glimpse study abroad acclimation guides

traveling to DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

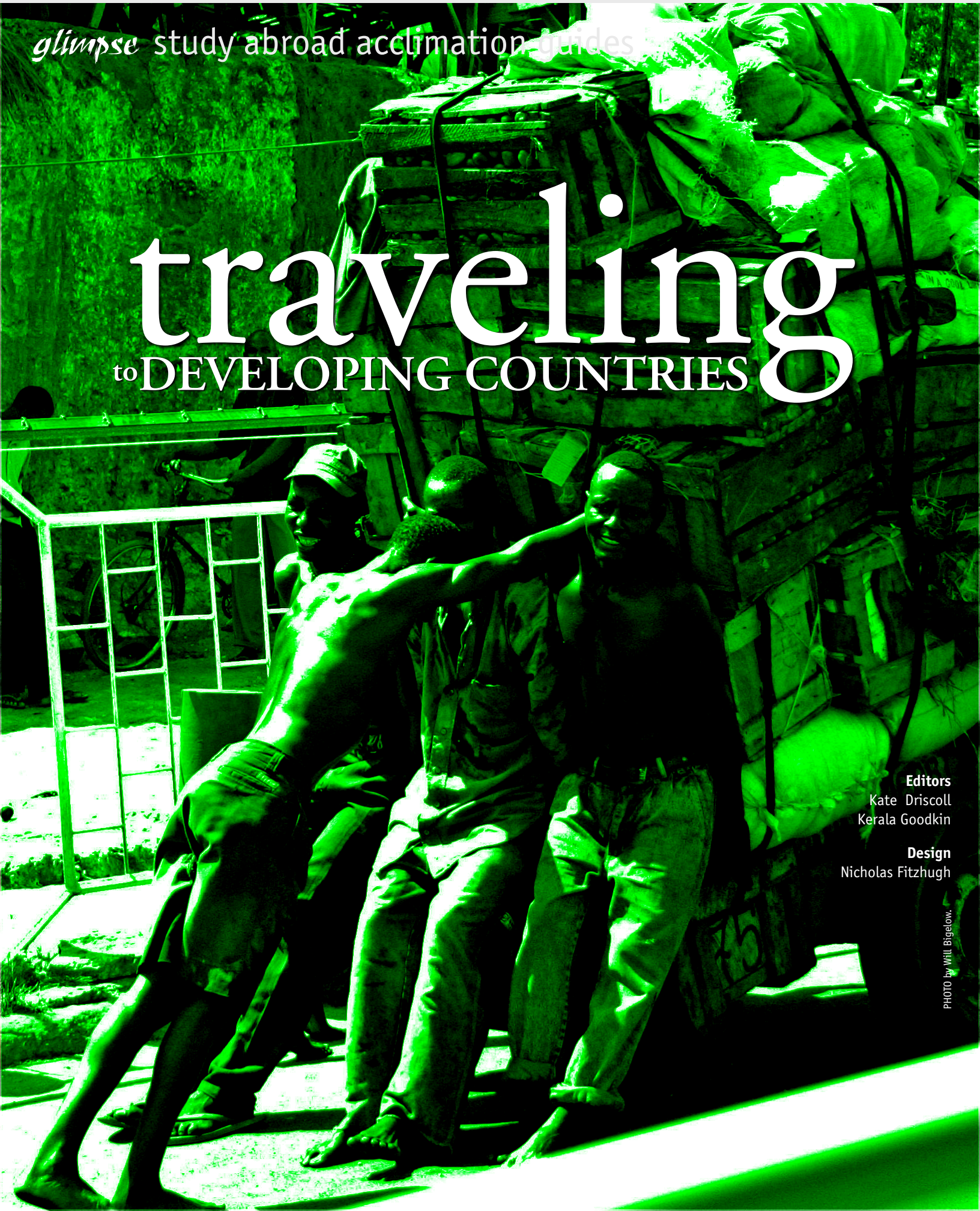

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PHOTO by Will Bigelow.

England, France, Italy, Spain, Australia—these are common destinations sought by the majority of students who study abroad. Around one in seven students who studies abroad, however, decides to take a different path by choosing to visit a developing country.

This decision inevitably gives rise to challenges. The standard of living in the United States is one of the highest in the world; for many, adjusting to life in a developing country is especially disorienting. Something you take for granted in the United States—toilet paper, for example—may be a luxury in poorer nations.

That said, living in a developing country affords a wealth of opportunities that you may not encounter in more "traditional" study abroad destinations. By truly immersing yourself in a culture markedly different from your own, you are opening yourself up to new outlooks and ways of life that can have a long-term impact on your own ideals and daily living habits. Students who venture to developing countries consistently remark on how their experiences have helped them put U.S. cultural practices in perspective. By escaping the consumer frenzy and hectic pace of life so prevalent in wealthier countries, students find that for the first time they are able to reevaluate their own value system, and in the process, sort out what is truly necessary in life from what may be superfluous.

The Glimpse Foundation surveyed 75 study abroad students and volunteers about their experiences and advice.

Disclaimer

"Developing country" is an ambiguous term, and there is no quantitative measure by which to classify a country as "developing" or "developed." "Developing" loosely refers to the two-thirds of the world that lacks the technology, industry, infrastructure and standards of living found in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, New Zealand and Australia. We refer to "developing countries" throughout this guide for lack of a better term, and we fully recognize the ethnocentrism of such a classification. Though it is now considered a more politically correct term than "Third World," both terms emphasize areas of deficiency, implying that these countries are "behind" or "below" so-called "developed" countries. By holding countries to Western standards, we entirely overlook areas in which developed countries can (and should) learn from examples set by developing countries—especially when it comes to resource use, cultural preservation and communal welfare.

PHOTO by Sandra Fredricksen.

I. READY, SET, GO
ARE YOU PREPARED TO LIVE IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY?

The majority of students who venture to developing countries have visited three to five other foreign countries prior to studying abroad. But even if you've never set foot outside the United States, you shouldn't automatically discount the prospect of exploring a less traditional destination. A lot depends on your personality and your expectations. Ask yourself some key questions:

1. Are you good at adapting to new situations?
2. Are you independent and self-sufficient?
3. Do you consider yourself high- or low-maintenance?
4. What are you looking for in a study abroad experience?
5. Are you proficient in a foreign language?

