



glimpse study abroad acclimation guides



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PHOTO by Daphne Hollinger

culture
SHOCK



Though all the clichés associated with the study abroad experience usually end up being true—“enriching,” “exhilarating,” even “life-changing”—the experience can also be a difficult one, jarring you from the life-style and norms to which you are accustomed. Of course, culture shock manifests itself differently in different people, but research has detected general patterns of emotional highs and lows experienced by international travelers. These phases vary in duration and severity, and are not necessarily linear.

- * **EUPHORIA** – The first few hours, days or weeks abroad are often characterized by the excitement of sensory overload. Both adrenaline and expectations are running high, and everything seems new and intriguing.
- * **IRRITABILITY AND HOSTILITY** – Once the initial “honeymoon” phase subsides, dissonances between native and host cultures begin to seem more pronounced, and a sense of alienation can set in. Curiosity and enthusiasm about-face, transforming into frustration, insecurity, negativity toward local culture, glorification of home culture, exaggerated responses to minor problems, withdrawal and/or depression.
- * **GRADUAL ADJUSTMENT** – With time, you’ll begin to orient yourself to a different set of cultural practices and feel increasingly comfortable and confident in your new surroundings. Your sense of humor, which may have been lying dormant for a while, will reemerge.
- * **REENTRY OR REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK** – Upon returning home, you will be faced with integrating your abroad experience with life in the United States, where you might feel disoriented, out of place or changed by your experience in a way that makes relating to family and friends difficult.

While some degree of culture shock is virtually inevitable, there are things you can do to help yourself to effectively overcome it, even before you begin your journey. The Glimpse Foundation surveyed over 400 study abroad students from across the country to ask them about their experiences with culture shock, including what helped them cope and what they would do differently if given the chance.

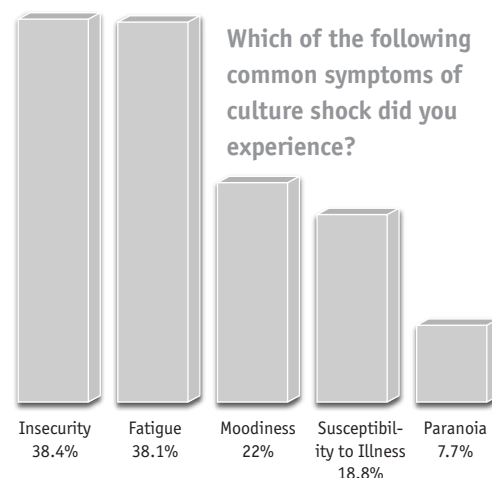


PHOTO by Christopher Quirk

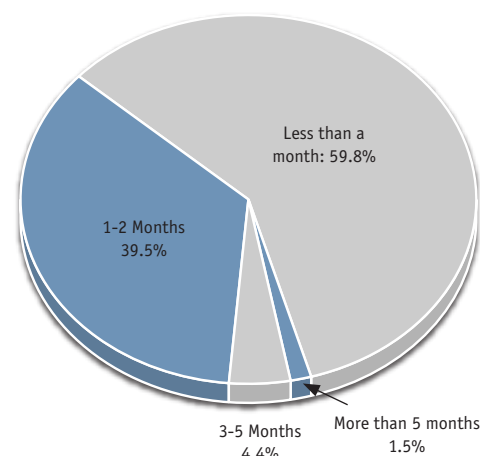
The doors in my host family’s apartment have to be closed very gently or they will rattle the doorframes. I constantly forgot this, and one night, I shut the door to my room a little too hard. I started changing into my pajamas, and when I had just gotten completely undressed, my host mom walked right in and proceeded to give me a lesson on the finer points of door closing. I just stood there, totally naked and absolutely shocked. Nakedness just isn’t such a big deal in Spain, I guess.

Jacqui Goldman
Studied in Spain

Here’s how our respondents—80% of whom spent 3-6 months in their host countries—answered the following questions:



How long did it take you to feel comfortable in your new home abroad?





On one of our first nights out in Italy, my roommate and I went out to dinner at a fairly nice restaurant. We were starving so we both ordered quickly, and as soon as the dinner arrived, we dove into our food. The people at the restaurant were extremely offended. As the waiter later explained to us, to eat at the pace we did is terribly rude and considered an insult to whoever prepared the meal.

