS

Greetings:

Greetings are the most important aspect of Senegalese etiquette. Most people greet each other with the consecrated Muslim formula: “Asalaamu Aleykum,” (“May peace be upon you”) or “na nga def?” It is also customary to shake hands especially if you are greeting one or a couple of people.

Sense of politeness:

Politeness is very important to Senegalese people. Here are some other ways politeness can be shown:

- Using only your right hand when you eat or pass items to people
- Learning people’s names
- Removing shoes when entering someone’s living room, especially if there is a mat or a rug
- Walking guests all the way to the sidewalk when it comes time for them to leave

Personal space:

Be ready for people to ask questions that might feel very personal (from an American perspective). Senegalese people are not afraid to show physical affection and have a different understanding of personal space. There are instances, however, when being aware of personal space is important. For example, when people are praying, walking right in front of them should be avoided. At the same time, it is usually off-putting when someone gets close to animals and, as a rule, petting or cuddling animals should be avoided.

Meals and Mealtimes:

The richness of the Senegalese cuisine finds its virtue in the *ganale*, meaning the art of welcoming, a tradition that obliges special attention to the preparation of dishes. It is a matter of honor for Senegalese people to give their guest a meal of quality. Most Senegalese families will offer a rich variety of foods like the national dish *ceeb-u-jen* (fish and rice), *yassa poulet* (plain rice with onion sauce and chicken), *maafé* (rice and lamb or beef with peanut sauce/veggies), or *thiou* (rice and fish or meat with onions and tomato paste). Meals in Senegal typically consist of a starchy staple such as rice, millet, or couscous, accompanied by a sauce. Popular sauces include tomato-based sauces, peanut sauce, and okra sauce, often cooked with some meat or fish in palm oil. Meat is rarely the main focus of the meal; however, there is usually a small amount in the sauce.

Depending on the family, millet couscous will be served for dinner on Fridays. In Dakar, French fries will sometimes be served with meat and lettuce. Maintaining a strict vegetarian diet can be somewhat challenging in Senegal. SIT staff are well acquainted with common food restrictions and allergies and you are encouraged to share information about any dietary restrictions you have in the health and participation form so that they may be honored during planning. For vegetarians, most dishes are cooked with several vegetables such as carrots, cassava, eggplant, sweet potato, cabbage, and green beans. For vegans, the protein supplement can be in the form of local beans called *niebé*. Vegetables are available all year round in Dakar.

Meals are generally served around 1:00 pm for lunch and at 8:30pm/9:00pm for dinner. Meals are sometimes followed by the traditional Senegalese tea called *Ataaya*, or local juices such as *bissap*, ginger, tamarind, and *bouye* (fruit of the baobab tree). Fruits are also available all year round.

DIET

SIT Study Abroad provides experiential learning opportunities where students become embedded in their host community. As such, we strive to accommodate serious food allergies where possible,

but simply cannot ensure that all dietary restrictions or non-medically mandated diets can be accommodated. Students are encouraged to participate in the local food culture as a central aspect of daily life. By trying to replicate your diet at home, you may miss an important part of your host culture. If you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office via the Health and Participation Form prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

It's safe to assume tap water is not potable; bottled water and beverages are recommended. Food and water standards around the world vary based on the destination. Standards may also differ within a country and risk may change depending on activity type. You can learn more about safe food and drink choices when traveling by accessing: [Choose Safe Food and Drinks When Traveling](#).

ACCOMMODATIONS

You will be accommodated in well-appointed hotels, as well as Canvas-sided tents while in Lompoul desert ([example](#)). In hotels/camping, students will be in shared same-gender rooms with shared bathrooms and each student will have their own bed. Faculty/staff leader(s) will be in single rooms with private bathrooms. Laundry services will likely be available for an additional charge at your hotel.

TRANSPORTATION

For the program's scheduled daily activities (when walking is not an option) and on group excursions, transportation will be provided via rental bus with a dedicated driver.

