



glimpse study abroad acclimation guides

american IDENTITY ABROAD

Editors

Hilary Costa
Kerala Goodkin

Design

Nicholas Fitzhugh



oh my!

Though Americans comprise less than five percent of the world population, the remaining 95 percent has the United States on its radar. Our global omnipresence can render an American's experience in a foreign country complicated and awkward, though ultimately enlightening. Glimpse surveyed over 350 returned study abroad students about their experiences as Americans abroad, including the stereotypes they confronted and the ways in which their abroad experiences changed or expanded their attitudes toward the United States.

I. RICH, FAT & LOUD: PREVALENT STEREOTYPES ABOUT AMERICANS

No matter your international destination, it is all too likely that you will be preceded by certain impressions based on your nationality—for better or worse. While the characteristics below conjure grotesque caricatures of the American tourist, clearly interaction with American travelers alone has not constructed these images of the United States. In fact, the most influential U.S. ambassadors seem to be our pop culture and foreign policy.

TOP 12

* CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH AMERICANS

- I. Loud
2. Obese
3. Wealthy
4. Arrogant
5. Ignorant
6. Rude
7. Materialistic
8. Friendly
9. War-mongering
10. Ethnocentric
- II. Environmentally disrespectful
12. Sexually promiscuous

Nearly unanimously, survey respondents wrote of the pervasiveness of U.S. popular culture in their host countries: often, American movies, television, music, celebrities and products are more popular than their local counterparts. Equally ubiquitous as the selective, distorted and sensationalized realities proffered by film and TV is news coverage of American foreign policy. Especially in the post-9/11 world, this coverage is often deeply critical—time and again respondents wrote of perceptions they encountered that U.S. citizens collectively share their administration's values and politics.

I was sitting on a bus in Sydney, keeping to myself like most Australians do. There were a bunch of 'typical' Americans sitting on the bus, 'typically' unaware of their much quieter surroundings, talking at their 'typically' high volume and annoying the rest of the quiet passengers on the bus. Finally, one Australian lady stood up, extremely irritated, and shouted, "You people are everywhere, I just can't get away from you!!" Then she stormed off the bus. The group of 'typical' Americans were silent for a minute, as was the rest of the bus, and then they all burst into laughter and continued with their conversation, unphased. To be honest, I wanted to do the exact same thing as that lady had done.

*Sean Houghton, Carnegie Mellon University
Studied in Australia*

PHOTO by Eric Moffat.





Over Espresso

New Perspectives in France
by Margo Buchanan

I am sitting in a café one sullen and rainy night in early February. Some friends arrive and order *martini blancs*. Then one of them begins, “*Monsieur Bush est un connard.*”

I agree, President Bush is an asshole, but before I can say that I dislike him as well, my friend continues, “It is so typically American to want to go to war, to dominate the world at all costs.”

And with that, all six of my friends start ranting and raving at one another. After an hour, my friend Priscilla asks me if I feel all right. “Yes, I’m against the war,” I say blankly, fumbling my words.

I catch a cab back to my host family’s apartment, crying because I know that I am naïve. I have never genuinely cared about the world, nor known much about it. Before coming to Paris, I had lived my whole life under the impression that I was born in the best country in the world. But when talk of war in Iraq begins to escalate seriously, I become ashamed of something I simply cannot comprehend: I am ashamed of my own country.

In the months that follow I buy various papers every morning, attend protests and feel confident in voicing an educated opinion in opposition to the war. Yet I still can’t help but wonder to what extent the French hold me—an American—responsible for George Bush’s foreign policy. Every night when I come home, my host father bombards me with the question, “Do you know what YOUR President has done now?” And every time I remind him, “Monsieur Julien, I did not vote for him.”

As an American in Paris, I quickly shed the layer of egocentricity that has protected me my entire life. When I return to the States, not one of my college friends asks me what it was like to be in Paris during the war. They act like nothing of significance has happened over the past few months. They ask me about the shopping and the nightlife. Occasionally I joke and say, “There was a war, too, you know.” I have yet to get a real response.



PHOTO by Ryan Conaty.

“[One prevalent assumption was] that all Americans are rich. People asked me to buy cars for them.”

*Dana Shephard, Dickinson College
Studied in Cameroon*

“I do not think people realize there is poverty in the United States. It is not shown on TV so how do they know it exists?”

