



Intern Guide: Wildlife Rehabilitation & Conservation in Cape Town, South Africa

Welcome to Cape Town and SANCCOB! Interning in wildlife rehabilitation and conservation in South Africa is an incredibly rewarding experience, but arriving prepared can make a big difference. Here are a few things I wish I'd known before coming:



Tip #1: Dirty Work

Insight: Cleaning is a huge part of animal care, which means lots of scrubbing, laundry, and foodprep. Bring clothes and shoes you don't mind getting dirty. Crocs are a must and layers are helpful, as mornings can be cold regardless of the season.

My Experience: I was surprised to be tasked with scrubbing crates, mopping floors, cleaning dishes, sanitizing equipment, and doing laundry during my first week. It didn't feel like animal work, but I quickly learned that every duty plays a role and just how vital cleanliness is for preventing infection and disease.

Cultural Context: There is a strong emphasis on teamwork in South Africa. You'll be trained by "rehabbers," and competency is assessed before you can move on to new tasks. Everyone, no matter their title, pitches in to help.



Tip #2: Fish Prep

Insight: The handling, chopping, and blending of fish is a daily chore. It is messy and smelly, but you'll get used to it. It is important to ask questions, take notes, and not be afraid to make mistakes.

My Experience: I have spent a lot of time chopping fish and inserting oral medications into whole fish. It was a repetitive task and I smelled of fish, but it helped me understand the center's feeding protocols and importance of nutrition plans.

Cultural Context: Wildlife work in South Africa is hands-on. It involves physical labor and you're expected to keep a good attitude.



Tip #3: Respect for Protocols and People

Insight: Listen to rehabbers, follow instructions and protocols, and always ask before acting.

My Experience: I like wearing bright colors, but I learned that penguins are startled by them. Had I not asked about proper work attire, I might have worn bright colored crocs to work and caused them stress.

Cultural Context: Workplace culture in South Africa places a high value on respect for others and structure. It is important to ask questions and understand that protocols are in place for good reason. There's a strong culture of trust in expertise, and following instructions and protocols are seen as both respectful and safe; for both animals and your team.



4. Commute Time

Insight: Taxis/Ubers are easy to arrange for your work commute, but traffic and transport can be unpredictable. Always allow for extra time and pack a water bottle, snacks, and lunch.

My Experience: My work site was 20+ miles from my home, and I did not account for morning traffic delays and failed to pack lunch on my first day. My Uber did not arrive at the time I reserved it and I found no time to order food to my workplace. Luckily, there was a small, on-site cafe. I quickly learned to reserve an Uber 15 minutes ahead of schedule and to pack a water bottle, a few snacks, and a lunch (usually leftovers from dinner).

Cultural Context: Some locals plan for “African time,” which means they may approach timing and scheduling with a more relaxed approach. Therefore, taxis and shuttles may not arrive at the exact time you request them. Flexibility is important.



Tip #5: Tea Time

Insight: Food, especially tea, is more about connecting with people than just taking a break.

My Experience: Every morning we get a break, which is referred to as “tea time.” At first, I thought I had to drink tea, but I learned that it’s more about connecting with people than drinking tea. It’s now something I look forward to, and I’m finding that I’m talking more with others on my breaks rather than spending time on my phone.

Cultural Context: In South Africa, tea time is a daily ritual. It’s about sharing and connecting with others. Saying “yes” when someone offers you something is a way of showing respect and accepting hospitality.



Tip #6: Take Time to Explore

Insight: Cape Town, South Africa is not only beautiful, but is rich in history, diversity, and culture. There are many places to explore, from beaches and wildlife reserves to mountains and marketplaces. Take every opportunity to get out, tour, explore, and experience everything you can. Many of the tours accept cash only, so be sure to order South African RAND before leaving.

My Experience: A few of my most memorable experiences included visiting Boulders Beach and seeing African penguins waddling freely on the sand. I also went on a tour of the Garden Route, which I highly recommend. The 3-day tour included a 4x4 safari drive, kayaking, exploring the Cango Caves, an elephant encounter, and bungee-jumping off Bloukrans Bridge, one of the highest jumps in the world. Another favorite was surf lessons at Muizenberg Beach. Many of these experiences pushed me outside my comfort zone, but in the best way. Exploring South Africa is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure!

Cultural Context: South Africans take pride in the beauty of their land, its people and culture, and nature/wildlife. Exploring outside of work helps to connect with South Africa’s nature and culture. Asking locals for recommendations is also a great way to connect and initiate meaningful conversations.