In your free time, if your university policies allow, you may use public transportation such as the *Car Rapide*, the white minibus known as *Ndiaga Njaay*, or busses called "TATAS." Taxis are also common in the cities and are very reasonable as a mode of transportation. It's recommended that you utilize public transportation only with local program staff or affiliated local peers.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

SIT recommends you do some reading prior to departure about the health, safety, and security recommendations for Senegal. Consult the [U.S. Department of State](#) website and search their [Countries and Areas Archive](#) for international travel information and current travel advisories. Search the [Center for Disease Control Traveler's Health](#) page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country you plan to visit.

You will be thoroughly briefed on safety considerations specific to Dakar during in-country orientation and updated throughout the program if and when circumstances change. If you have any questions, please reach out to the SIT [Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team](#).



COMMUNICATION, PHONES, & INTERNET

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the program, 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 program. 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.

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students and faculty/staff leader(s) are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that their phone is operational when you are away from Wi-Fi. For this program, SIT will provide SIM cards for unlocked personal cell phones upon arrival as needed at no additional cost. WhatsApp groups are a primary form of communication between all program participants on SIT programs. Read more: [Cell Phone Policy](#).

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.

MONEY

Senegal's currency is known as the Franc CFA (pronounced Céfa), which is also used by seven other countries in West Africa and six in Central Africa. Although the West African CFA has the same value as the Central African CFA, the two are not interchangeable. The West African CFA can only be

used in the West African countries in the CFA zone and vice versa. Check current exchange rates: <https://www.oanda.com/currency-converter>

ATM (debit) cards are easy to use in Dakar and other cities and are the preferred choice for accessing funds - but remember that there is often a fee (around US\$1.75-US\$5.00) each time you withdraw cash. **Make sure to bring some cash with you to start off with, around US \$100 dollars**. It is extremely difficult to wire money to Senegal so be sure to have other means of accessing cash in an emergency. It is recommended to not bring traveler's checks, as they are difficult to exchange. If using a debit card and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans before your arrival. Make sure all your ATM cards are issued with a PIN to avoid theft.

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the program, 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.

Please read SIT's full [Independent Travel](#) policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Your home institution will give you further instructions on whether independent travel is allowed on your specific program.

CODE OF CONDUCT & POLICIES

SIT maintains a [Code of Conduct](#) and clear institutional [policies](#) regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. We work in close collaboration with your home institution to implement both institutions' codes during your program.

PACKING GUIDELINES

LUGGAGE

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 day-pack/backpack for excursions. Please check the current requirements of the [Transportation Security Administration \(tsa.gov\)](https://www.tsa.gov) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

COMPUTERS AND ELECTRONICS

If you bring laptop or tablet for schoolwork, it will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you ensure that you buy insurance for all your electronics in the event of loss or theft. SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country, theft, or loss. You will be responsible for making arrangements to store your laptop and any other electronic equipment you choose to bring with you in a secure place while on excursions. However, it will not be difficult to find ways to keep your laptop and your electronic equipment safe.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters: [Full list: Plug, socket & voltage by country - World Standards](#). The standard voltage in Senegal is 220-240 volts AC. **This means that your 110-voltage electronic equipment (other than a laptop and your smartphone or tablet) will either overheat or burn out unless you use it with a converter.**

For all electronic equipment, you will need an adapter to fit into Senegalese electric outlets.

GIFTS

You may consider bringing a few small gifts for people that you meet while on your program. Please avoid anything with alcohol or pork as these may be offensive in the local culture. Try to choose 1-2 gifts represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city,

state, or local artisans produce or visit your campus memorabilia store. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank people you meet.



CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Fashion in Senegal is fairly cosmopolitan. Do not bring sloppy clothes or clothes with immodest pictures or writings. **Revealing clothing and very informal clothing is discouraged.** Jeans, t-shirts, blouses and tank tops are fine. Avoid crop tops, low-riding pants, and very short skirts; use your own judgment for wardrobe choices, keeping in mind that you will be in a more or less conservative place, although Dakar is also a 21st century city.