*Student, Whitworth College
Studied in Chile through ISEP*

“Young Russians view the United States as they see it on MTV music videos and popular films—a sexually driven culture swimming in dollar bills, clothes and cars. They thought that every American citizen wakes up at noon, spends a couple of hours dressing for the night out, and then spends the remainder of the day having fun.”

*Nathan Fry, Dickinson College
Studied in Russia*

“People I met thought that current trends, such as legislating based on religious beliefs or perpetuating the war in Iraq, are supported by the entire American people.”

*Kat Kramer, Dickinson College
Studied in France*

* TOP THREE COMMONLY CONFRONTED STEREOTYPES ABOUT AMERICANS

1. All Americans share the Bush administration’s views (especially on foreign policy).
2. America is incredibly violent; all Americans own and wield guns.
3. Life in America mirrors its portrayal in movies and on TV (especially *The O.C.*).



II. ENCOUNTERS WITH ANTI-AMERICANISM

The majority of survey respondents listed “identity as an American” as the factor that most influenced how they were treated in their host country. While clearly, not all this treatment is negative, you should prepare yourself to encounter some degree of anti-Americanism abroad. No need to be paranoid, however: less than half—37 percent—felt discriminated against because of their identity as an American; only 13 percent ever felt threatened by their nationality.

Remember that anti-Americanism can take a variety of forms. In fact, 54 percent of respondents found that most locals who expressed negative attitudes toward the States did take care to differentiate between the American people and the American government. It’s important to distinguish blanket, misinformed and/or personal accusations from valid criticism. Many respondents—54 percent—found that they tended to agree with the criticism directed toward the States.

“I was met with a lot of static about Bush, whether it was small harmless jokes or candid political conversations. Many people all over South America expressed their opposition to Bush, and their confusion over why he was re-elected. Often people suggested that I could never understand their situation because I was from the United States. I don’t think capitalism is terrible, nor our way of life excessive, so even when people said, ‘It isn’t you, it’s your country’s way of life,’ it was difficult not to take things personally.”

Cara Miale, University of Colorado at Boulder

Studied in Chile through CIEE

“I met a few Germans who were against U.S. policies, but didn’t seem to mind that I was American. Germans are, in general, very good at separating the people from the government, and they know when it’s time to talk politics, and when it’s time to chill and have a beer. Sometimes I had to request (politely) that we talk about something else, and they were more than happy to change the subject.”

Carrie Medina, Portland State University

Studied in Germany through Oregon University Systems

“Perhaps the most challenging situation was understanding what others were saying about the United States, Americans or myself, in another language and knowing that the speakers did not realize that I understood their conversation. If my face became red with embarrassment about what I was overhearing and was noticed by the speakers, most times a sudden halt to the conversation would occur, followed by a lengthy silence. Other times, the speakers would continue and increase their criticism, knowing that I understood what they were saying.”

Suzan Babcock, School for International Training

Studied in Taiwan

oh my!

I was riding on a bus talking with a Hungarian teacher and the person in front of us started screaming at us. I didn’t understand him and thought he was drunk. My teacher friend suggested that we move to another seat. It turned out that he had said, “If you live in Hungary, you should learn Hungarian and speak Hungarian.”

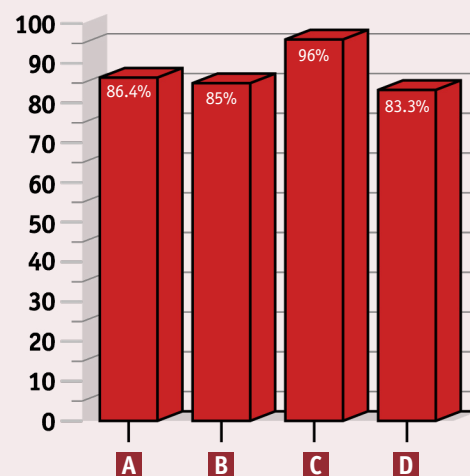
Teacher, Odgen High School

Studied in Hungary through the Fulbright Exchange Teacher Program



PHOTO by Sharon Itkoff.

WHAT TYPE OF ATTENTION DID THE UNITED STATES RECEIVE IN YOUR HOST COUNTRY?



- a. media attention on foreign policy
- b. media attention on celebrities
- c. presence of American movies
- d. consumption of American brands/goods



Love the One You Hate

Identity in Israel
by Haninah Levine

George Bush's crusading fundamentalism has awakened a new uneasiness in Israel, where secular culture retains many of the socialist sensibilities on which it was founded.