If you can't live without a curling iron and a daily Starbuck's frappuccino, Western Europe might be a good bet. On the other hand, if you're looking for genuine cultural displacement and have faith in your ability to acclimate to new cultural practices and standards of living, we encourage you to think

Two Cents

Communicating in a different culture is fun and exciting—the only way to approach it is to do it, and do it full out.

Sarah Foster, Boston University
Studied in Niger through BU

PHOTO by Richard Sitler.

Two Cents

Know what you're getting yourself into and don't be afraid of bucket showers or making mistakes. In India, beggars are hard to deal with, but talk to the locals about it—it's interesting how they regard beggars as members of their communities instead of just nuisances we feel bad for, which seems to be a more typical American reaction.

Dara Klein, Brandeis University
Studied in India through SIT Study Abroad

beyond the First World. Knowing another language is certainly a bonus, but given the UK's sprawling colonial rule, there are many developing countries in which English is widely spoken.

Adequate preparation before your abroad experience is vital. While we recommend referring to our "Culture Shock" guide for a more in-depth exploration of this topic, our survey respondents found the following activities helpful:

TOP 5 * CHALLENGES

1. Being constantly conspicuous; attracing a lot of attention
2. Dealing with poverty while coming from a position of relative wealth
3. Being patient; adapting to different concepts of time
4. Coping with different cultural standards, particularly gender roles
5. Returning home; adapting to U.S. excesses and the hurried pace of life

WESTERN INFLUENCE WAS MORE APPARENT IN MY HOST COUNTRY THAN I ANTICIPATED.

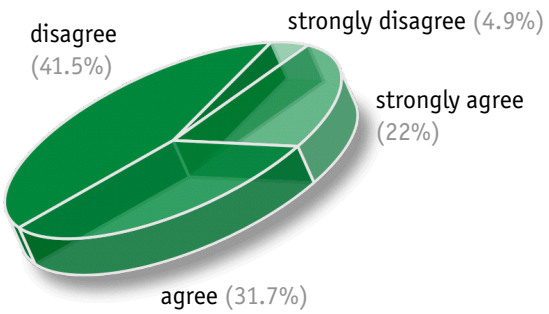


PHOTO by Melissa Mullan.

II. NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE
GETTING ACCLIMATED IN YOUR NEW HOME

No matter how exhaustively you prepare for your time abroad, acclimating to life in your host country will not be all peaches and cream. There will be physical adjustments—time changes, food options, climate, etc.—as well as longer-term emotional adjustments. In the beginning, you will probably feel a bit lonely and overwhelmed. Or incredibly lonely and overwhelmed.

But don't despair! Remember that the process of acclimation is just that—a *process*—and it requires time and patience. Accept that there will be some bumps along the road. The majority of our survey respondents, 76 percent, reported that they felt comfortable in their new home within two months or less.

TOP 5
* THINGS PEOPLE MISSED ABOUT THE UNITED STATES

1. Electricity and indoor plumbing
2. Ability to effectively communicate
3. Access to a variety of food
4. Gender equality
5. Reliable transportation

TOP 5
* THINGS PEOPLE APPRECIATED ABOUT THEIR HOST COUNTRIES

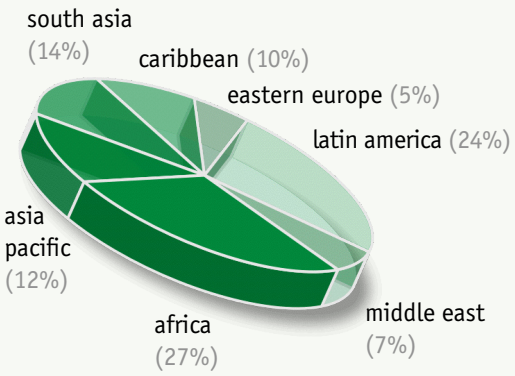
1. Friendliness of the people
2. Relaxed pace/simplicity of life
3. Beauty of the natural landscape
4. Intimacy of family life
5. Cultural traditions

Two Cents

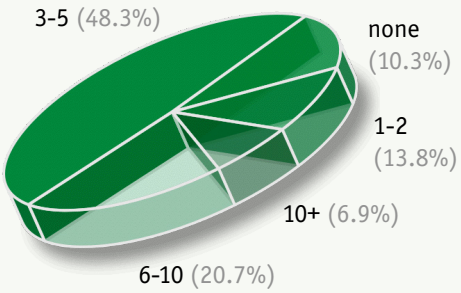
Try to feel out the rhythm of the country. Every country has its own rhythm, but the rhythm of India is quite different from the rhythm of the States. An American could easily become frustrated by the difference, and I did for a few weeks. Then I calmed down and tried to observe the way things worked when I stopped trying to force expectations on them—this change in mentality allowed me to adapt and appreciate the culture rather than become frustrated with it. I like the motto, 'No hurry, no worry.' Also, I whole-heartedly believed that everything works out, and this helped me a lot in traveling and living abroad.

Dara Suchke, Georgia State University
Studied in India

REGIONS REPRESENTED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS.



HOW MANY FOREIGN COUNTRIES HAD YOU VISITED BEFORE YOUR ABROAD EXPERIENCE?



