

# **How I Did it**

## **Past and Present**

### **Participants Explain the Planning Process**

*By Ariele Foster*

Last March I weighed my options and decided that if I wanted to take a semester to study abroad it would have to happen in the coming fall. I had dreamed for years of living in other countries, and I knew that college was one of the few times in many people's lives when they have the freedom to travel.

Since I wanted to go to a non-English speaking country, but lacked foreign language skills, I knew that a gradual introduction would be more comfortable than sudden immersion. I knew also that I did not want spend the whole semester in a city—where foreign universities are located—and that I wanted a reasonable amount of academic freedom and inspiring, challenging atmosphere with an academic program concentrating in my areas of interest.

Even though I had no Spanish background, I was most attracted to programs in Spanish-speaking countries. So by the time in the spring when I had to choose a program I had already finished a three-week immersion Spanish course and was currently in the middle of a second semester Spanish course.

My advisers encouraged me to consider the direct exchange program that my school has with ICADS (Institute for Central American Development Studies) in Costa Rica. I spoke with the study abroad counselor and students who had recently finished the program; their ideas and experience were crucial in helping me to make a decision. From them I received a good grasp of the program's strengths and weaknesses; I realized it matched what I needed and that its potential drawbacks were ones that I could handle.

The ICADS Field Course is an ecology and sustainable development program that is divided in three month-long blocks. The first month is spent near San Jose, taking intensive Spanish classes and courses on the ecology and sociology of Central America. During this time we lived with host families within walking distance of the institute. This was an intensive yet low-key introduction to the country—we studied and practiced Spanish, yet we spent most of the day with fellow gringos. We had a fair amount of free time to go to the Internet Café, find the best restaurants, see movies, etc.

During block two, the two professors, their assistant, and the students (up to 12) travel together around the country studying farming methods and sustainable energy projects and doing small science projects. We stayed mostly in hotels, stopping one weekend in San Jose.

The third block is spent in the location of your choice (usually a site visited during block two) doing an independent project, or, commonly a combination of the two. Finally, everyone comes together for a week at the end of the semester to turn in papers, discuss independent projects, and celebrate.

I am currently in the middle of my independent project (studying disease control in organically grown bananas and working on a permaculture farm.) My energy level and optimism have been amazingly high considering the fact that during block two we were essentially in school 24 hours a day with almost no privacy—all in the rainiest month of the year.

How could I have prepared more thoroughly than I did? I might have read more about tropical agriculture, the subject of my independent project, but I would not have known where to start. I wish I had known more Spanish before coming—if I were to do this over I would try to arrive in Central America a few weeks earlier to get a head start and take an additional intensive language course. However, I was able to communicate comfortably with my host family, and the truth is that having confidence in your ability to communicate is a hundred times more important than being at a particular level in the language.

The most important lesson that I have learned by being here is the perspective the experience has given me on environmental problems throughout the world. Now I am determined to be more active than ever before in efforts to protect the environment.

Many of the ideas I held about the developing world and even about travel and tourism have changed. The complexity and subtlety of issues of land preservation and agriculture are now apparent to me, and this will surely influence my behavior and academic direction for the rest of my college years.

I highly recommend this program and studying abroad generally to anyone wavering. It is one of the most richly rewarding, safe, yet adventurous ways of traveling. Whenever you can, put aside your doubts and take advantage of this unique time. Four months or even nine months will pass more rapidly than you could have ever imagined, and they are more valuable than years of normal college experience.

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# Prepare Yourself

*By Bo Zimmerman*

Is there anything better than going off to some distant place where you have endless opportunities to learn, meet people, and get, to know more about yourself? While there is no way to be fully prepared for everything you will do while abroad, it helps to know as much as you can.

Let's start with the time before you even start looking at programs or even other countries. Your roommate tells you about an information session on overseas study and you go. You see all these people talking about amazing experiences they had on the other side of the world. They pique your interest, and you start thinking, "Hey, I'd like to do that." But you have absolutely no clue where to begin.