Newspapers run frequent stories about Israeli tourists in the United States who are mistaken for terrorists, subjected to humiliating questioning and occasionally deported. An unexpected culture war: Israel and the United States may be close kin, but in the United States, "socialism" is a dirty word.

Yet not very deep below the surface of this newfound mistrust of the world's military and cultural superpower lies the comfortable, easily identifiable adoration. When changes in American visa regulations in the middle of the summer made it significantly harder for Israelis to visit, the line of Israelis desperate not to lose out on their transatlantic vacation wound out the doors of the embassy, around the corner and down three blocks, reminding many sarcastic Israelis of a crowd of refugees. American movies still inspire admiration, American television inspires imitation and "American style" remains the gold standard for ice cream, pizza and interior design. The other side of the culture war: even the ultra-Orthodox seem to understand tacitly that while perhaps in God they trust and in the Messiah place their hopes, on America they need to rely.

III. WHEN IN ROME: DISPELLING MISPERCEPTIONS

Sixty-six percent of respondents write that they actively dispelled misperceptions about the United States while abroad. Above and beyond all else, they stressed the importance of cultural respect. Unwillingness or lack of effort to adapt to one's surroundings can be seen as a form of ethnocentrism, and it is precisely this kind of careless arrogance for which Americans are infamous.

Though you may be competing with George Bush and Britney Spears, remember that you, too, are a cultural ambassador and can do your part to combat negative stereotypes:

- * **TALK TO PEOPLE.** Conversation is a great tool for broadening perception. When confronted with anti-American viewpoints, students find that whenever possible, talking through these viewpoints and offering counter-examples to sweeping negative generalizations is the absolute best way to respond.

"I found that most anti-American sentiment diminished when I sat down and talked to people. Most individuals did not hold my nationality against me. It is also much easier to hate or hold negative stereotypes regarding a stranger; people who might purport to dislike America or Americans in general have trouble applying these prejudices face-to-face, on an individual basis."

Gillian Horton, College of William and Mary

Studied in South Africa, Spain, Germany, Argentina, Nicaragua and Mexico

- * **LISTEN.** When engaging in such conversations, keep an open mind. You're allowed to be defensive about your home country if you feel it is being unjustly attacked, but don't blindly defend it. Pay attention to what people are saying and ask them why they feel that way.

"One of the most complimentary comments that the group of American students I was traveling with received was that it was great to engage in an intelligent conversation with Americans, and in turn dispel some of the negative viewpoints that they had about the United States."

Kim Harrison, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

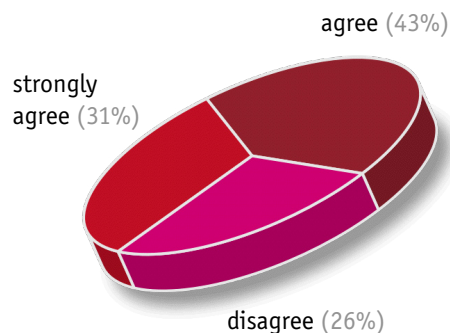
Studied in Australia through Australearn



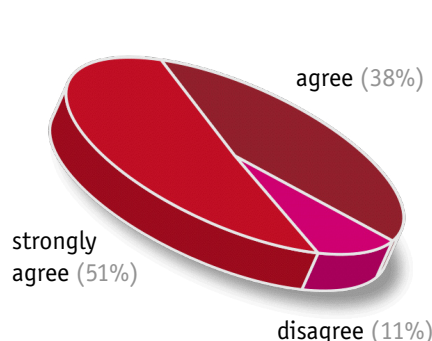
PHOTO by Mitch Ginsburg.



LOCALS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MY HOME COUNTRY WERE BASED LARGELY ON U.S. FOREIGN POLICY



LOCALS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MY HOME COUNTRY WERE BASED LARGELY ON U.S. POPULAR CULTURE



Terror Talk

Life in Kenya after the Terrorist Attacks
by Emily Hunter

I had spent the majority of the four months before the Mombasa attack traveling with 21 other American students, driving all over the country in a huge blue lorry that we referred to as the *Mzungu Bus* (White Person Bus). We were greeted with gleeful shouts from children in rural Samburu, but had buckets of water and handfuls of stones thrown at us in northern Tanzania. Most of this attention we chalked up to the spectacle we knew we were making. But sometimes the reactions seemed more poignant, more specifically directed at the fact that we were a bunch of Americans traveling in a third world country.