*Erin Lauria, Lynchburg College
Studied in Italy*

“There really is only so much you can do to prepare for culture shock. However, you can learn about the culture of the country, including such things as personal space, body language, gender roles, what housing is like, how people use electricity, and the stereotypes they have of your culture versus the ones we have of theirs.”

*Jenna Tonet, Stonehill College
Studied in Italy*

“It’s one thing to read about traveling there, but it is entirely another to talk to people who are your age and your nationality who have traveled there.”

*Sarah Case, UC Boulder
Studied in Egypt*

“It’s essential to know and admit that there is going to be a period of adjustment; don’t expect everything to go smoothly all the time. You will have some sad days and feel lost a little. Those feelings are all normal and part of the experience. They are what help you grow.”

*Liz Walker, Washington State
Studied in Spain*

I. BEFORE YOU GO

- * **RESEARCH YOUR DESTINATION PRIOR TO DEPARTURE.** Read up on your host country’s history, religion, art and natural resources. Become well-versed in the country’s politics and current affairs. Know who the president is! If available, read an online newspaper from your host country regularly before departing—not only will familiarity with your host country’s politics and news give you something to talk about with locals, it will help to dispel the widespread stereotype of the “ignorant American.” Read novels and watch movies from your host country, if available—they can provide insight into nuances of humor and personal interactions, which are often strikingly different from those at home.
- * **TALK TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE STUDIED IN THE SAME REGION.** The best way to find out about the etiquette, social norms, unspoken rules and idiosyncrasies of your host culture is by talking to people who have already lived there. If you know or can locate international students on your campus who are from your host country, talk to them about the challenges they encountered in coming to the United States. This “reverse perspective” can lend you valuable insight into the cultural differences between the United States and your host country.
- * **READ THE MATERIALS PROVIDED TO YOU BY YOUR STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM.** It can be tempting to blow these off, but survey respondents stressed the importance of paying attention to such materials. Many have been painstakingly researched and prepared specifically to help you!
- * **KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** While pre-departure “research” is essential, mentally prepare yourself for surprises. No matter how much you think you know about your host country, not everything is going to match up to your expectations. Use books, newspapers, movies, study abroad materials, etc. to familiarize yourself with local issues and customs, but keep your pre-conceptions flexible!



PHOTO by Elaine Ackrill



II. WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Since each host country (and individual) is unique, each process of acclimation will be different. However, when it comes to cultural disparities between the United States and the rest of the world, there are some that seem to hold true across a wide range of countries:

10 POINTS OF ADJUSTMENT YOU MIGHT FACE ABROAD:

1. Concept of time and schedules
2. Approach to work and integration of work into daily life
3. Eating habits
4. Gender relations
5. Reliance on walking and public transit vs. cars
6. Size of public and private spaces
7. Prevalence and permissibility of smoking
8. Incorporation of exercise into daily life
9. Environmental conscientiousness (prevalence or lack thereof)
10. High interest in domestic and international affairs

Respondents stress the element of choice: you can respond to the differences you find in the day-to-day life, values, customs and social cues of your host country with judgment and rejection, or you can broaden your frame of reference to recognize that other ways of doing things are often as valid as the ones to which you are accustomed.

Of course, no matter how tolerant you are on an intellectual level, psychological responses such as those listed above can still be very powerful. Recognizing these symptoms, and acknowledging that they are common and not at all abnormal, can preclude further anxiety and frustration.

TIPS TO HELP EASE YOU INTO DAILY LIFE ABROAD:

- * **SETTLE INTO YOUR LIVING SPACE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.** This can make you feel more grounded and less like an outsider.

"I made my room my own space—I put up pictures of my family and friends and tried to get settled right away."

Lauren Mhlaba, UMass Amherst

Studied in Spain through API

- * **GET INVOLVED.** Sign up for extracurricular activities and/or volunteer work. Not only is it a great way to meet people, but you avoid the stagnant stretches of time when homesickness can creep on you.

"I got involved in a local church—that was my way of meeting people in the community. It is really important to get involved; don't completely rely on your American friends. Spend some time with the people of the culture you are visiting."

