

Transitions Abroad

An Overseas Experience Will Change Your Life Forever

By Alaina N. Fields, Spelman College

Studying abroad was a fulfilling experience which resulted in many changes in my perception and understanding of the world; it was an exceptional opportunity to learn first hand about a culture distinct from my own. As I representative of my country, my race, my religion, and my gender, I had an opportunity to learn but also to teach. While everyone's overseas experience is unique and bur responses to change will be as varied as our experiences, there are some things that will help ensure that your transition is a smooth one.

To get the full experience of traveling abroad, one must first be prepared to step out of his or her comfort zone, the area where everything is known and easy. Things will not be the same, so do not expect them to be. The reason that one travels is to experience the new, and this is not possible until you let go of your conventional ideas of what is "right" and "wrong." I have found that one spends the majority of one's first time abroad fighting the transition, you will save a lot of time and have a much richer experience when you accept and embrace the differences.

To begin with, read up on the history of your host country, including information on the background of the people, common customs and practices, and the economy. But keep in mind that the fun of traveling is sometimes not knowing everything there is to know about the place. I never read the popular guide-books because I knew that they would influence my perception of the country and its people. That is exactly what I did not want. Instead, I wanted the freedom to form my own impressions and opinions and to explore my new surroundings without a guide.

Practical matters include taking safety and health precautions seriously. Know what to eat and what not to eat and what inoculations are required for the region.

Take care of money matters before you leave. Find out the rate of exchange and plan a monthly budget based on that information. How much is public transportation? How much is food? If you are studying, how much do books and other materials cost? Also, find out how money can be sent to you. Always have some of the foreign currency on you when you arrive because you never know when you will be able to get to a bank. Most countries have banks with automatic teller machines (ATMs), but it is always helpful to have a credit card in case of emergencies.

If there is a number that you will call frequently, work out a telephone billing program with your long distance carrier before you go. In Buenos Aires there were "locutorios" -places to make phone calls where you pay on the spot. This helped me control spending, but I didn't know that such places existed until after two months of making phone calls with my calling card and paying a surcharge. Of course e-mail is always the cheapest way to communicate.

The single most important part of my experience abroad has always been staying with a host family. This is the best way to totally immerse yourself in the culture. You will eat native foods and listen to popular music. In conversation at meals, and even around the TV set, you'll learn what is not in textbooks. I wish that before I went abroad someone had stressed the importance of completely immersing myself in the culture. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, I socialized mainly with the North American students in my exchange program. My comfort impeded my learning.

Cultural Immersion

If the country is not an English-speaking country, try not to speak English. Participate in as many activities as possible that force you to break away from what is comfortable. Look for ways to meet local people. Join a cooking class or an art class or a dance class or a gym. If you're at all inclined, attend a place of worship. Also, try to volunteer in your field of interest. If you are interested in medicine, volunteer at a hospital. In a country that is not English speaking, you can usually get a job teaching English.

One story illustrates how I have applied what I learned abroad to my current interests. While studying in Japan, I got very sick after being bitten by an insect. Later found out that the bug bite had nothing to do with my illness, but at the time I was terrified because I thought that I had contracted some rare disease and that I was going to die in Japan. The fact that I had not gotten the shots I was supposed to have added to my panic. I went to the local hospital and tried to explain my symptoms to the doctor. I panicked because no one there could speak English, and I was afraid that because I wasn't able to communicate with the doctor he would not be able to tell what was wrong with me. I experienced for the first time what it was really like being a foreigner. I had traveled before, but I had never felt the confusion, the frustration, and the fear that I felt at that moment. I realized that this is the experience of millions of people daily in this and other countries—people who are constantly neglected, taken advantage of, and misunderstood because they cannot communicate their needs and their fears. Like me that day, these people need an advocate. I decided after that experience that I wanted to open a clinic where there would be doctors who speak different languages and are accessible to all people. Healthcare should not be a privilege extended to those who have a certain socioeconomic status or who are of a certain race or who speak a certain language; it should be a right extended to all people.