One day, stopped in the middle of a busy street in central Mombasa, we were confronted by an elderly bearded man. He waved his walking stick at us, shouting, "Look at me! You are lucky today to see Osama bin Laden!" He did bear a striking resemblance to the elusive al-Qaeda strongman. Was he looking for laughs, or did he have a different message to pass on to us as young American "ambassadors?"

Later on, I returned to Mombasa by myself to settle down in preparation for a four-month internship. While strolling through Old Town, aimlessly turning down this narrow alleyway and that, I passed a small shop, seemingly no different from any other. The proprietor of the shop, seeing me pass by, stepped into the doorway. I assumed he was going to call out and invite me to come in, like most of the retailers in Mombasa tend to do, with shouts of "Come into my shop, I am Mr. Cheaper!" or some variant thereof. Instead, he gleefully informed me, "This is an al-Qaeda base! The Mombasa al-Qaeda base is here!" I chuckled and kept walking, convinced that if it really were a gathering point for al-Qaeda supporters, of which I'm sure Mombasa has its share, they would have had the sense to employ a more discreet security man.

* DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CONSTRUCTIVE AND OBSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM.

Many survey respondents wrestled with an agonizing sense of ambivalence when engaging in such dialogue: on the one hand, they agreed with much of the criticism advanced against the United States, and on the other hand, they felt a sense of loyalty to their country and indignation in the face of sweeping, simplistic indictments. You may agree with a local's criticism against the U.S. presidential administration but become frustrated if that local extends the same criticism to the entire U.S. population. The key here is to make sure that your conversation partner understands crucial distinctions between the American people and American government or popular culture.

* DEMONSTRATE CONSIDERATION FOR LOCAL CUSTOMS/MANNERS OF DRESS.

Leave your U.S. fashion sensibilities where they belong: back in the United States. Don't wear tank tops if it's considered disrespectful—no matter how hot it may be. If people in your host country tend to dress up more on a daily basis, break out your formal attire. Think twice before walking down the street swathed in Nike symbols. By the same token, observe local customs: if bargaining is the norm, don't be the "stupid American" who buys an item for the first price offered.

* LEARN/SPEAK THE LANGUAGE. Learning another language is no piece of cake, but if living in a non-English speaking country, make it one of your primary goals to achieve some degree of fluency in the local language. See Glimpse's "Language Learning" guide for more advice on this topic.

"People thought that all Americans were loud and only speak one language. I learned the following joke: What do you call someone who speaks three or more languages? Multi-lingual. What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call someone who only speaks one? American."

Alanna Randall, Western Michigan University

Studied in Costa Rica and France



oh my!

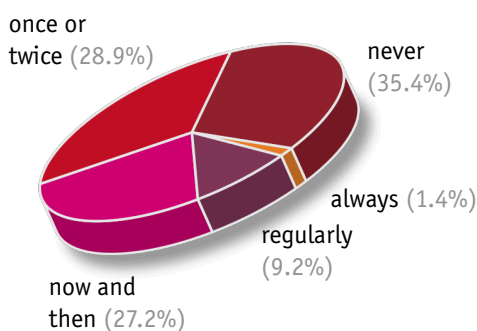
Two French guys accused Americans of not knowing geography. They said that the day before they had watched a TV show where a reporter walked “the streets” of the United States and asked Americans what Morocco was. Apparently, the Americans questioned thought it was an orange-producing company. I was shocked because the two guys vehemently believed the biased reporter. I explained the idea of skewed journalism and politely refused to be baited into the argument.

*Isabel Gardocki, Carnegie Mellon University
Studied in France through CIDEF*



PHOTO by Sara Kaplan.

I PURPOSEFULLY CONCEALED MY IDENTITY AS AN AMERICAN ...



- * **KNOW YOUR HOST COUNTRY.** What's the best way to combat the “ignorant American” stereotype? Be informed. Before you go, beef up on your knowledge of international news/events by regularly visiting websites like the BBC and World Press Review (see our “Resources” section for more information). If there are online versions of local newspapers from your host country, read them daily. Once abroad, keep on top of local and international news. Check out the local music/arts scene. Demonstrate an active interest in your host country's politics and culture—it's a great way to engage locals in conversation.