Wild and Wonderful

Food in Burkina Faso
by Kathryn Coulibaly

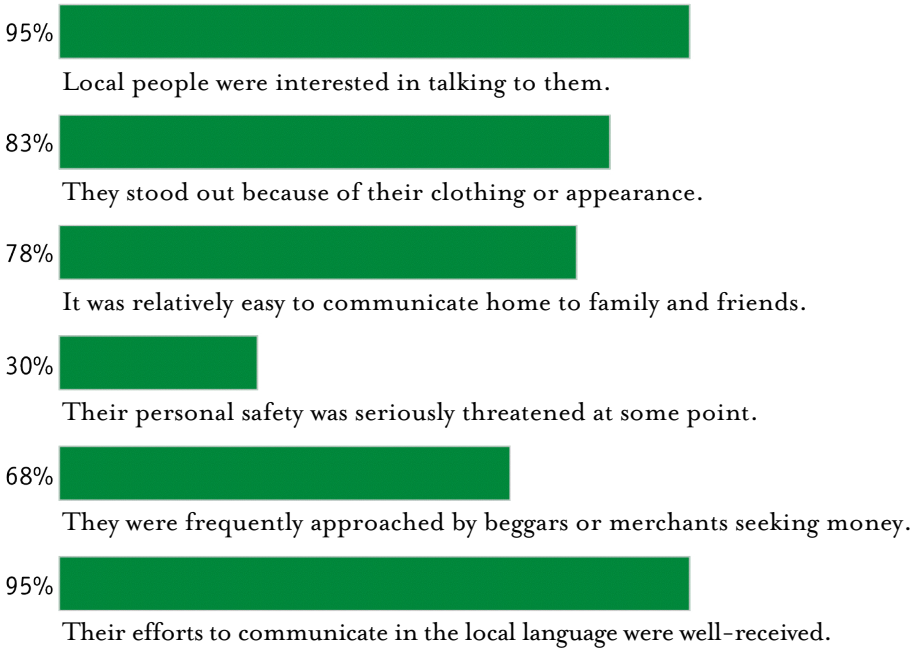
I took every chance I could to eat with my neighbors, but this opportunity—although sociable and pleasant—was not without its challenges. One night, after dinner at my friend's house, I complimented her on the chicken she had served. "Chicken?" she replied in confusion, and my heart went cold. Fortunately, the "chicken" in question was actually rabbit, and not something more "exotic."

On another occasion, I was enjoying a meal at the mayor's house. His wife was my good friend and never failed to invite me to dinner. That night, I was happily eating some rice and chicken—verified this time by my discovery of the chicken's head on my plate. I didn't want to eat the head myself, but felt guilty for refusing anything in someone else's home, especially since I knew that here, the head was considered a treat. It wasn't until my friend went inside the house to fetch something that I was able to discreetly give the morsel to Kadi, my friend's precocious little niece.

I did blatantly refuse one food item in the mayor's house, when his wife's pet monkey had to be put down for biting too many people. People came from miles around to ask for the monkey's meat to make a feast. But in consideration of my friend's feelings, and perhaps my own, I graciously shook my head when asked to sample "Boo-boo."

When I returned to the United States, I had a deeper respect for food, perhaps because I had seen what life is like when there is so little of it. I admit that I enjoy the look of shock on people's faces when I tell them I've tasted porcupine, dog and snake. I watched my neighbors in Burkina eat frogs, mice, insects, wild birds and other things that would make most Americans shudder. The people in my village had a much wider interpretation of what constituted food, and a much deeper understanding of what went into a meal, from capturing an animal to serving it up. But they also had a knack for making everything taste delicious.

* COUNTDOWN *Percentage who felt that …*



III. NIGHT AND DAY: TOP EIGHT CULTURAL ASPECTS MOST DIFFERENT FROM THE UNITED STATES

1. FOOD
2. TRANSPORTATION
3. GENDER ROLES
4. FAMILY STRUCTURES
5. CONCEPT OF TIME
6. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS
7. PERVASIVENESS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE
8. LIVING CONDITIONS

* FOOD. In the United States, we're used to having a plethora of culinary options available at our fingertips, ranging from fast food to various ethnic cuisines to fine dining. When it comes to food, the two most common challenges study abroad students encounter are eating the same things day in and day out and getting a more limited range of nutrients.

Of course, cuisine varies drastically from country to country, and your experiences will vary accordingly. Vegetarians will have an easy time in India but will find few vegetarian options in Bolivia. Research local dishes and, if necessary, prepare accordingly. Some students pack multi-vitamins; others bring protein bars or jars of peanut butter.

No matter where you go, open yourself up to trying new things. You'll drive yourself crazy expending too much energy salivating over all the food items you miss; instead, concentrate on what's available and what new culinary adventures your experience affords.

"I think one of the biggest differences of living in a so-called developing country is eating the same food every day for each meal. When I was in Nicaragua for only three weeks, I did not think I could eat another plate of rice and beans. It is humbling to recognize that the people around me have eaten whatever the food may be for their entire lives."

Laura Buchs, University of Wisconsin–Madison Program Director
Volunteered in Micronesia through the Peace Corps

"It is important to assimilate into your family by eating the same meals as they do. However, don't neglect your own health. Go to the market and get veggies, go out to dinner with other exchange students or treat your family if you need protein or other nutrients you may not be getting."

Laura Ostenso
Foundation Program Assistant in Uganda

"In Madagascar, rice is the staple. It was hard for my body, which is used to a variety of fruits and vegetables, to have so many carbohydrates and so few other nutrients."

Kalin Drzewiecki, Fairleigh Dickinson University
Studied in Madagascar through SIT Study Abroad

* TRANSPORTATION. If you're like most Americans, accustomed to driving most anywhere you need to go, chances are you'll have some adjustments to make. Get used to walking! And be patient. Though often quite efficient, public transportation options in developing countries, such as minibuses, shared taxis, motorbike taxis and/or rickshaws, may be more informal than what we're used to, without set schedules or a predetermined series of stops.

A vast majority of students come to enjoy getting around without relying on a car, finding that walking and taking public transportation affords a plethora of opportunities to interact with the local culture. As many students reported, the journey is half the fun.

"The most common modes of transportation were minibus taxis, where upwards of 15 people would be crammed in. Most locals walked everywhere."

Jen Lazuta, Gettysburg College
Studied in South Africa through Interstudy

"I LOVED riding my rickety bike to school every morning, but I missed the Washington DC metro."

Arianna Levitus, George Washington University
Studied in India through South India Term Abroad

"Public transportation in Nicaragua is remarkably efficient, almost to a fault. Buses leaves from all the markets in Managua to destinations throughout the country at all hours of the day. The only substantive differences are the extent to which the operators allow infinitely more people onto the buses than should be safely permitted, and there are few, if any published schedules—you just show up and get lucky."

