

# MARIA AND MANDELA

*As 15 year old Maria boarded her flight for South Africa, she had no idea she was headed to the ground floor of a significant historical event!*

## Meet Maria

Maria from California chose to study abroad for 1 semester in South Africa with iE-USA.

Toward the end of her exchange semester, news of Nelson Mandela's death rocked the world. Maria, now immersed in the South African culture, was able to see these events through the eyes of a South African.

*Maria shares more in her own words:*

## What impacted you during your semester in South Africa with iE-USA?

It's hard to list just one thing, because I'm so thankful for the experience in general. The townships were like nothing I had seen before. There are squatter camps, where people build houses out of tin and other materials, and there are formal settlements. These are housing units made out of brick, which was an effort that Mandela began post-apartheid. In the townships, everyone was smiling and friendly, yet they have almost nothing. It made me realize how

**Nelson Mandela** was a celebrated anti-apartheid activist who served as the first democratically elected President of South Africa from May 1994 to June 1999. He was an advocate of human rights and was 75 years old when elected president. The UN declared July 18 Mandela Day in honor of Mandela's work to end social injustices.

much we take for granted.

## How did people respond to Nelson Mandela's passing?

The energy that week leading up to the funeral was all revolved around him and remembering the life that he led. There were thousands of flowers laid out on the streets and hand-written cards to the Mandela family. It's not until you are in that environment that you realize he did not only have a physical impact on the laws and government, but an emotional impact on the people and their minds. People really feel like he impacted their lives on a personal level, and he did.

Below: Maria lights a candle as part of a week-long tribute in Cape Town celebrating Nelson Mandela.



## Why did you choose South Africa?

I wanted to go to a country where their first language is English. That narrowed it down pretty quickly. Most of the other English-speaking countries all have a similar culture to that of America, and so I felt South Africa would be the most different. I *wanted* the “most different.” I wanted something out of my comfort zone.

## What differences did you notice?

The languages. You can sit on a bus and hear English, Zulu, Tswana, Afrikaans, and Xhosa. You don't get that in America. Also, school was the polar opposite of my school in California. We had uniforms, which I ended up liking because I didn't have to decide what I wanted to wear in the morning. And I got to take classes I had never been able to take back home, like African History and Consumer Studies.

## Do you have any favorite memories from your time?

I got to go shark cage diving - that was one of the coolest things. You wear a wet suit and get in the water with them!

## What does it feel like to come home?

So far, it's as if nothing has changed, which is good and kind of weird at the same time. I am glad I can pick up where I left off, but the experience was so personal, that I feel like I have changed drastically, while nothing around me is different.

## What advice would you give someone considering studying in South Africa?

I would say to just be open-minded, because, if you go to any country with a closed mind, you are not going to be happy. One thing people should be prepared for when they go to South Africa is that there is more poverty than in America. They should also know that it's not a reason to be scared. Overall, I found that they (South Africans) are very friendly, loving people - more so than in America. I took the train, taxis, and city buses, but I always felt safe.

## How do you think this might affect your future?

I would like to revisit South Africa in the future. I am even considering a year abroad at UCT. I also hope this experience will help me get into college, so that I may continue studying culture and people on a higher academic level. I believe this is just the first step in a long list of cultural-immersion experiences.



Maria poses with a seal outside of Capetown.

## About South Africa

**Languages:** English, Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, and Xhosa

**Currency:** The Rand

South Africa offers a rare mix of modern life, African culture, wildlife, and outdoor attractions. Due to its complex history, it is a country on the move and constantly changing.

## About iE-USA

Founded in 2002, iE-USA is a **non-profit** educational exchange organization **devoted** to the growth of friendship and understanding among the people of the world. We **believe** that learning about other cultures, languages, and customs is the best way to eliminate international fears and prejudices.

**Learn more at [iE-USA.org](http://iE-USA.org)!**