What country? What to study? Homestay or dorm? The prospect of even deciding on a place to go can seem daunting. However, once you get started, you'll start to see that all the different opportunities allow you to tailor your needs. So hit the Internet, go to your school's study abroad office, talk to advisers and people who have been where you might want to go, contact programs and learn you can about them. Find the program with the right location, the right price, the right course work, the right travel time, etc., and you will have that much less to worry about before you leave.

After all that is done, the real fun begins. You head off to Argentina or Italy. Travel extra light, and leave lots of room in your bags going over.

With clothing the word is versatility. Bring clothes that are comfortable, look good, and can stand some wear and tear. Shoes that are good for walking will become your best friends.

Try to save as much money as you can before you go. Whatever you set aside, you *will* need more. An idea that friend of mine had is to have somebody at home make small amounts available to you as the semester or year goes on. Be smart and frugal; try not to miss out on something big (like a trip to the Canary Islands) because you spent so much cash on dinners the month before. The best thing about studying abroad is travel. Allow time and save money to do it.

Once you've been there for a while, traveled, taken some great classes, and hung out with the locals, you feel comfortable after the initial shock of a new culture. Now comes the hard part: going home.

Many people don't realize that the study abroad experience will last long after you return. Reverse culture shock takes hold, and you begin to see all of the weird and unpleasant things about people at home. You want to tell them about your experiences, but you find that you cannot explain it, they just don't appreciate the changes you've been through. You've become more independent, but mom and dad can't see that. After finding a home some place else, you have come back to the old scene and an old set of rules that don't seem to apply to you anymore. It's very easy to get stuck in a rut here but you can do things to help yourself out. For example, I've kept in touch with friends that I made abroad, and we have already had several reunions. Get involved in the international scene at your school. I have become a peer advising intern for the study abroad office, and it has turned out to be a big support base. As with planning the trip, you must be proactive.

The memories you have from your experience overseas will be with you forever. The more prepared you are, the more you will learn and the more fun you will have. Like studying for an exam or researching a paper, how you prepare yourself will determine how well you will do.

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## A Study Abroad Checklist

*By Aileen Alexandra Finley*

They say hindsight is 20/20. Study abroad is an endeavor that should be undertaken only with a full armory of advice, input, and evaluation. A little forethought and research may make crucial differences in the experience itself. As a veteran study-abroad, here are my practical tips on how to make your trip less stressful—before, during, and after.

**Before You Leave:** First, make sure the place you are headed is to the place you want to be. In addition to geographic location, consider different living accommodations: dorms, apartments, host families. Many programs do not offer options, so be sure that the one you pick suits your living preferences. Be sure to consider the presence of other Americans before committing to a program location. Even foreign universities may offer “foreigners only” classes; others may place international students in the same classrooms as native students. Research the academic quality of the institutions you consider.

**What You Should Have known:** My biggest regret was overpacking. Pack smartly and lightly. Take clothes that do not require dry cleaning, ironing, or special care.

My second regret was having all of my money with me from the beginning. This led to a lot of frivolous spending at the start of the trip which prevented me from doing things at the end of that trip I could have afforded to do otherwise. Keep an “untouchable” stash for the last third of the trip.

Finally, I regret not structuring my study abroad experience so that there was time for extra traveling. After all, if you are already there why not make the most of it and travel all you can?

**Home Again:** Now that it's over—probably the best experience of your life—it's hard to hold onto that high. So look for opportunities to apply your experience abroad to your life at home. I have kept in close touch with the friends I made in Costa Rica and with my wonderful host family. I have also become an intern and peer adviser in my school's international studies office and have continued my language study.

Other ways to incorporate study abroad into your life back home is to become part of a cultural club or an organization that promotes study abroad. Volunteer work with ESL (English as a Second Language) students or in communities with high numbers of immigrants are other ways to apply lessons, learned abroad to life here. Continue study of the host country language and culture. Make a scrapbook And start saving up to go back. All these strategies can make re-entry less stressful and more fulfilling.