Evan Casper-Futterman, Vassar College
Studied in Nicaragua through SIT Study Abroad

Getting There

Transportation in the Dominican Republic
by Gabrielle Wallace

Slowly, passengers trickle on the bus where I am waiting, and when a middle-aged man casually tells me to scoot over, filling the last available seat, the driver finally starts the bus. In the Dominican Republic, public transport runs on demand. In other words, the schedules depend on the customers; when all the seats are occupied, the bus will depart.

Arrival times depend on how fast each driver is willing to go. Cruising into Puerto Plata, I tell the driver that I need to make a connection to the smaller *volador*, a public bus that runs along the northern coast of the island. At the next traffic light, he points to a 15-passenger *volador* two blocks away. I step onto the sidewalk and hurry past dozens of moto-taxis, the eyes of the young drivers eyes burning through my skin like UV-rays. Poker-faced, I pass up several enthusiastic offers to give me, the blue-eyed gringa, an overpriced moto-taxi ride.

The *volador*, like most *voladors*, has been stripped of all luxuries—no shock absorbers, no carpet, no ceiling cloth, no seat belts. However, the few added amenities include extra seats attached to the back of the front row seats and a couple of foldout chairs to accommodate any passenger that boards the bus along the way. The driver and the *cobrador* (fare-taker) converse through a series of taps that sounds like Morse code, but actually signal the driver to stop and go as the *cobrador* lets passengers get on, pay and get off.

Tap, tap, tap. The driver pulls to the side of the road to let a new batch of passengers aboard: a female hotel employee neatly dressed in a blue business-style uniform, a dirt-bathed field worker, several junior high school students in blue collared shirts and khaki skirts and pants and two Haitian adolescents selling peanut brittle and honey-coconut sweets. The smells of sweets, perfume and sweat blend with the sea breeze from outside, and I silently hope the *cobrador* does not let anyone else on the bus.

Another Calloused World

Street Crime in Ecuador
by Regis Elizabeth Ahern

When family members greet each other here, it is with a kiss and a warm embrace. An enthusiastic, "How are you?" follows, and I know that the question is genuine, not posed as an empty formality. Here, my large extended family often eats lunch together on the weekends, and frequently this time together continues well past dinner.

What I admire most is the casual cuddling, the insouciant caress. I often see teenage boys wrapping their arms around their mothers and resting their heads on their mothers' shoulders. Mothers and daughters walk down the street with their arms linked or their fingers intertwined.

The design of homes here often encourages bonding and socializing within the family. In addition to formal living spaces, there are smaller clusters of seats and couches in the hallways, especially on the second floors. At first, these seating areas seemed random and useless to me, but their use became apparent one night when I got into a conversation with my sister and grandmother on my way out of the bathroom. Instead of standing around, we moved to the adjacent couch and continued to talk. The conversation was undoubtedly more comfortable and longer than it would have been had we continued to stand.

Although I didn't recognize it at first, there is a lot to appreciate here; it is just a matter of opening my eyes and heart to what's around me.

Two Cents

Be open to the fact that the preconceived notions you have will probably change. Immediately.

Lindsey Ryan
Taught abroad in Mexico

* GENDER ROLES. One common challenge, especially for females, is confronting different notions about gender roles and adapting to them without compromising your own ideals. Survey respondents recommend keeping an open mind and making a concerted effort to understand your host country's cultural beliefs and practices when it comes to gender. Talk to people. Ask questions.

  Many students—particularly those who studied in Asia and the Middle East—note that while the roles of men and women are much more distinct than in the United States, this does not make them inherently unequal. In general, students find that middle- and upper-class women in urban areas have opportunities and expectations more in line with their own, whereas women in lower-class and/or rural areas are more likely to fulfill traditional domestic roles.

  For a more comprehensive examination of this topic, please see our "Gender Roles" PDF Guide.

"Especially in rural areas, women do all the household work, cook and raise the children. Men spend time with the herds, which often involves socializing under a tree. This was very hard to get used to."

Kalin Drzewiecki, Fairleigh Dickinson University
Studied in Madagascar through SIT Study Abroad

"For me, as a female, it was important to not get visibly angry about the gender discrepancies in Uganda. I made sure to vent my frustrations in my journal or in emails home, and use them to learn about, not blame, the culture."

Laura Ostenso
Foundation Program Assistant in Uganda

* FAMILY STRUCTURE. In poorer areas, close family ties are a matter of survival. Everyone is expected to chip in and contribute to the family's sustenance, and this often includes extended family members as well. Most students enjoy a more intimate family atmosphere, taking pleasure in the emphases on communal activities and collective well-being. Participating in family rituals provides an invaluable window into local culture and customs.

  However, students warn that the family structure can feel restrictive—especially for college students used to being independent and setting their own schedules. Children in developing countries often do not leave home until they are married, and the concept of an independent, unmarried, young student may be difficult for host parents to grasp. Make an effort to respect your host family's rules and to participate in important communal activities and events.

"Families were, in a way, closer in Costa Rica. The children live with the parents until they marry. They rarely, if ever, move away for college. In one way, it's lovely to see a culture that makes family such a priority. On the other hand, it's hard to relate to that when you value independence, personal autonomy and ambition."

Elizabeth Osius, Carnegie Mellon University
Studied in Costa Rica through International Studies Abroad

"Extended family plays a larger role in Micronesia. More people are related to each other in one community, and family lines are matrilineal. Brothers are responsible for their sisters' children, not their own children."

Laura Buchs, University of Wisconsin–Madison Program Director
Volunteered in Micronesia through the Peace Corps

"I think family structure is stronger in Honduras. It's really important to celebrate with family for birthdays and other important events like Quincieneras, regardless of how busy you are. Weekends are a time for families to come together and enjoy one another's company."

Jeffrey Ramberg, Hamline Universtiy
Studied in Honduras through Global Student Teaching

* TIME. Americans are singularly obsessed with their watches. We value overachievers, and we frown upon tardiness. We like things to run smoothly, efficiently and as fast as possible. One of the most popular pieces of advice from study abroad students? Relax! Smell the roses. And besides, what are you really in a rush for anyway? Just because people are routinely late, it doesn't mean they're incompetent. Just because people don't schedule every minute of their day, it doesn't mean they're lazy.

