Last summer, Pamela Sebeza '21 boarded a plane from her home country of Rwanda to begin the 17-hour journey to Princeton. This year, she embarked on another journey across the Atlantic, this time to participate in Princeton’s language-immersion program in Aix-en-Provence, France.

Sebeza had always dreamed of coming to the U.S. for school. “I knew I wanted to go to college outside of Rwanda because I wanted to know more about the world and get the best education possible. I also knew that I was going to have to work really hard to make this dream a reality.”

After high school, Sebeza was accepted to a selective program called Bridge2Rwanda, that helps prepare high-performing students from East African countries for undergraduate study in the U.S. Based on her interest in politics, the program advisers encouraged her to apply to Princeton.

“I don’t know what Princeton saw in me, but I got in!” she jokes.

While the prospect of moving across the world alone and adjusting to a completely new culture would be daunting for many 19-year-olds, Sebeza was not intimidated. She jumped right into life at Princeton, joining the African dance group and enrolling in several politics courses, her prospective major.

Walking through the University’s Academic Expo at the start of her first semester, Sebeza found her interest piqued by the Department of French and Italian’s summer language immersion program in Aix-en-Provence, or Aix.

“I grew up speaking French until I was 13, when the Rwandan government changed the official language taught in schools from French to English,” she says. “Since then, I concentrated on learning English. I hardly used French, especially because most people in my generation in Rwanda don’t know the language.”

While she had planned to test out of the University’s language requirement, she decided to enroll in French courses so she would be eligible to apply to the program in Aix.

For Sebeza, the purpose of studying abroad was twofold: “I wanted to be reminded of the French that I used to know, and I also wanted the perspective of ‘going abroad’ as an American college student.”

“As an international student, you’re already ‘studying abroad,’ but being in a country outside of America with your classmates means you’re all experiencing something new together.”

The four-week program in Aix is designed to give students an immersive linguistic and cultural experience. Students attend classes, stay with host families and participate in activities such as a cooking class with a French chef and art projects with local artists.

This year, students also got an introduction to sociolinguistics, or the study of how language and society intersect. Through an ethnographic project called “Voices in the City,” students interviewed a diverse group of Aix residents about their experiences with the local dialect, Provençal.
"I was thinking that we were going to spend a lot of time in class, but we ended up spending much more time outdoors, experiencing French culture and talking to French people. Being in Aix really gave me a taste of life in France: the bread, the cheese, the markets...it was so much fun!"

The program helped Sebeza think about ways she might use French in her plans for the future. "My hope is that after graduation, I will be able to go back to Rwanda and work in their government; I’m studying politics because I want to learn how to make policies and set sustainable goals that can help make Rwanda a better place.

"Since French is one of Rwanda’s official languages, I want to be able to speak it fluently, which is why I’m now planning to get a certificate in French."

Sebeza is also pursuing French for a more personal reason. "My parents know French more than they know English, so when I went back home this summer and was able to speak to them in French, it felt really good. It’s important to me to be able to connect with the people and the place I am from."

"As an international student, you’re already ‘studying abroad,’ but being in a country outside of America with your classmates means you’re all experiencing something new together."

— Pamella Sebeza ‘21