Some may think of overseas travel and study as a fun thing to do during the junior year in college, a time to goof off—with the added bonus of another entry on the resume. Of course traveling is entertaining and exciting, and it does look good on one's resume to have lived in another country. But it is more than that. It is an experience of exchange that will change your life forever. :1

ALAINA N. FIELDS, who attends Spelman College in Atlanta, is preparing to be a bilingual physician. In summer 1993 she assisted the project manager for the South Africa/South Pacific Program to Eradicate Racism (World Council of Churches)¹ Geneva, Switzerland; in school year 1994 she was a DC, Public School Youth Ambassador in Seoul, Korea and hosted a Korean student in the U.S.; in summer 1994 she was an exchange student with Youth for Understanding in central Japan; in summer 1998 she was an exchange student from Spelman College in Oaxaca, Mexico; and in fall 1998 she was an exchange student with the COPA/Butler Univ. program in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Go with an Open Mind

By Dirk Padfield, Penn State Univ.

I spent my first day in Egypt reading novels in my dorm room because I was too afraid to venture out into the streets of Cairo. The other American students had not yet arrived, and I felt that my Arabic was inadequate to communicate with Egyptians. When I finally did leave my room, I went to Pizza Hut for dinner.

Ten months later, on my last night before leaving Egypt to fly back home, my Syrian friend Moez and his family joined me in the taxi to the airport. We chatted easily in Arabic. At check-in, the airport security guards appeared suspicious when I answered all of their questions in their own language. Perhaps they thought I was a spy. But they eventually allowed me to board the plane with my luggage laden with Arabic dictionaries, newspapers, and pictures from my travels in Egypt, Jordan, and Israel.

During the months in between, I learned to be less stressed by time schedules after witnessing the Carefree nature of the Egyptians as they sat on their porches and in cafes smoking water pipes and talking with their friends for hours on end. I learned what it really means to be poor as I visited my friend Moer in his basement home where he took cold showers from a hose attached to the sink faucet. I learned about the selflessness of people who worked long hours each day for very little money but who would not think twice about asking you to share dinner with their family. I learned about my own spirituality when I saw how Muslims stopped their cars on the street when prayer times arrived and bowed their heads to the pavement in worship of their God.

As I think about all of these things now, I wonder how I could have better prepared for these adventures abroad. What should I have done differently to have benefited more from the experience?

My answer is quite simple: Nothing. I can say this because I went abroad with an open mind, ready to shed my prejudices and inhibitions in order that I could be immersed in a way of life, a religion, a culture so different from my own. Looking back, I realize that an open mind is the best equipment for anyone who wants to live or study in a different land. Apart from some essential aspects of the language and culture, most of the things you will need to know you can learn once you arrive.

Now that I am back at Penn State, I recall the apprehension I felt when I first considered the prospect of studying abroad. Because my major is electrical engineering and the American Univ. in Cairo does not offer that major, my advisers recommended that I not study there for an entire year. With careful planning of class schedules and courses, however, I have been able to make up all of the courses I missed while studying abroad. I will be finishing a major in both electrical engineering and international studies in four years. Studying abroad was certainly not an impossible feat, and it was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

With my background in Middle Eastern studies and engineering, I plan to return to the Middle East to work as an engineer after I graduate. The experience in Egypt served not only to introduce me to an entirely new way of life but also evoked a great desire to continue my travels and experience other cultures and languages. I know that as long as I take with me the quality of openmindedness the doors of hospitality will open wherever I go, and I will be prepared for anything I may encounter.

DIRK PADFIELD spent a year in Israel after high school doing voluntary service at the Baha'i World Center. There he became interested in the Arabic language, which eventually led to study in Cairo during his second year at university. Along with a major in electrical engineering, he will graduate from Pennsylvania State Univ. with a degree in international studies with a concentration in the Middle East.

Giving Something Back

By Jeff Talbert, Baylor Univ.

The South African flying ant is similar to a small dragonfly. I held one in front of me for several seconds, trying not to think about what I had to do. Then, quickly, I picked off the wings, pinched off the head, and popped the bug's body into my mouth. I was relieved to find that it had no taste. The Zulu family with whom I was living smiled and laughed approvingly. By joining them in consuming this special delicacy, I bonded more closely with them.

I believe this is the first key to an appreciation of an overseas experience: relinquish your own customs, desires, and expectations and embrace those of your hosts. The second key is to leave something of yourself behind that will establish a bond.