You will likely feel frustrated by longer stretches of free time and your host culture's more lax attitudes toward punctuality, but a vast majority of survey respondents report that they come to appreciate the slower pace of life. In fact, once adjusted, it makes them wonder why Americans are always in such a darn hurry. _

"Omani time is 30 minutes late. If you want someone to show up on time, you say 8 o'clock English (or American) time."

Ryan Wismer, University of Tulsa
Studied in Oman through SIT Study Abroad

"In Madagascar, people move much more slowly, and it can take a fast-paced American a while to adapt to that difference."

Kalin Drzewiecki, Fairleigh Dickinson University
Studied in Madagascar through SIT Study Abroad

"There is a very different concept of time in Argentina; it's actually very cool. Dinners can last four hours, buses can never come ... I learned a lot of patience that made me enjoy life more. I wasn't looking at the clock every second."

Courtney Butler
Studied in Argentina through CIEE

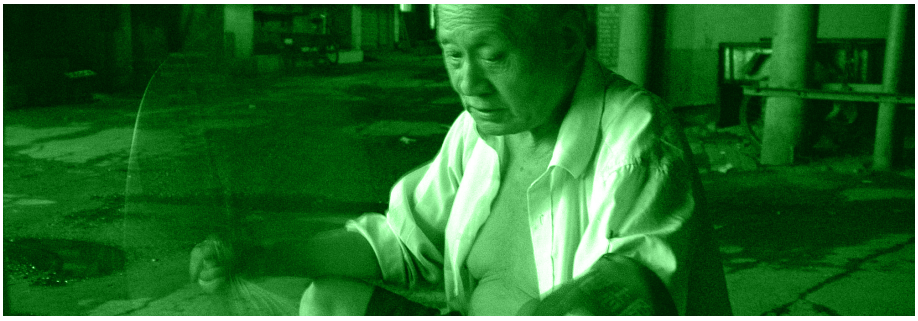


PHOTO by Narayan Mahon.

Yoda and the Skytrain

Commuting in Thailand
by Molly Angstman

My route to work funnels me, along with crowds of commuters, onto the "sky train"—Bangkok's new elevated transportation system. Every day, without fail, the first 50 people off the escalator in the station see a new train pull up and then start running, all the while smiling ear-to-ear like they are doing something really ridiculous. The little uniformed girls with their pigtails and giant backpacks, some barely taller than my waist, treat the 20-meter run as a hilarious adventure, holding hands and giggling, arriving at the train with flushed faces. As the doors quickly close, swallowing their giggles, they leave me to wait for the next train.

I think they smile because even the youngest commuters know how inherently silly it is for a Thai person to run for a train. Although Bangkok is now home to big-money transnationals, the pace of life is still traditionally slower than other cities at a similar level of development. Being in a hurry is almost unseemly, but business is still profitable and the trains run like clockwork. Patience is the lauded quality, not promptness. As Buddhists, they will get another go at it anyway. Why rush?

If I'm not at work every morning with a comfortable 10 minutes to spare, I feel I have failed in my responsibilities as an efficient intern. This is why the second-grader with the Winnie the Pooh backpack will always be wiser than me. She hurries because it is funny and exciting, not because she thinks being early makes life better. Despite their glittering efficiency, these trains might never be fast enough for me. So I am taking cultural orientation classes from these mobile philosophers. Lessons learned so far: 1) Spend rush hour with friends, 2) Enjoy the ride, and 3) Never hurry in paradise.

Brown Water, Blue Sky

Village Life in El Salvador
by Allison Grappone

The intricacies of village life have overwhelmed me these last few days. I have a tough time maneuvering through the village's "roadways"; three-foot-deep ditches are dug in the middle of the road to collect rainwater, a necessary means for survival. Garbage pick-up ends on San Jose Villanueva's main street, causing trash to pile up alongside the streets, rivers and houses.

My host mother Lupe, her friend, their kids and I attempted to go to the beach on Sunday. We searched for a beach, but the water was brown because of the rain, so we just kept driving around. I took a photo of one alcove, in which 10 rusty USA vegetable oil cans lie scattered in the foreground, shoes and trash occupy the middle portion of the picture and a layer of brown water sits in the background, followed by blue water and clear skies.

I've gotten used to seeing oxen carry loads of grain past our door and horses galloping to the command of a Dengue sprayer's whip. The only things my eyes haven't become accustomed to are the trash and pollution. Black diesel shoots out of every vehicle tail pipe to spread a blanket of black soot on the cans, tires, plastic and rocks that line the roadways.

I went on a beautiful walk with the entire school before the start of a six-day vacation. Physics was the subject of study that day, and on the hilltop, the students conducted experiments using Coke cans, which served as vessels of mass and time relationships. My usual indifference to the subject of physics held strong, but as we walked, I learned about the trees, flowers, corn, fruit and animals that we passed, impressed by the students' knowledge of nature. We also had conversations about the nation's trash problems and were careful to collect and carry away our Coke cans from the field. We left a trash-free blanket of green and headed back to school, disappearing into the surrounding corn.

* ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS. Many students are discouraged by the relative lack of environmental consciousness in their host countries. A lot of developing countries are dealing with an influx of plastic products and other non-decomposable items but lack the infrastructure to effectively dispose of them. While industrialized nations may be exposing them to new practices and technologies, this knowledge is being passed on without an accompanying understanding of the environmental impact.

  That said, people in developing countries consume far, far fewer resources than Americans. In fact, if they consumed the same number, we would need seven planet Earths! Conservation and moderation are economic necessities, and study abroad students find that living in a country with more limited resources helps them to gain a greater awareness of their own wasteful practices.

"Micronesians threw trash into the ocean as we were traveling across it. They used dynamite to fish—destroying the coral reef that provided not only homes for those fish, but that also supported the scuba diving tourist industry. They left garbage thrown about and had no understanding of the potential impact of garbage on their small islands. There was no sense of environmental concern in Micronesia because no one talked about it and you did not see anything printed about it."

Laura Buchs, University of Wisconsin–Madison Program Director
Volunteered in Micronesia through the Peace Corps

"Though people seemed less aware of environmental problems, they create less waste in one year than an average American creates every day."