The most important thing to remember is that study abroad does not have to end with a return home. It is a truly life-altering experience, and it is only natural that life upon return will reflect this. Your experience has changed who you are and how you see the world. Embrace this. Use it not only to further your own goals but to help to start someone else down their own path. Sharing what you have learned now is the best way of keeping your past alive.

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## Talk to People

*By Christopher Moore*

Talk to people who have been on your selected program. Ask them about their experience, what did they do for fun? Were there any interesting people who gave them insights into the country and culture?

Get in-country contacts: friends, relatives, family, friends of friends. Don't be shy. Call a contact up when in your host country. Tell them you are new to the country and would like to meet with them to chat and find out a little about living there.

Offer to take them to dinner or buy them a drink They normally are more than happy to assist you in "getting to know the place! People are usually pleased you're interested in their country and will often be proud to show you around. Smile, ask questions, test your language skills, and don't be afraid to laugh at yourself or of being laughed at by others. It's all part of the fun.

I went to Spain inexperienced, naive, and deluded by stereotypes. I left Spain with a new perspective on the world, a greater sense of independence, and a passion for travel. The most important things I've learned are: be prepared for anything, assume nothing, and keep smiling. Follow this and you're guaranteed success on any trip you take.

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## Join a Local Group

*By Susan Loiacona*

The single most important piece of advice I would give to students going abroad is to join a local activity group and to try, and spend as little time as possible with other exchange students. Probably the most valuable thing I did in Chile to gain Chilean friends was joining the climbing team. I saw the same small group of people three or four times a week and went climbing with them on the weekends. Climbing was our universal language.

My year was filled with rock climbing with billy goats, trekking in beautiful national parks, visiting penguins and admiring enormous glaciers, climbing active volcanoes) being chased by a bull, and crossing the driest desert in the world. I had an adventure. I learned things during my year abroad that I would have never been able to learn in the United States. I learned that I can survive in a land where they speak a different language, where I know nobody.

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# Study the Culture

*By Rebecca Talaga*

I didn't know the price of milk in America when I went to Mongolia. Nor did I know the price of beef, bread, or soap. Nowhere on the packing list that the Peace Corps sent me did it say to bring a grocery receipt showing the prices of the basic necessities of life. Even if the list had mentioned it, I was too busy buying long Johns and wool scarves to give any thought to something as silly as that. And yet, during my two plus years there, I wished for a grocery receipt more times than I wished for sliced bread and peanut butter.

Mongolians are enormously curious about the difference in prices of basic items. Almost every Mongolian that I met would, at some point, ask me about the price of milk in America. And the price of beef, and the price of potatoes, etc.

What I did bring that compensated for my lack of knowledge about the price of milk was a basic understanding of Mongolia. The Peace Corp's comprehensive pre-departure packet included a wealth of information on shopping, food, family life, weather, traditions, history, daily life, education, and customs. As a result, I didn't have to spend time wondering how to act when invited into someone's *ger* (yurt). I could focus on getting to know the people instead of worrying about the appropriate way to drink the milk tea or where to sit. The focus became one of expanding my knowledge and becoming a part of the culture.

Traveling, studying, volunteering, and working or living abroad are all an exchange—an exchange that requires knowledge of both the culture that you are entering into and the one that you have come from. Having this knowledge can make for an immense and mutually satisfying experience as well as making any sojourner a responsible global citizen.

Since I have returned from Mongolia I have paid much more attention to what is happening in my own culture. Among other things, I now know the price of milk! The next time I go abroad, I will include along with my camera and guidebooks a little piece of paper that weighs nothing yet means much: a grocery receipt.

*REBECCA TALAGA is from Oregon and started traveling in high school as an exchange student to Australia. She attended the Univ. of Redlands, CA for her undergraduate work in international relations and traveled to Korea, Russia, and Europe. After graduating she joined the Peace Corps as a community developer and English teacher. She is currently an MA student at the School for International Training.*