The emphasis should be on neat. Bring clothes that look nice but will not cause you to be disappointed if they become faded, worn, or lost. A couple of long-sleeved shirts may be useful for evening protection against mosquitoes. For travel convenience, clothes that you bring should be hand washable and breathable.

WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Soap, shampoo, toothpaste (including several U.S. brands), and school/cleaning supplies are available in Dakar, usually at a comparable price to the U.S.. Pack only if you prefer a specific brand.

Don't miss the packing list on the next page!

PACKING LIST

These are suggestions from past students and SIT staff. The clothing you bring may be adapted to your own style, within cultural norms of acceptable dress.

CLOTHING

- Semi-professional outfits recommended for site visits and meetings with officials:
 - Lightweight pants or long dresses/skirts
 - Short-sleeved blouses/structured shirts (nicer than T-shirts); Necklines should be somewhat conservative, midriffs covered.
- For casual days
 - Jeans are fine, but light materials will be more comfortable; Shorts should be Bermuda length or longer.
 - Sleeveless/ tanks are less commonly worn locally and not recommended.
- 1 athletic outfit (could include T-shirt/knee length/basketball shorts or running pants for jogging/sports)
- Long-sleeved shirts for protection from mosquitoes in the evening
- 1 pair **comfortable** everyday shoes that are fairly dressy and good for walking
- 1 pair of sandals for outdoors and 1 pair flip-flop for inside (these should be two separate pairs; indoor shoes/slippers is an accepted practice in Senegal).
- All-purpose jacket/light raincoat
- 1 swimsuit (somewhat conservative, one-piece if you have one); packable towel
- 1 brimmed hat (to prevent sun overexposure); Sunglasses
- Scarf or head covering if you plan to visit a mosque (can also be purchased locally)

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- **Passport**; Photocopy of visa (if applicable)
- **2 photocopies of your passport, and credit/debit cards**, stored separately from your originals
- **CDC Proof of COVID-19 Vaccine Card encouraged**
- [Yellow WHO Card](#) (if you have already received one from a travel clinic) with a list of your immunizations

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Prescription medications used regularly and a copy of the prescription. *Store in original packaging!*
- [Malaria prophylaxis \(if applicable\)](#). Talk to your health care provider about which (if any) malaria medication you should take.
- Small first aid kit for personal use with small things like bandages/antiseptic/antibacterial ointment and over-the-counter meds as approved by your doctor. *This is optional as program staff will also have supplies.* Recommended OTC meds include pain reliever/fever reducer, cold medication/decongestant, cough suppressant (all available locally) but particularly those NOT available in Senegal: *laxative, anti-diarrheal medication (such as Imodium), travel sickness medication.* Store in original packaging!
- Extra contact lenses and/or spare pair of glasses (if you wear them); Contact lens solution (can be found locally but expensive)
- Mosquito repellent with 20-30% DEET for use on skin and up to 100% DEET for clothing OR (Permethrin) for use on clothing
- Vitamin supplements (available locally, but expensive). *Note: Even if you don't take them regularly, you might consider, given the substantial changes in diet.*
- Gatorade or electrolyte powder
- Sunscreen/Solarcaine spray/Aloe
- Tampons or pads (available locally but generally more expensive and may not be in the size/brand you are accustomed to)
- Hand-wipes and/or antibacterial hand wash

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Daypack or book/shoulder bag
- Water bottle and UV water purifier e.g., SteriPEN (*not necessary but helpful so you don't have to rely only on bottled water*) and/or water disinfectant tablets (1 bottle) or iodine
- Small locks for your luggage if you wish
- Extra batteries for all electronic items (note: AAA batteries are hard to find; AA easy to find, but expensive)