The program with which I traveled is called Youth With a Mission (YWAM), an international Christian Organization with bases in over 120 nations. YWAM owns three "mercy ships" which sail to Third World countries to provide free surgical and dental work. Medical facilities are located on board, and the surgeries take place while the ship is docked in each county. Satellite groups also go in-land to where they teach carpentry, plumbing, and other basic skills.

Nobody in YWAM receives a salary. My cost for working with YWAM was \$7,000 for five months. I worked and saved much of this prior to leaving, but many of my friends gave me money because my main purpose in going was to help people in need. I docked with the ship in East London, South Africa and soon learned about the "white" culture, a mix of Dutch and British. I tried surfing and saw exotic animals. Although fun, touring was not fulfilling.

During the fourth months, 10 of us went to volunteer in a Zulu township. That is where I learned about a South African culture that has been swept under an apartheid rug for many years. The township in which we lived is about 100 miles outside of Durban, in an area called the Valley of a Thousand Hills. Life was simple-no electricity, no running water, no need for a calendar. We were the first whites to live in the Zulu township. They accepted us warmly and without hesitation.

It wasn't always easy to live in that environment. One day when I asked my Zulu friend about the curiously-textured floor, he said, "Dung and mud." Had it been just a floor it would have been "no big deal," but that mud and dung was my bed! The toilet consisted of a rusty sheet of metal with a hole torn through it. Sleeping was also an adventure. During the night, I heard rats scampering in the walls and running over the roof beams. Often the clumsy rodents knocked debris down on me.

But my discomforts were well worth it: The Zulu family became my family and I found it hard to leave them behind. My advice is not to settle for an overseas experience that simply earns you credits or gives you a momentary thrill. Have a higher goal-determine to give something back. This is what will fulfill you the most. To experience a country you must first know the people. You may not be called upon to eat flying ants, but sacrifices will be required.

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An Educational Voyage

By Gregg Cummings, Univ. of Oregon

When I left on my Salzburg Semester, my mother advised me to do these things:

"Stay with as many families as possible. Don't take a Walkman on the train. Read as many books as you can."

I am proud to say I followed her advice. I stayed in nine different homes in seven countries while in Europe and as a result gained more knowledge than I did in all of my class work. I became a "connoisseur" of continental cuisine, local folk music, regional art, and nature in the south of France.

By opening my mind and eyes and listening, the second thing I gained from my mother's advice were new friendships. While taking long journeys by train, I met people from around the world. I know if I had my headphones on, I would have missed out on some of the funniest experiences and people in the world.

In following the third piece of advice my mother gave me, I read in my spare time and on empty trains. I read classics that I had skipped in my younger days. This was just another giant step in my education while traveling. Time was so much more abundant because there were no meetings, lectures, or jobs to worry about. So there was time for relaxation, socializing, and yes, even studying.

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Benefits of Exchange

By Kelly Beth Rich, Samford Univ.

When I was sophomore in high school I went to France with my school. When I got back [immediately asked my parents if we could be a host family for an exchange student. As an only child, [wanted to know what it was like to have a sister. We learned that we were on a long list of families wanting a French girl, but my parents and I were patient, and eventually, through the ASSE exchange program, our wish came true.

Over the school year, Emilie and I bonded and became like true sisters. I was invited to go to France for a second time and stay with Emilie's family in Jouy-le Moutier just outside of Paris. I now had two sisters, two brothers, and a whole new set of parents and grandparents. During my time in France I learned so much that my life took on a different meaning, with different goals and different values.

Being a member of a much larger family, I realized the importance of such things as sitting down for meals, of listening to and truly appreciating one's family.

My goals in life changed. I went from being content with just finishing high school to wanting to go straight to the top. I decided to go to college and to major in international relations and French. Now, a sophomore at Samford Univ., I see where my interests have taken me in just four years. I will soon be making my fourth trip to Europe—to visit friends in Germany, see Scotland for the first time, and take a two-week class in London with my university. Next I plan to do an internship with the Canadian parliament and then a semester 'abroad in Morocco. My interest in other cultures has led me to find many possibilities to travel and to work to make the possibilities a reality. It is only by really searching that I have found so many opportunities. When meeting people from another country I befriend them and talk with them to learn more about their culture. As a result, I now have many friends all over the world and an open invitation to visit them whenever I can find ways to fund the travel.