Allison Moore, Gordon College

Studied in Ireland through University of Limerick

Taiji at Dawn

Cultural Complexities of Harbin, China
by Abby Cutler

Best part of the day? Shower-time runs a close second, but my absolute favorite time of day is when I'm lazily lying in bed in the morning, just before I plan on getting up. I love these moments because in the morning, I am ready to take on China. Then my day progresses. I know to expect a headache on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, immediately following my two-hour one-on-one class with a teacher who I adore but can barely understand. Lunch in the cafeteria might be cheap, but is also a daily physical and mental endurance test, involving elbowing, shoving, spitting, shouting, spilled rice, second-hand chopsticks, staring, pointing, snickering. A vacant seat, in spite of the half-eaten, discarded chicken bones left lying on the table, is a godsend. Sometimes the dorm's hot water isn't really hot at all; sometimes my roommate finds so many mistakes in my homework that I must do all I can to not cry. And my 24/7-language pledge can make life feel pretty lonely. Any matter of conversation is always undermined by the simple language I must use in order to express myself. It's hard to tell sometimes if my Chinese is actually getting any better. On top of that, I often feel as though I've even forgotten how to speak English.

Frustrations aside, I wouldn't trade my time abroad for anything. There is something inspiring about being someone's first foreign friend. There is something gratifying about bargaining well for the first time, and being complimented on my Chinese in the process. I love sharing my food with everyone else at the dinner table. I crave the chance to be a part of preserving, documenting and sharing this culture with the rest of the world. But journal entries will have to do for now. At the moment, I'm living life in sub-Siberia—I'm 12 hours by train from Beijing and a hell of a long way from home.



faux pas!

My friends and I went to a bar in Fremantle (a section of Perth) and noticed a bell hanging by the pool tables. We were curious as to what its purpose could be, and after some egg-ing-on by our newly-found Aussie buddies, one of us gave it a tug. Weren't we surprised when we were told that we had to buy everyone in the bar a round of drinks! This is called "shouting the bar." After our costly mistake, we made sure to stay away from the "hells-bells!"

Brian Gill
Studied in Australia

Through the Looking Glass

Culture Shock in Argentina
by Becky Rowlands

I spend my first days in Buenos Aires wandering the streets, dusty, sweaty and confused, wondering why there is trash everywhere and why children are juggling in traffic for coins. I stare stupidly at little pieces of paper—poems, advertisements, queries for money—are constantly thrust into my hand. I feel gargantuan, American and painfully obvious.

The first days in Buenos Aires stretch on like years, and I keep secretly hoping to wake up from this crazy South American dream. Gradually, I begin to accept that this is not going to happen—that I am through the looking-glass for good, or at least for a while. I begin to accept that it will take longer for me to do things in this country—longer to eat, longer to speak and certainly longer to get anywhere I want to go. A walk down a narrow city block is an adventure in itself, in which I find myself dodging disgruntled business people, walking billboards, mopeds, loose sidewalk tiles, mysterious substances dripping from buildings and, of course, ubiquitous dog piles. But slowly, I'm learning the steps of this strange *porteño* (from Buenos Aires) dance. I've never been a person with much patience, but I am enveloped by this new rhythm whether I like it or not.

- * **KEEP A JOURNAL.** This can help clarify impressions and give perspective.

"I really enjoyed writing in my journal. It was more like a scrapbook and journal in one book. It was a great way for me to vent or celebrate my feelings, note important cultural discoveries, list new words and slang I'd heard, and save memorabilia, in a productive, creative way."

Juliana Broste, University of Colorado at Boulder

Studied in Australia through University of New South Wales

- * **KEEP IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY BACK HOME.** While you don't want to spend all your time cooped up in an internet café, writing home regularly helps combat any sense of isolation you may feel, and more importantly, gives you a space to reflect on your experiences.

- * **ESTABLISH A DAILY ROUTINE.** While most study abroad students appreciate their abroad experience for the break it gives them from their hectic schedules back home, setting aside time for a few daily activities can make you feel like less of a traveler and more of a resident in your new home.

"Finding a routine that fits into the lifestyle there is very helpful: for example, doing grocery shopping everyday during *siesta*, visiting the internet cafe at night and taking walks daily like I would at home."

Brietta Costa, UMass Amherst

Studied in Spain through API

- * **GET OUT AND ABOUT.** Explore your neighborhood so you feel geographically situated and in touch with its goings-on.

"When exploring your new surroundings, walk a different direction every day for the first week or so. Keep walking until you get tired or find something interesting. This way, you find things that many others have not discovered yet and end up with a better overall idea of what your new home has to offer."

Josh Vise, Webster University

Studied in Thailand

- * **BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE.** This can improve your mental health as well as hook you up with a social circuit.

