



# Into

# Africa

*By Amy DerBedrosian*

*Photography by Scott Hertzberg '04*

To many people, including many Saint Mary's College students, South Africa can be summed up in a name and a word: Nelson Mandela and apartheid. If they imagine the country beyond this austere shorthand for the still-unfinished struggle for racial equality and political change, they picture other stereotypical images of Africa, perhaps a dusty rural landscape reminiscent of another time.

So Cape Town, a modern city of almost three million people, is a shock, especially for students better accustomed to Saint Mary's cozy confines. Although they're

close to large cities back in California, they're not in one. In Cape Town, they're definitely in a city.

SAINT MARY'S STUDENTS have experienced that sense of surprise—and much more—in South Africa since 1999. That year, Margot Winer, a member of the anthropology faculty and a research fellow at the University of Cape Town, organized a new semester-long program there. It was also Saint Mary's first homegrown study abroad program.

Before, some Saint Mary's students had traveled to South Africa in January. But that was a very different experience. Winer explains, "Jan Term was a whirl-

wind cultural tour. It was a lot of fun, but it was only an overview of a place. How much can you learn in four weeks?"

Winer imagined something more. She proposed a rigorous academic program that also reflects Saint Mary's values.

"I set the standards for this program very high," says Winer. "I wanted a program integrated with a world-class university, where our students would mix with local students. There's a real cross-cultural understanding to be gained from that. I wanted to make sure they got the most from being abroad. It's important to take students outside our community, outside our comfort zone, to live in another country as residents, not tourists. >>>

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Mediterrane

Equator

Living and studying in a country  
transforming itself proves transformative

ATLANTIC  
OCEAN

As a Lasallian institution concerned with social justice, we needed some avenue to work in the community, doing something that makes a difference. This also takes students from a tourist role to being engaged.”

**IN SOUTH AFRICA**, the Saint Mary’s students, typically a group of fourteen to eighteen, take classes at the University of Cape Town, considered the continent’s leading teaching and research university. Guided by Winer, the students choose two to three courses taught by the local faculty and populated by South African classmates. Every Saint Mary’s program participant enrolls in Winer’s interdisciplinary course on South African history,

usual federal, state, and College financial aid to program expenses. Saint Mary’s provides further assistance by paying half the airfare to South Africa.

“Saint Mary’s is famous at the University of Cape Town for the diverse students we bring,” comments Winer. “We have the most diverse study abroad program there.”

Perhaps most important for students considering the program is their potential to thrive in a setting that demands academic independence and personal initiative. In South Africa, they attend a large university rather than a small college, and they live together in a neighborhood house rather than a campus residence hall. But they aren’t completely on their own.

“Because Margot is South African, we got to see the hidden mysteries of Cape Town,” says Scott Hertzberg ’04. “That really helped us integrate into the city and South African life.”

Nonetheless, being in a place as far from home as many can imagine is an adjustment. It’s exciting, but also challenging. Sometimes it’s baffling or even unnerving.

Bowman describes traveling to the campus in a bus without seats, each day noticing something she’d never seen before, including a fellow passenger transporting a sheep’s head in a bag. Bowman, who participated in the program in spring 2002, made discoveries in class as well.

“I took a world history class, a few months after 9/11. It was interesting to hear about it from a non-American standpoint,” she says. “Going over there and learning not everyone loves us was surprising. People were bashing Americans, and that gave me a chance to speak up for my country and also to understand their point of view.”

For Amanda Shigihara ’04, a year later, the lessons were different. She says of her experience, “A lot of what I take in anthropology is about Africa. But reading about it and seeing it are very different. It’s much more emotional. Now, I feel I really know what’s going on. I feel stronger in an academic sense, too.”

**IN SOUTH AFRICA**, it’s inevitable that the students encounter poverty and other evidence of the country’s longstanding racial divisions. Winer says, “All around, they see vestiges of apartheid. The University of Cape Town is now 50 percent students of color, but Cape Town is still a divided city. You can see where the

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culture, politics, and arts. A community service course is optional, but every Saint Mary’s student has taken advantage of that opportunity.

With the program now firmly in place, the continuing challenge lies in getting students to consider a semester abroad. Too often, says Winer, Saint Mary’s students think this experience is intended for someone else or that they can’t afford its cost. But, she stresses, they’re wrong.

The South Africa program is designed to be inclusive, in terms of both covering most costs (airfare, tuition, housing, and some meals and field trips) in a single package and enabling students who come from all economic and ethnic backgrounds to participate. Students can apply their

“Margot was our surrogate mother for five months,” says Erin Bowman ’04. “She became such a role model for me. I appreciated everything about her, the way she lives her life—she’s so aware—and the way she teaches.”

**WINER UNDERSTANDS** how it feels to be a college student in an unfamiliar land, having experienced that feeling herself as a young South African seeking an education in the United States. She assigns pretravel readings to acquaint the Saint Mary’s students with the country that will be their home for five months. She also eases their transition to South Africa, readying their housing and serving as their liaison with the University of Cape Town.



Visits to their professor's home and lingering images of the apartheid era offer students contrasting views of South Africa.

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Volunteering in disadvantaged communities deepens this understanding. Some students, including Kimberly Richards '03 and Paul Fox '03, have worked in mobile health clinics, assisting physicians coping with the world's highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. Shigihara taught Ganga Township women about protecting their health, and Bowman helped poor children develop their art skills, often with only pencils as a teaching tool.

Visiting the townships, says Hertzberg, "we saw people doing more with what they had than should have been possible. They took corrugated metal and made it a home. You haven't seen poor until you've been there. You haven't seen happiness until you've been there. Every emotion I had just expanded by being there."

YEAR AFTER YEAR, Winer has seen the Saint Mary's students change over the course of their South African stay. In fact, the students often find readjustment to the United States unexpectedly difficult.

"I think they have a more profound culture shock when they come back than when they go. They have a sense of dislocation," says Winer. "They arrive in

South Africa with a sense of euphoria and excitement. They return with a greater level of maturity and an understanding of poverty and social justice. Their lives look very comfortable when they come home. Most of them continue some community engagement when they come back."

Shigihara, for instance, is now working with the Coalition for the Homeless in San Francisco, served as co-president of the Homeless Action Project on campus, and wrote her senior thesis on homelessness. But experiencing South Africa

still the sarcastic anthropology student, but I'm much more open to change. I've learned to take a deep breath, step back, and look at things differently. I have more restful sleep because I worry less. Friends have noticed the changes in me. I think I'm more giving, a lot more open, and a lot more available to them."

South Africa has changed Bowman's life, too. Once interested in a fashion or journalism career, she had never left the United States before going to South Africa. Now, she has decided to become a

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has changed Saint Mary's students in a variety of ways. Some have gone back to the University of Cape Town for independent study. Others are considering returning for graduate study. Maureen Benton '03 will marry a South African man this year. Hertzberg plans to study anthropology in a graduate school in the United States and considers himself a person transformed.

"Before, I was a sarcastic prelaw anthropology student who knew everything that would happen in my life," he says. "I'm

Peace Corps volunteer and will spend two years in sub-Saharan Africa, involved in AIDS education. She says, "My father wonders why I didn't major in business so I could make money. He can't believe I'm joining the Peace Corps. But one thing I learned in South Africa is that you can live with your heart and not with your wallet."

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