“Before I left for Bolivia, I read up as much as I could about the country's history and current events. My host father was shocked that I knew the names of Bolivia's major political parties and prominent indigenous activists. I made sure to read the newspaper regularly and always engaged him in conversation by asking what he thought of the day's or week's events. There is never a dull moment in Bolivian politics, so we always had a lot to talk about. My host father was by no means anti-American, but I could tell how much it meant to him that I took an active interest in the goings-on of his country. ‘You know more about my country than my own daughters!’ he confided to me once.”

Student, Emory College

Studied abroad in Bolivia through Duke University

- * **REMEMBER YOUR MANNERS.** Coming from a culture of lawsuits and money-back guarantees, we Americans have a penchant for becoming easily frustrated if things don't go our way. While frustration may be inevitable, try to remain calm and polite when resolving conflicts; adopt a flexible, “go-with-the-flow” mentality. Remember that Americans maintain a sense of entitlement that may be not be shared by residents of other countries.

“The most effective way of avoiding anti-American sentiment was to avoid overtly American symbols, dress more like locals, be aware of cultural sensitivities and always ask questions politely when I was confused, so that even if I seemed foreign, one could not immediately pin me as American. Once they did discover my nationality they would hopefully be impressed that I did not match up to their stereotype. Arguing was never an option—actions often speak louder than words, especially abroad, and so the only hope of dissuading anyone who viewed Americans negatively is to disprove such stereotypes by one's own actions.”

Mary Bernard, Stetson University

Studied in France through Universite d'Avignon



IV. A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents found that their attitudes toward the United States changed during their time abroad. The changes were both positive and negative, ranging from renewed appreciation for personal freedoms to newfound disgust for U.S. materialism. Sometimes what people missed most while abroad, culturally speaking, were precisely the same values or practices that were most difficult to return to.

TOP 10

* WHAT ASPECTS OF LIFE IN THE U.S. DID YOU MISS?

1. Variety and availability of foods and products
2. Good customer service
3. Cars
4. Television
5. Personal freedoms
6. Convenience of day-to-day life and 24-hour stores
7. Friendliness
8. Racial diversity
9. Exercise as a common practice
10. Respect for women

"I feel like I learned how to appreciate my country more while away. Things that I had not even really noticed suddenly became so important. I also learned to recognize the opportunity available in the United States. While not everyone here is rich, there are so many other ways to access opportunity."

*Chelsea Funk, Portland State University
Studied in South Africa through CIEE*

TOP 10

* WHAT ASPECTS OF LIFE IN THE U.S. WERE HARDEST TO COME HOME TO?

1. Ignorance about the world
2. Consumerism/materialism
3. Fast pace of life
4. Celebrity worship
5. Suburban sprawl
6. Dependence on cars
7. Higher drinking age
8. Ethnocentricity
9. Work-centered life
10. Media pressure on women

In Nicaragua I went to a meeting with a Jesuit priest. He was being very critical of the U.S. government, but he made sure to differentiate between the people and the U.S. government, and at the end of our conference with him, he said, "Thank you for being here and educating yourselves on these issues, but it is not enough. If you really want to change the world you need to change your country." I think that statement hit us all hard. Later, I was at a concert in Nicaragua that was sponsored by one of the universities there, and at one point everyone started cheering. I looked up at the stage and saw the U.S. flag in flames. I remember being frustrated a lot, but also having the understanding of where they were coming from.

*Kelly Sve, Augsburg College
Studied in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala*





Acting Supreme

Gaining Perspective in Ireland

by Christina Nelson

There I was, standing in absolute bewilderment as I clenched my half-empty pint of beer. My friends and I were among the sea of kids who had showed up at *The King's Head* to experience a night of so-called "authentic" Irish music and entertainment. I had been chatting with a young man close to me in age. When we began talking about America, my beloved home, the man said firmly, "I hate America."

What had he just said? It was as though someone had kicked my puppy for no good reason!

I quickly shot back, "If you hate America, then why does your culture imitate so many parts of our culture?"

Before it hit me that my comment had been far less than wise, he snapped, "Our culture? Our culture wants nothing to do with yours! We don't want to be like America, or associated with your country in any way!"

How could anyone possibly hate America? We were the most powerful, almighty nation in the world!

As it turned out, that was just it. I have always held the United States in high regard and have lived by that ever-so-popular slogan, "*Proud to be an American.*" But being in Ireland made me realize that maybe, just like any other country, America makes mistakes or fails to interact with the rest of the world in a respectable way.

I've gained a new political consciousness that reminds me to seek the views of foreign nations and honestly consider them before coming to a conclusion about global issues.