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Choosing a Program

Josh Lawlor, Haverford College

The study abroad office should be the first stop for students and recent graduates preparing to go abroad. Since all the program brochures you find there are very inviting and this can make choosing a program difficult, it's a good idea to figure out your priorities first in order to narrow your list.

Do you want to live in an English-speaking or non-English speaking country? If you have even minimal experience with a foreign language, choosing a country where that language is spoken can be much more rewarding.

If learning a new language or improving your existing language ability is important to you, consider the options. Does the program you're considering offer an initial language intensive orientation period? Are classes conducted in English or the native language? Will you take integrated classes at a foreign institution or will you be learning only with other Americans on your program?

You should also be aware of the housing options. Living with a family is often the best way to learn a language because you will be forced to speak it constantly. If you want more freedom and are considering a program where you can live in student housing~ ask how much past participants interacted with foreign students. Some programs house all the Americans together in one location. This can make it extremely difficult to improve your language skills. The best way to determine which living situation is right for you is to contact people who have participated in your program.

Once you find several programs that meet your language needs, look into what else the program offers. How extensive is the orientation period? What resources are available to students? How qualified are the program administration? Are there opportunities to work or gain experience in internships? How easy is it for Americans to become involved with extracurricular activities? How convenient is the housing to the university or to downtown? If housing is far from the city, is public transportation available?

The city you choose is also important. While big cities offer many attractions, it is sometimes easier to feel less like a tourist in smaller cities. Also, large cities tend not to be representative of the country as a whole.

Be sure to check with your academic adviser to make sure that your home college or university will accept credits from a foreign institution and that you will be able to graduate on time.

Finally, you should understand the vacation schedule of your program so you can plan your travel. Passes purchased in advance in the U.S. can save you money.

Once you have picked your dream program, it's time to plan what to take with you. Whatever you decide to bring, make sure that you can carry all your luggage by yourself. Although my suitcase had wheels, I was not prepared for the lack of escalators in the Stockholm train station. If you plan on traveling at all while abroad, you should seriously consider bringing a backpack. While you may be tempted to bring a pack that could serve you well for two months in the wilderness, a smaller backpack is more convenient for travel between cities.

If you take the time to find a program that's right for you, the benefits of your experience will continue well after you return to the States. Regardless of where you go, living and traveling abroad will increase your confidence and strengthen your sense of self-reliance. Your future academic experiences will be more fulfilling because of what you've learned from immersion in a foreign culture. I was able to draw from my experience in Germany for parts of my senior research thesis. My part-time internship with a German consulting firm has impressed many potential employers.

JOSH LAWLOR, a political science major at Haverford College, studied in Freiburg, Germany through the Institute for the International Education of Students German Program during the 1998 spring/summer semester. He held an internship with a German health economics consulting firm. During vacations and after the program ended he traveled throughout Europe.

Know Before You Go

By Loretta V. Ramirez Loyola Marymount Univ. It wasn't until I enrolled in an art appreciation class that my memories of Europe were tinged with regret.

Day after day in my art class I realized how much I had overlooked while strolling down narrow streets on my way to major tourist attractions. I knew only enough to glance at the art so famous that the street vendors had replicas of it for sale on T-shirts. By the end of the semester I desperately craved to return to all the places I had already visited, this time to give them my full attention.

This is not to say that one must be steeped in the appreciation of the art, culture, and history of a country before arrival. A full-blown education in art appreciation isn't essential, but a willingness to look at those things not pictured in travel brochures is necessary to have a complete appreciation of the country. There is great fun in going to the top of the Eiffel Tower, taking a picture in front of Big Ben, and riding a gondola through the canals of Venice. But if that is the whole experience, a sort of mass production tourist experience of Europe, then you're not getting your money's worth.

Before I returned to Europe again I took courses, read books, studied maps. I soaked up all I could about the places where I would be traveling. And when I returned I felt that I saw more in one day than I had the entire time of my first trip

Knowing as much as possible about the places you visit will open your eyes, build up the pre-departure excitement, raise the thrill of finally seeing the sight, and make the money you spend on the trip a better investment.