"I jumped right into what I loved doing—basketball. I found an outside court where people played street ball almost everyday. From playing there, I made almost all my Spanish friends, who became quite close to me. From then on my Spanish improved dramatically since I was immersed in it and was forced to speak it all the time."

Elisa Chen, Rice University

Studied in Spain through API



- * **COOK MEALS.** While you certainly want to take advantage of the culinary adventures that your new home has to offer, many survey respondents found that eating familiar food once in a while could be a great comfort. Also, cooking and eating is a great way to entice new local friends into your home and teach them a bit about your own culture. Then sit back and hope for a reciprocal invitation!

"I spent a good portion of my time in London around the kitchen table with my British flatmates. We cooked for each other often. When Thanksgiving rolled around, a few American friends and I invited about 20 Brits over and made an elaborate meal—turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes ... the whole deal. It was one of the greatest social events of my abroad experience."

Ariel Dekovic, Vassar College

Studied in England

- * **FIND YOUR "OWN" SPOT.** Locate a pleasant public place where you can go for some solo time and simply watch the local culture bustle around you.

"I would go and sit in a Piazza all by myself ... get a sandwich and just sit and watch the people. It was incredible to be in and amongst that much culture! I would suggest that you find a place where you can just sit and soak it in!"

Rebecca Smith, Auburn University

Studied in Italy through API



PHOTO by Nicholas Fitzhugh

My New Life, Barcelona Style

Culture Shock in Spain

by Lindsey Freedman

I think the term "culture shock" is a gigantic understatement, a phrase that cushions the reality of having your mind completely blown upon arriving in a foreign country. When I arrived in Spain, I was ready, I suppose, for the big differences, like all the stores closing in the afternoon for *siesta* or the mania that *fútbol* (soccer) inspires. But I was not prepared for the more insignificant differences to jar me so much; for me, the accumulation of these "little things" was the hardest obstacle to my cultural adjustment.

One day I freaked out and cried hysterically on the phone with my parents over the apparent absence of cheddar cheese in Spanish markets. A few days after my crying fit, I had pulled myself together enough to reflect on my frustrations. Why, I wondered, had such trifles pushed me to tears? Either I was clearly not as stable as I had previously considered myself to be, or adapting to a year in a foreign country was going to take more time than I thought.

It doesn't bother me anymore that I have to line-dry all of my clothes. I find myself selecting Spanish cereal instead of American (All-Bran Choco has replaced Special K, which is boring anyway). I no longer think of Spanish products, attitudes or cultural idiosyncrasies as being "better" or "worse" than that of the United States—just different.

I still have an aversion to buying my milk in boxes, but I grin and bear it. I've discovered that cheddar cheese does exist, but I now prefer to pick a random cheese that looks good and ask my butcher to cut me off a chunk. These seemingly trivial details have a way of building on one another: I am continually amazed at how broad my world has become in the two months since I've been here.



faux pas!

While volunteer teaching in Guatemala, a few colleagues and I offered the children in the schoolyard bananas for a snack. We discovered that one of our bananas was in fact a “double banana” (two bananas covered in one peel). Assuming that the children would be fighting over this special piece of fruit, we were surprised when they insisted that we throw it out. In their culture, the tale goes that the children of whoever eats a “double banana” will be stuck together at the head. In an effort to amuse the children, one volunteer took a bite out of the unlucky banana. His effort had quite the opposite effect, as the children backed away from him, many crying and screaming. The next day, one woman told us that her son had come home in tears and prayed for the cursed volunteer.

Allie Bruns
Studied in Guatemala



PHOTO by Trevor Knoblich

III. RETURNING HOME

Interestingly, many respondents write that reverse culture shock was more acute than its antecedent. Students found it hard to settle back into their old routines and to reconnect with family and friends who had not undergone the same mind-broadening experiences.

TOP 10 POINTS OF ADJUSTMENT UPON RETURN

1. Driving everywhere instead of walking
2. Coping with Americans' rudeness
3. Contending with American excess
4. Finding that family and friends quickly lose interest in your stories from abroad
5. Speaking in English
6. Handling the fast pace of U.S. life
7. Returning to mundane or trivial details of your previous life
8. Feeling a disconnect from friends who have a body of shared experiences you missed out on
9. Adapting to a different eating schedule
10. Returning with an expanded worldview—particularly with a more acute awareness of the United States' flaws

“I felt very bitter returning home. It’s hard to not be ‘mad’ at America for some of the ideals and principles that have been instilled in us. I didn’t want to come back at all. No one takes the time to stop and appreciate things here. It’s very disheartening. Over time the feeling fades, but at the beginning it was very hard to be back.”