Kalin Drzewiecki, Fairleigh Dickinson University
Studied in Madagascar through SIT Study Abroad

"Unfortunately, it's very rare to meet Egyptians who are environmentally conscious. I try to do my best to recycle and throw my trash in the baskets, but most people here don't know how to do that."

Rose Aslan
Studied in Egypt through American University

* PERVASIVENESS OF RELIGIOUS PRACICE. Students who lived in countries where one or two religions were widely practiced found that they appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the religion(s) firsthand. Whether or not you're religious, students advise that you respect local religious practices—it doesn't mean you have to convert! Learn as much as you can about the religion, both by talking to people and doing your own research.

"Nepali people integrate their Hindu and Buddhist practices into their daily lives, making religion a seamless connection to everything they do. There is nothing forceful or judgmental about their practices; religion is a private practice and varies greatly from one household to another."

Kate Wray Chettri, Education Abroad Advisor
Lived in Nepal

"I was really taken with the Hindu and Sikh religious traditions. I respected and appreciated the pervasiveness of these religions in everything, from the bus shrines to the dress to the incense burning around every corner. I found this aspect of the culture fascinating ... and in a country like India, I think survival is based on faith."

Dara Suchke, Georgia State University
Studied in India

* LIVING CONDITIONS. Living conditions will of course depend on whether you're living in a rural or urban area, and whether you're staying with a host family or in dorms. Most students living in rural areas find that the conditions they encounter make them realize how much Americans take for granted, but also how gratifying it can be to put time and effort into daily chores, like hanging laundry, fetching water and peeling potatoes.

Study abroad programs in urban areas often match students with upper-class host families, and day-to-day living can be quite comfortable, if not luxurious. Some students' host families even employ live-in maids to do laundry, cook and clean—which can be a rather awkward experience if you're not used to being catered to by domestic help. Talk to your program provider to get a sense for what you have in store.

"I found that the concrete differences in living conditions—such as no running water, no electricity, outdoor toilets/bathing facilities, etc.—were hardly noticeable; my family was so much fun and great to be around that I didn't even care about the differences. I also came to think that my Ugandan family's priorities were in the quality of their relationships, religion, etc. than in their desire to have unnecessary niceties. I liked that."

Laura Ostenso
Foundation Program Assistant in Uganda

"I lived with my host family in a very nice section of San Pedro Sula. If anything, my living conditions were better here than back home. Overall, however, living conditions in Honduras are much, much worse than in the United States."

Jeffrey Ramberg, Hamline University
Taught in Honduras through Global Student Teaching

"Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the Western hemisphere, above Haiti. Even working- and middle-class residents of Managua do not have the ability, much less the desire, to consume on a scale resembling the United States. In the countryside, conditions are far more stark, and poverty becomes more universally apparent."

Evan Casper-Futterman, Vassar College
Studied in Nicaragua through SIT Study Abroad

PHOTO by James Pickett.

Breaking the Fast

Ramadan in Tanzania
by Jillian O'Rourke

It was just shy of noon on Eid el Fitr, the day that marks the end of Ramadan. I was waiting for my friend Tashu, to fetch me so I could join her and her family in the day's celebration. Tashu was late, as is the usual custom in Tanzania, and we stopped at her house to meet her immediate family before continuing on to the home of her maternal grandfather. While there, Tashu tried her best not to be insulting as she suggested that I borrow a pair of shoes and use some of her make-up.

Her mother and several sisters were in a whirlwind of activity, finishing up their hair and make-up, layering on masses of gold jewelry and carefully pinning their veils with elaborate gold pins. The 11 of us clamored into her brother's Range Rover, and we were off. When we arrived, we joined the crowds of women heading into the female part of the house, where it was proper to remove our *buibuis* and relax.

The room was bursting with color and cheer and gold. I had not yet seen women so exuberant and lively in Tanzania. Plastic sheets were laid out like tablecloths on the floor. At least 20 large tin trays laden with goat, *pilau* and vegetables were brought out and set at relatively even intervals. Sitting cross-legged and eating with right hands, everyone dug into the food.

Within 15 minutes, the mounds of food were gone and the women had pushed themselves back along the walls, relaxing with each other while they digested. As small children began to drop off to sleep, women started to gather their things together and head downstairs, where responsibility and *buibuis* awaited them.

Although the entire event had lasted no more than three hours, it was something the women looked forward to each year—joining with family after the month of spiritual reflection. With hugs and occasional tears, the women bid good-bye to their close friends, relatives and distant kin. They then left to sleep off the excess and dream of next year's Ramadan.

Disorder a lo Colombiano

Colombia's Daily Rhythms
by Amy Thorne

On Sept. 17, 2004, Dr. Alfredo Correa, a professor of sociology and a charismatic "anti-Yankee," was shot and killed at 2:30 p.m. near his home in Barranquilla, Colombia. Just after receiving the news of his murder, I accompanied some of his former students to a dance hall, where they danced salsa and *cumbia* and became entranced with the music of carnival: brass horns, accordions, flute and washboards. My friends referred to the evening as "The Disorder." Let's go for some Disorder, they said.

Every corner in the place was painted a different, brilliant color; stairs led up and down to different levels of the building. Half a surf board had been embedded into the wall, jutting out among other disparate objects like children's chairs, a burro's saddle, weathered shutters and a golden lion's head. The *llamadora*, or "the caller," was a drum that for me immediately conjured up ritual, its deep, trembling resonance calling the dancers to attention.

BOOM ... BOOM ... BOOM. I could think of nothing, only feel my body drawn to move. Two men in their 60s shook it up on top of the bar for hours, and no one else but me found the sight hilarious. I tried to copy the way they moved, but I knew that they had been listening to the *llamadora* since birth, that they had danced before they spoke, that we lived with different rhythms.

We drank water and juices of tropical fruits to stay hydrated. When the carnival music began, signaled by the entrance of the flute, I didn't think I could possibly dance to it, unable to identify the rhythms. But in carnival, it doesn't matter. We shook our hips, swung our arms, stomped and jumped, marched and turned, without partner, pattern or care. "The Disorder," as they called it, finally made sense. The dance floor became one giant sea organism, with arms waving like tentacles and pulsing with a beat you could feel in the blood.

PHOTO by Amy Thorne.