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Pre-departure Travel Tips

by Lisa D. Cantey, Univ. of Virginia

Just a month earlier I had been staring down a cuy, a Peruvian delicacy that is in fact a guinea pig. I was trying to think of a polite way to explain my sudden switch to vegetarianism. Now all of a sudden I was back in the sterile U.S. staring down 160 students preparing to depart for semesters abroad.

When the overseas studies office at my university first asked me to speak at the pre-departure sessions, I thought of such helpful hints as "Travel-size soaps are better than big ones," and "Always carry a roll of toilet paper with you in your bag." Now it occurred to me that, although these tips are helpful, the most important things that I had learned from my time in Lima concerned less immediately practical matters, and nothing I could do could prepare someone else for the experience they were about to have.

So I gave the wisest advice I could think of: Always keep a sense of humor, be open to try new things, be accepting of ideas that seem strange, and take travel soaps instead of large bars. Also, of course, be cautious of any delicacy that looks like a rodent; then try it anyway. I promise, it tastes just like chicken.

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Surviving Is Enough

Lauren Benotti, UMASS-Amherst

On paper, I must have seemed like the perfect study abroad candidate. Not unlike most students who study abroad, I have always been a good student, accustomed to success. That's why when I first arrived in Spain and found myself lost on campus, confused by the language, and scared of not being able to relate to Spaniards, I wasn't sure how to handle it. I remember thinking, "How did I become a failure so quickly?"

The first day on campus I tried to find out where everything was and who everyone was: I just wanted to feel like I felt at home -but in Spain. Needless to say, it just wasn't going to work that way. When you're in a new country or culture and dealing with people who speak a different language the easiest things suddenly become difficult and you have to work at everything. It would have been nice to know that all I had to do was simply function once I was there: never mind being the well-rounded American student I once 'vat was so used to being in charge of my We and knowing what to expect at all times that this new uncertainty really threw me off guard. I wish someone had told me that I didn't have to triumph overseas, I just had to survive.

Sometimes the same things aren't as important over there as they are here. So you can't leave the U.S. with an agenda or a to-do list. Although it's nice to set goals for yourself abroad, when you find that these expectations are impossible to live up to, you may become unhappy and discouraged. Keep in mind that you're a brave and independent person just for taking the initiative to spend an extended amount of time in a new country. Those who can set aside the old and familiar to make room for the new and different in their lives deserve to be congratulated. Forget about getting straight As, making loads of new friends, and seeing every sight in your new country.

That leads me to another thing I wish I had known: It's normal to and yourself depressed sometimes, and it passes. The things that made me sad and homesick at night were often gone in the morning, although nothing had changed but myself. There will be times when you ask yourself why you ever decided to leave home in the first place. To this question you must confidently answer: Because I worked hard to get here and I deserve to be here.

People do change when they live in a new culture and learn to think and express themselves in another language. One of the reasons I decided to study overseas was to figure out who I am and what I am capable of doing on my own. I wanted a chance to get to know myself, aside from what others tell me they think I am. While there, I wasn't ready to change or to deal with the changed person I inevitably became. It is only now, almost two years since I came home, that I realize what culture shock really is.

Those who are planning on spending an extended period of time overseas need to be prepared for disappointment and surprise and for the positive and the negative feelings that may develop toward the new host country as well as toward the U.S. Studying abroad presents challenges unlike any that one may face at home, and it makes possible seemingly endless opportunities for accomplishment. It is a means of finding out who you are and what you are capable of becoming.

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On Being a Gaijin

By Tracy Rundstrom, Univ. of Missouri-Kansas City

The traveler takes with her a set of norms and standards to which everything "foreign" is compared.

What she often overlooks, however, is that she herself is a foreigner to those with whom she interacts while abroad. Spending a semester in Osaka, Japan filled me with a lifetime of memories-the adventures of traveling, learning a new language, living with a Japanese family and experiencing a very foreign culture were all amazing and memorable. However, the most Unforgettable of these was 'my experience of being a "gaijin," to use the Japanese, not so affectionate term for someone who is/was a foreigner, an outsider, a Westerner. For the first time in my life I experienced being part of a minority.