Lauren Travis, University of Texas at Austin
Studied in Spain

“I think the biggest challenge for me was getting back into the pace of American life. It is so demanding and fast-paced that I just wanted to say ‘slow down!’ when I got home.”

Janna Stansell, California State University
Studied in Spain

“When I returned to the United States I had horrible reverse culture shock. People seemed so rude, the U.S. culture seemed so fake compared to where I was living previously, and Americans’ love of fast food disgusted me.”

Student, University of Cincinnati
Studied in United Arab Emirates through American University



"I had all these new experiences and I saw so much, so it was sort of hard to express and share everything with my family and friends because they never saw what I saw or experienced what I experienced."

Ashley Grillo, University of Rhode Island

Studied in Italy through API

"The biggest challenge for me was returning to the safety and, in fact, tediousness of my life at home. While at first being surrounded by familiar things was wonderful, in time I missed the excitement and challenge of living abroad."

Joseph Hoover, University of Colorado at Boulder

Studied in Switzerland through SIT

"I was surprised to remember how wasteful we are and how badly we eat. I missed walking, and I missed the slower pace of life in France. Before I left. I was enrolled in 18 credit hours a semester and working two jobs 15-25 hours a week. I re-evaluated the whole way I was living when I got home and now take more time to slow down and enjoy myself rather than rushing around to stay busy all the time."

Anna Romanosky, University of South Carolina

Studied in France through API



PHOTO by Leani Wessels.

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On Coming Home

Rediscovering America

by Eli Jelly-Schapiro

After a long flight from Cape Town, South Africa to New York, I arrive in John F. Kennedy Airport, where enterprising capitalists check stock quotes, get football scores, eat Au Bon Pain and incessantly make calls on their cellular phones. After emerging into the terminal, we form two lines—citizens and non. I make eye contact with a man in the opposite line. We stare at each other, and I see on him the same blank look of disorientation that my face most certainly wears.

When I return to Georgetown, where I attend school, the neighborhood overwhelms me, in all its opulence and sense of entitlement. It revels in this elevated status, but the neighborhood's celebration of itself is a quiet, largely private one. People stay indoors.

Inside, one can hide from reality. Outside, not five miles to the southeast, people undergo a daily struggle for survival in some of the most impoverished ghettos in the country. Thousands of miles away, in Afghanistan and Iraq, starving families live with the constant fear that bombs will drop on top of their hunger. To many of Georgetown's residents, such injustices are merely collateral damage. Why worry about racism, state violence and economic exploitation when Benetton and Ben & Jerry's are right down the street?

The flag is everywhere. Now, after seeing some of the consequences of our government's foreign policies in person (the residual scars left by an apartheid government we for so long supported), I have a harder time looking past the flag's baser associations. In South Africa, the wounds of a racist government are still very fresh. While I was there, the inequalities that exist along racial lines—most evident in the presence of economically downtrodden townships and shantytowns—never escaped my sight or thoughts. In America, I am now coming to realize that we try our hardest to keep our ghettos out of sight and mind.



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Taiji at Dawn

www.glimpseabroad.org/article_63.html

Through the Looking Glass

www.glimpseabroad.org/article_430.html

My New Life, Barcelona Style

www.glimpseabroad.org/article_56.html

On Coming Home

www.glimpseabroad.org/article_110.html



READ DOZENS OF OTHER ARTICLES IN THE "CULTURE SHOCK" SECTION OF GLIMPSEABROAD.ORG

www.glimpseabroad.org/abroad_1_Culture%20Shock.html



WHAT'S UP WITH CULTURE?

An online cultural training resource for study abroad, this website presents several "mini-lessons" to help you prepare for the cultural adjustment process.

www.pacific.edu/sis/culture/



CULTURE SHOCK!

A book series that covers more than 50 countries, 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.

You can order guides through our website: www.glimpseabroad.org



CULTUREGRAMS

On the CultureGrams website, you can access cultural overviews of all 182 countries, which include topics such as "Greetings," "Gestures," "Dating and Marriage," "Diet," etc. A word of caution: while these guides can be helpful in preparing you for your trip abroad, they are prone to sweeping generalizations. Approach them as tools, not as "cultural bibles."

www.culturegrams.org