IV. NOTABLE DISTINCTIONS
CULTURAL ASPECTS PERCEIVED AS SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT FROM THE UNITED STATES

1. STYLE OF DRESS
2. RECREATION OPTIONS
3. POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
4. CRIME LEVELS

* DRESS. Students almost universally recommend making a concerted effort to adapt to local styles of dress. Not only will you feel less conspicuous, but locals will immediately be able to distinguish you from the stereotypical camera-toting, shorts-sporting Western tourist. Many students find that wearing traditional clothes opens opportunities for meaningful interaction and cultural learning that may have been closed to them otherwise.

"Women from the United States (or other Western nations) who chose to wear pants and/or shorts received a very different response than those of us who wore skirts. Perhaps more than anything, my choice to dress like the women around me positively influenced my time in Micronesia."

Laura Buchs, University of Wisconsin–Madison Program Director
Volunteered in Micronesia through the Peace Corps

"I am glad that I wore traditional clothing during my stay; local residents took me much more seriously, and I felt more like a member of the community than any tourist who passed through."

Arianna Levitus, George Washington University
Studied in India through South India Term Abroad

* RECREATION OPTIONS. With the increasing popularity of study abroad, the experience is also gaining an infamous reputation as "one big party." Many students who choose more traditional destinations are excited by the lower drinking age, and some spend more time barhopping than they do in class.

While this is certainly not to say that all students going to Western Europe or Australia treat their time abroad as an extended spring break, students who choose less traditional destinations are often more concerned with a true cultural immersion experience. And this can mean adapting to new modes of entertainment. In countries with fewer resources, you'll be less likely to find flashy discos or multiplex cinemas, especially where locals don't have extra money to spend on leisure activities. Many students find that locals entertain themselves by gathering in homes or communal places to eat, drink, dance or just shoot the breeze.

"Almost everyone was up by five in the morning, and nothing is really open on Sundays because everyone goes to church. More activities are communal."

Caitlyn Horose, University of Colorado at Boulder
Studied in Ghana through CIEE

"Women are not expected to drink, smoke or otherwise act 'like a man.'"

Tiffany Moore, University of Cincinnati
Studied in Kenya

"In four years I went to *one* movie: it was an old evangelical horror film about what happens to promiscuous teenagers. Recreation involved invitations to someone's home, where we smoked the water pipe, drank coffee and tea and talked."

Renee Storteboom
Volunteer in Ethiopia with an African non-profit organization

"There are far fewer parks in San Pedro Sula than my hometown. I continued to jog everyday, but other recreation options didn't exist."

Jeffrey Ramberg, Hamline University
Taught in Honduras through Global Student Teaching

* POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS. Despite the fact that the United States is at the cutting edge of the "Information Age," most Americans are more likely to know the name of Paris Hilton's dog than they are to know the names of our Supreme Court justices. Students who live in developing countries consistently find that locals are not only very knowledgeable about local and regional political affairs, but also about U.S. politics. Being politically aware and active is not a special-interest "hobby," as it has come to be in the United States, but a vital part of everyday life.

"Ethiopians—at least in the capital and other major regional centers—are very conscious that politics impacts their daily lives. Even on a local level, we don't feel the impact so cleanly in the United States."

Renee Storteboom
Volunteered in Ethiopia

Two Cents

Listen and watch. Humility and learning the language beyond 'please' and 'thank you' means a lot more open doors. Remember you're the guest in this country and it isn't your place to make the rules, like it or not. Remember you are a guest and be a good one.

Renee Storteboom
Volunteer in Ethiopia with an African non-profit organization

Two Cents

Make an effort to know a little about the country before going because that will impress people and show that you took the time to get to know more about them.

Jeffrey Ramberg, Hamline Universtiy
Studied in Honduras through Global Student Teaching

PHOTO by Justin Ruben.

A Place Called Home

A New Life Perspective in Costa Rica
by Aaron Horenstein

Despite being immersed in the most tranquil of environments, I couldn't stop thinking about the day's unpleasant events. Earlier in the day, my friend Yurii and I had found ourselves waiting in the third bus terminal of the day. I felt a sneeze coming on, so I reached out for my school bag to grab a tissue, but to my dismay I realized that my bag was no longer beside me.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I shouted aloud to myself. Someone had snatched my school bag in the split second that I wasn't looking. "Keep an eye and a grasp on your stuff at all times," our program director had told us repeatedly.

Yurii and I didn't really have any particular destination in mind; we just figured we would hop on a bus and play it by ear. But after the bus ride, we decided to hitchhike, as I wasn't in the mood to stomach another bus station. We caught a ride with a truck, which eventually stopped in a tiny town.

I sat along the only road there was, trying to break open a coconut that Yurii had knocked off a palm tree. My attempts were futile, but just then a boy with a machete came walking toward us. "Uh oh," I thought. But he pointed to the coconut and offered to give me a hand. After a few simple strokes, I was drinking fresh, sweet coconut milk for the first time.

The boy informed us that the whole neighborhood was talking about the two gringos wandering through town. We told him that we were just looking for a good place to sleep that night, and upon hearing this he immediately said we could sleep in his front yard. I was shocked! I imagined wandering through an unfamiliar neighborhood back in the States, and then crashing on someone's front lawn. The police would be called before I even started snoring.

Yurii and I followed the boy back to his home, where we met his father and two younger brothers. That night, we slept under the stars.

"Political consciousness seems higher than the United States at all levels of Nicaraguan society. Young people, both affluent and impoverished, attend demonstrations regularly, and are familiar not only with relevant political and economic issues, but statistics and evidence as well. Older people, no matter their affiliation or class, seem to understand the politics and history of their country as well as current events, which is different from my experiences in the United States."

Evan Casper-Futterman, Vassar College
Studied in Nicaragua through SIT Study Abroad

"Ghanaians are not only aware of their own political affairs, but are also very knowledgeable about affairs around the world, including the United States."

Amber Schneider, Central Michigan University
Taught abroad in Ghana

* CRIME. Americans, it must be said, are somewhat paranoid about the dangers of traveling to developing countries. Our fears are not entirely unfounded: you may find yourself in a politically turbulent region or in need of quality medical care that your host country simply cannot offer. But when all is said and done, students' largest concern is generally petty theft, as locals peg them as someone likely to be carrying money or valuables. Learn what the popular tourist scams in your area are, if any, and use your common sense. For example, don't walk the streets by yourself at 2 in the morning. Bad things can happen anywhere, but don't let safety concerns evolve into unsubstantiated paranoia that will preclude a meaningful cultural experience.