As an American citizen, I will always love and find pride in the great things our nation accomplishes. However, I am no longer afraid to ask myself what the other side of the world might be thinking about us, and I am no longer unconditionally offended if what they think isn't always good.

"After returning home, I saw Americans as rather boastful, perceiving our opinions to be the only right ones. I find it really sad that the U.S. media mainly focuses on U.S. news and hardly reports on situations in other parts of the world as adequately as needed. Countries in Europe are much more well-rounded when it comes to their news sources, and actually seem to care about what is going on politically and socially in other countries."

Nrupa Jani, University of Virginia

Studied in Spain through Servicios Programas Universitarias en Valencia

"Honestly, it's not that my perception of the United States has changed much, but rather that it has broadened. I think that until people have experienced what it's like to look from the outside-in, they are unwittingly myopic about the United States and its place in the world. Traveling abroad provides an opportunity to gain the peripheral vision that gives a clearer and more complete picture of the United States."

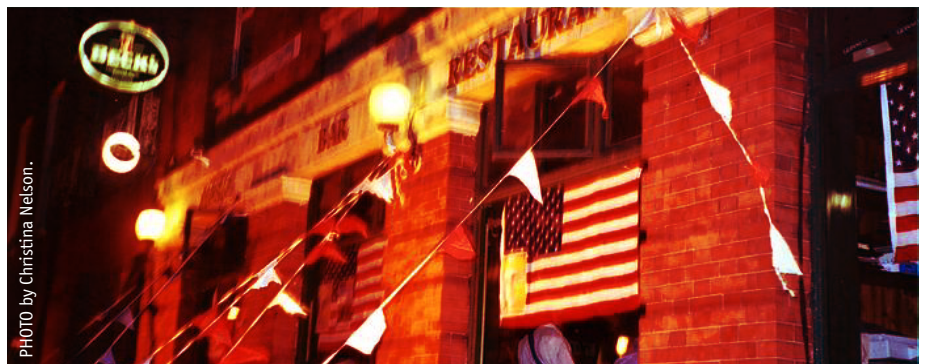
Student, University of Virginia

Studied in Spain through the UVA Hispanic Studies Program

"My perception of the United States is that it is driven (in a big, gas-guzzling car) by consumerism and a strong sense of, 'I want, so shall I have.' I learned that there are many aspects of American culture that I really enjoy and miss when I'm away, but there are also many things the United States could improve upon: namely, public transportation, education and health care. Many Americans adopt an attitude that it's 'my way or the highway' and aren't willing to look to other countries to see what's working there."

Alanna Randall, Western Michigan University

Studied in Costa Rica and France



Amidst the many compelling reasons to venture abroad, fear of anti-American sentiment should by no means deter you. Yet it is important to keep in mind that the United States is a powerful global force, politically and culturally, and that you will be subject to certain judgments based on your nationality. It is up to you to determine which judgments are fair and which aren't—and to respond productively. Engage your international acquaintances in reasoned discussions and do what you can to disprove negative stereotypes. Communicate what you love about the United States and recognize where it may fall short.

Grand adventures await you, but between the trekking and clubbing, remember that you—yes, *you*—are a cultural ambassador, and you have a job to do!



IV. FURTHER RESOURCES

READ THE FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES
EXCERPTED IN THIS GUIDE

- * LOVE THE ONE YOU HATE www.glimpseabroad.org/article_424.html
- * OVER ESPRESSO www.glimpseabroad.org/article_175.html
- * TERROR TALK www.glimpseabroad.org/article_386.html
- * ACTING SUPREME www.glimpseabroad.org/article_193.html

BRUSH UP ON CURRENT EVENTS
IN YOUR HOST COUNTRY

- * **BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION (BBC) WORLD NEWS**
A comprehensive site with news stories from all corners of the world. You can also listen to BBC news hour through the website—or on most National Public Radio stations. www.bbc.co.uk
- * **WORLD PRESS REVIEW**
World Press Review offers articles pulled and translated from hundreds of newspapers around the world. www.worldpress.org
- * **FOREIGN AFFAIRS**
Published by the Council on Foreign Relations, this website takes itself very seriously, but it's a good place to go for in-depth explorations of key issues in other countries. www.foreignaffairs.org

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Culture Shock! guides go beyond the “do this, see that” advice offered by your traditional guide, delving into the cultural challenges that one should anticipate if planning for an extended stay overseas. Order guides on our website: www.glimpseabroad.org
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