

LGBT Student Travel in Africa

Travel Health and Safety; Academia
Africa

Summary

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students, traveling or studying abroad in Sub-Saharan Africa can present unique safety and security concerns. LGBT students face challenges ranging from verbal harassment, stalking, intimidation, and sometimes even violence. Simply disclosing alternative gender and sexual identities can have dangerous consequences, and some African countries threaten jail sentences for homosexual activity.

Many African countries have pending or implemented anti-gay legislation that limits the rights of gay men and women and criminalizes same-sex relationships. Of the 53 African countries, 38 have criminalized consensual gay relationships, and many colonial sodomy laws remain on the books. South Africa is the only country in Sub-Saharan Africa that has legalized same-sex marriage, though anti-gay violence remains high, and crimes such as “corrective rape” continue to occur. Over 30 lesbian women have been murdered in South Africa in the last 10 years.^[1] Uganda, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Ghana criminalize homosexuality and have pursued prosecution against suspected homosexuals.

OSAC constituents are likely to encounter anti-gay campaigns or cultural attitudes that may be different from Western standards. Being informed about local laws, customs, and cultural attitudes is important for successfully transitioning into a new culture. In addition, U.S. citizens are subject to the laws and judicial process of host nation governments, and understanding legal issues--such as the legality of same-sex partnerships or specific laws pertaining to gender and sexual identity--will help keep LGBT travelers safe.

Best Practices from OSAC Constituents in Academia

Addressing issues of LGBT safety and security abroad helps prepare students’ expectations and helps them avoid potential unsafe situations. Some academic OSAC constituents have incorporated LGBT issues into their orientation programs for study abroad. Others have hosted workshops, distributed written materials, or conducted pre- and post- trip interviews with LGBT students to both inform them and record their experiences to help inform future LGBT-identifying students. OSAC academic constituents with programs in Africa contributed to the below summary of best practices for preparing LGBT students for life abroad, which may be useful to all OSAC constituents, regardless of industry:

- Provide a forum or a space for travelers to ask questions or voice their concerns about LGBT living in Africa.
- Outline the LGBT resources or support organizations available in the U.S., on campus, or in the destination country, if available.
- Educate travelers on host nation restrictions surrounding freedom of expression and association as it pertains to LGBT communities.
- Collect, document, and share past LGBT student experiences traveling, living, or studying in Africa.
- Discuss local laws prohibiting homosexuality.

- Provide suggestions to travelers on how to deescalate confrontations or remove themselves from potentially unsafe situations.
- Advise students to travel and go out in groups.
- Recommend travelers consider how their LGBT identity may impact their relationships with host nationals, local students, and faculty.
- Advise against excessive displays of affection in public.
- Be wary of “new-found friends” who could be criminals trying to exploit LGBT travelers.
- Suggest LGBT students establish a support structure in the U.S., amongst fellow students or administrators.
- Discuss how cultural perceptions and behavioral signals around LGBT people can be different in Africa than they are in the U.S. For example, men and women holding hands with friends of the same gender may be common, while certain types of dress, hairstyles, and jewelry may be associated with homosexuality.
- Advise students that being “open and out” can invite harassment.
- Educate travelers on local cultural attitudes, such as the belief that homosexuality is “un-African,” that it is imported from developed nations, that it does not exist in Africa, or that it is “immoral.”

Outlook

Though travel in Africa will likely continue to have its challenges for LGBT students in the near-term, most travelers have positive and fulfilling experiences. Being cognizant of local laws, perceptions, and the general security environment is important to mitigating risks associated with LGBT study, work, or travel in Africa. The wave of anti-gay legislation and campaigns in the last five years in Africa could be a reaction to homosexuality being more openly discussed, the growing visibility of the LGBT community, or a reaction to international pressure by donor countries to improve gay rights.

[1] “The Love that Still Dare not Speak its Name,” The Independent. 11 January 2010.