"While Kathmandu does have crime, such as petty theft and scams in the tourist area, there is not an overall high crime rate."

Kate Wray Chettri, Education Abroad Advisor
Lived in Nepal

"I did not experience any crime while I was in Ghana; on the contrary, people went out of their way to look out for our well-being!"

Amber Schneider, Central Michigan University
Taught abroad in Ghana

"There was much more petty crime in Argentina—it was all about stealing to survive. At home, I'm more scared of being a victim of violent crime—I felt much safer walking in Argentina, actually, because I knew they would only take my wallet, and nothing else would happen to me."

Courtney Butler
Studied in Argentina through CIEE

"We were often warned when traveling in Lima, though while there I didn't experience anything bad and it seemed like any other urban area that I've been in."

Shana Aoyama, Mount Holyoke College
Studied in Peru through SIT Study Abroad

IX. FURTHER RESOURCES

READ THE FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES EXCERPTED IN THIS GUIDE

* WILD AND WONDERFUL glimpseabroad.org/article_304.html
* GETTING THERE glimpseabroad.org/article_332.html
* ANOTHER CALLOUSED WORLD glimpseabroad.org/article_232.html
* YODA AND THE SKYTRAIN glimpseabroad.org/article_456.html
* BROWN WATER, BLUE SKY glimpseabroad.org/article_414.html
* BREAKING THE FAST glimpseabroad.org/article_302.html
* DISORDER A LO COLOMBIANO glimpseabroad.org/article_643.html
* A PLACE CALLED HOME glimpseabroad.org/article_195.html

OTHER ARTICLES

* "HOW TO STAY ALIVE AND HEALTHY ON A BUDGET" **by Julienne Gage**
  A brief overview of the advantages and disadvantages to travel in developing countries. www.TransitionsAbroad.com
* "NOW YOU CAN DO ANYTHING" **by Meredith Alt**
  A summary of guidelines for preparing to study abroad in developing countries. www.TransitionsAbroad.com

BOOKS & GUIDES

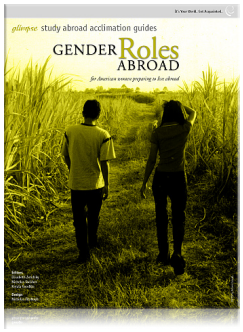
* THE NATIVE TOURIST **by Krishna Ghimire Earthscan**
  Examines the rapid growth of tourism in developing countries, as well as the environmental and social impact.
* HANDLE WITH CARE: A GUIDE TO RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES **by Scott Graham**
  The author recounts a variety of dilemmas he faced while visiting developing countries and discusses appropriate ways to resolve them.
* ADVENTURE TRAVEL IN THE THIRD WORLD: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO SURVIVE IN REMOTE AND HOSTILE DESTINATIONS
  by Jeff Randall, Mike Perrin — A guide to minimizing risk while traveling in developing countries without sacrificing adventure.
* FROM PILGRIMAGE TO PACKAGE TOUR **by David L. Gladstone**
  A fascinating look at the spectrum of travelers in developing countries—most of whom are not camera-toting Westerners, but rather indigenous people making pilgrimages to religious shrines.
* A SMALL PLACE **by Jamaica Kincaid**
  A short, impassioned book about Western tourists in Kincaid's home country of Antigua and their grave lack of respect for local culture.

Glimpse Study Abroad Acclimation Guides

PDF guides written by and for students to help you prepare to study abroad.

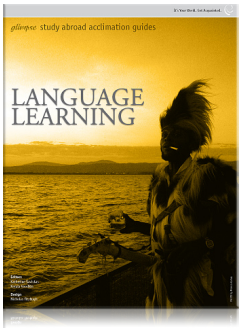
Culture Shock

Worried about adjusting to life in your host country? Learn how to prepare for culture shock, how to cope with it while abroad and how to handle reverse culture shock upon your return to the United States. Get Your Copy Now



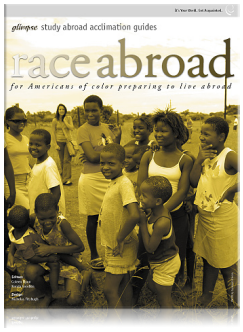
Gender Roles Abroad

It's time for some girl talk: this guide helps young women prepare for the challenges of coping with popular stereotypes about American females, adapting to different perspectives on gender roles and navigating the dating world abroad. Get Your Copy Now



Language Learning

Going to a non-English speaking country? In this comprehensive guide, learn everything you need to know to transcend that pesky language barrier. Over 250 returned students answer essential questions on foreign language learning, relevant to beginners and advanced learners alike. Get Your Copy Now



Race Abroad

Designed for American students of color, "Race Abroad" addresses the challenges of reconciling one's ethnic and national identity while abroad and adapting to different attitudes toward racial difference and/or different kinds of prejudice.

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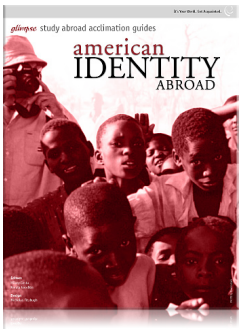

American Identity Abroad

Let's face it: these days, Americans aren't winning very many popularity contests abroad. With data and advice from over 350 American study abroad students, this guide helps Americans navigate the sticky issues that surround being a citizen of the world's only superpower.

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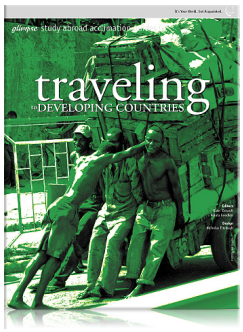

Traveling to Developing Countries

If you're all about breaking the mold, this guide's for you. "Traveling to Developing Countries" coaches students who are considering destinations beyond Western Europe and Australia on effective ways to prepare for and handle cultural, economic and social disparities between their host countries and the United States.

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