I had never thought much about my skin color or how it affected my life. While my experience in Japan was nothing like what minorities in America face on a day-to-day basis throughout their lives, I do feel it has given me some insight into their struggles,

It bothered me when a Japanese person chose to stand rather than sit in the empty seat next to me, or when people seemed to pull their dogs away from me as I passed them on the street. As a result, I developed two methods to deal with this behavior. The first, unfortunately, was to create a reason for their stares. In other words, I began acting in ways that I presumed they expected me to act. This attitude certainly justified their disapproving glances, at least in my mind.

My second reaction to this attention was to take it as natural curiosity and not something personal, and to try to become a good representative of a foreigner. I spoke in Japanese whenever I could, allowing people to ask me questions about myself and my country and following the cultural rules as much as possible. I came to realize that, for better or worse, we are all representatives of groups—whether of race, sex, age, nation, company, school, neighborhood, religion, or a million other subcategories. It's important to recognize that our actions reflect not only on us as individuals but also as members of groups. Therefore, my goal became to remain open, tolerant, positive, and friendly with the Japanese. This change in attitude had a dramatic affect on my experience. I learned to enjoy the attention and answered all sorts of questions about myself.

Of course, this didn't mean that I didn't still have frustrations. For one, stereotypes are hard to overcome because of reinforcing evidence: Once you get an idea in your head, you will remember the events that support it and forget those which negate it. So I would get particularly angry at other gaijin who played the "ugly American" role too well. Their actions made a more lasting impression than mine and exaggerated the bad image of Americans. But then again, maybe they were portraying a more realistic image of Americans. Stereotypes result from some truth, and if so many foreigners hold negative impressions of Americans, there must be something to it.

A second frustration came with the realization that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much Japanese I learned, no matter how long I lived there, I would never be "Japanese" in the way the Japanese person could become "American." Our society is based on diversity and acceptance; it is a country of immigrants. Japan is based on group similarities and homogenous qualities. So even if I became a Japanese citizen, I could never be Japanese racially, nor would I ever really be accepted.

I accepted my race because there was obviously nothing I could do about it, but [did continue to set the best example I could. I stopped looking for the negative aspects of the Japanese culture and started noticing the positive ones. I accepted the stares as a cultural reaction to me, not as something intended to be rude. Most importantly, I came to love my individuality and the country that gave it to me. Now that I am back in the U.S., I realize that we are all minorities, not because of our races but because of our individual traits. I invite anyone to stare at me, because, after all, I'm still a gaijin.

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The Shock of Arrival

By Rebecca A. Seebert, Lewis and Clark College

I sat down on the single bed with unfamiliar green and black sheets in my new room, the white sterile walls staring down on me. "Where am I and what am I doing here?" I asked myself, tears rolling down my cheeks.

Just a few minutes earlier, I had been dropped off at this campus compound of cafes, discos, and dorms. "I should be excited," I told myself. "Go explore. Go meet your new neighbors."

But I couldn't. I couldn't face someone with whom I could barely speak. I had had four years of German and one year abroad already, but I was petrified. After some time I worked up the courage (or was it simply hunger?) to walk to a cafe for dinner and use my basic German skills to order a Greek salad and a coke. This was not the place I wanted to be. I wanted to be with my parents and friends, walking around my familiar college campus, speaking my language.

The first few days I slept a lot and impatiently waited for the program to officially begin so I would be surrounded by some familiar faces from school. After four long, lonely days we had our first group dinner at a local cafe, and it was a blessing. English filled my ears. Some classmates were excited to be in Munich, but others, like me, were homesick, counting the days until the program would end.

Things soon began to improve as classes, group trips, and Oktoberfest. filled our first month. I met my floor-mates and my fear of leaving my room disappeared. The formerly intimidating city shrank in size as I became more familiar with the layout. I found the computer lab where the conveniences of email made my dismal days a bit more hopeful and where I could vent to my family and friends who, in return, would fill me in on the on goings of life at home. Life was becoming a bit more tolerable.

In January I was hired to work in a cafe, which helped my confidence immensely. I realized that I could speak, I could make it. During our two-month vacation I traveled around Germany and spoke with former West and East Germans about unification. This experience helped me to better understand the Germans.

More than anything, I found that keeping busy is what keeps one happy abroad. A job, a music group, fun classes-anything to keep busy and around local people will take an exchange successful and enjoyable. Those who only travel and spend time by themselves may end up with great photographs and a thick journal but with few valuable memories and experiences of their host country and they definitely will not have mastered the language.

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