STUDY ABROAD TIPS

For Students, By Students

Written by Harvard College students in collaboration with the Harvard Office of International Education
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Living in a New Country

Cultural Adjustment

- Do your research before you go
  - Learn about local laws, customs, food, and climate before leaving home
- Start practicing your language skills before you arrive in-country
- Take a tour of your city within the first few days of arrival and familiarize yourself with public transportation
- If you have a host family, make sure to establish ground rules and voice concerns early in the semester
- Familiarize yourself with your program’s academic system and meet with administrators and professors early in the semester, if possible, to discuss their expectations

Cultural Immersion

- Try to make an effort to use the local language
- Use TV, movies, music, and friends to practice
- Seek out what makes your city and country unique
  - Try local food and drink specialties
  - Learn local customs, like expressions, mannerisms, and cultural activities
- Try to make local friends
  - Talk to your program administrators about clubs, sports teams, and volunteer organizations that you can join
- Try to frequent areas where locals, rather than tourists, like to spend their time
- Consider doing an internship, if you are looking for a rewarding way to spend your free time
Traveling

Weekend and Spring Break Travel

• How will you get there?
  o Remember that budget airlines, while sometimes a good choice, are prone to delays and charge many extra fees
  o Train travel is a great way to see local scenery, can often be cheaper than air travel, and is less hassle
    ▪ However, train stations can sometimes be confusing and the journey will usually take longer than if you went by plane
    ▪ Make sure to validate your train ticket in certain European countries
  o Traveling by bus is a great way to see areas around your city

• Where will you stay?
  o Airbnb is a comfortable option, and many rentals offer good locations for cheaper prices than hotels
  o Hostels are very affordable and often provide opportunities to meet other young people who are traveling in the area
    ▪ However, make sure that the hostel is in a safe area before booking, and find out if you need to bring a lock or linens
    ▪ Travel to places where you have friends studying abroad and stay with them (if they are allowed to have guests)

• What will you do?
  o Remember that you have limited time on weekend trips; research your destination beforehand and decide what you absolutely must see and do
  o Look for free walking tours, museum tickets, and events
  o Figure out the easiest way to get around the city (public transportation, walking, uber, etc.)
General Travel Advice

- Make copies of important documents, including your passport
- Keep your real documents in a safe place and always keep a color copy with you
- Record important phone numbers
  - Make sure you know the local emergency numbers
  - Consider buying a cheap pay-as-you-go phone to call local numbers
- Know ahead of time whether you will need local currency and tell your bank that you will be traveling to a new country
- Bring the appropriate plug adapters
- Pack lightly and pack appropriately
  - Know the weather of your destination before you go
  - Some airlines charge extra for checked bags, many buildings will not have elevators, and you will want to have room for souvenirs
Finances

Budgeting

- Make a budget before you leave and update it regularly during your travels
  - Talk to people who are familiar with your country or who have studied abroad there before to understand costs of living
  - Take conversion rates into account
  - Consider every possible expense, including transportation, phone, and entertainment costs
  - It’s always better to over budget than to under budget
  - Ask your program for a sample budget
- If money is a concern for you, try to find ways to eat and explore economically
  - Try to cook, if you can, and shop at reasonably priced grocery stores
  - Look for free walking tours, museums, and cultural activities
  - If your program offers optional free excursions, take advantage
  - Spend time in your city; it’s a study abroad myth that you have to travel to a different country every weekend

Banks, Credit/Debit Cards, ATMs, and Currency

- Inquire about your bank’s foreign transaction fees; these can add up!
- Find out how card friendly your country is and which cards are widely accepted
- Notify your bank that you will be traveling to avoid them freezing your cards
  - Note your bank’s international phone number in case of problems
- Find out if your bank has a partner bank in your country
  - If so, you can use said bank’s ATMs without a fee
- If possible, bring an extra credit card with you for emergencies
- Bring foreign currency with you (note that many banks require you to order foreign currency at least two weeks in advance)
- Keep your money in a safe place and try to avoid traveling with large amounts of cash on your person

Financial Aid

- Talk to your financial aid officer directly about budgeting and funding resources
Health and Safety

Taking Care of Your Health

- Be familiar with your health insurance coverage before you leave
- Verify that your prescription medications are legal in your host country and bring enough of them with you to last for the duration of your trip
  - Not sure? Call International SOS (+1-617-998-0000) before you leave and ask to speak with one of their medical professionals.
- Keep emergency numbers (International SOS, local program administrators, local emergency services) with you at all times
  - Call the 24/7 International SOS number (+1-617-998-0000) or start a chat or phone call from within the International SOS Assistance app. (Remember to sign up for the app with your Harvard email address.)
- Your mental health is important, too – know that it’s okay to feel homesick, stressed, or uncomfortable
  - Reach out to local program administrators or International SOS if you need help
  - Talk about challenges with your friends; they might be feeling the same thing!
  - Bring comfort items, like your favorite blanket or slippers, from home

Avoiding Theft

- Try to blend in – wear appropriate clothing and avoid carrying a lot of bags or large maps
- Never leave your belongings unattended or your bags unzipped
- Don’t keep anything in your back pockets
- Refrain from carrying large sums of money
- Only take licensed taxis and negotiate pricing before getting into the cab
- Pickpockets often work in pairs or with children – be weary of people who approach you on the street, especially those who offer you “gifts”

General Safety Concerns

- Always be aware of your surroundings
  - Try to familiarize yourself with public transportation and the layout of
the city before traveling

- Trust your instincts – if something doesn’t feel right, get out of the situation immediately
- Observe political demonstrations from a distance and never take photos of protests
- When traveling, register your trip (and all overnight side trips) with International SOS MyTrips (globalsupport.harvard.edu/mytrips) and the local embassy of your country of citizenship
  - Always know where the nearest embassy or consulate is, as well as the closest police station and hospital
- Review International SOS country guides and subscribe to their email alerts for your destination (globalsupport.harvard.edu/travel-tools/emergency-response-program)
- Avoid unfamiliar areas at night
- Know your program’s emergency protocol

**Tips for Women**

- Research local laws, cultural norms and the general attitudes towards women
  - Contact Global Support Services (globalsupport@harvard.edu) if you would like an individual consultation with a safety and security expert
- Know that in many countries, cat-calling and whistling is more accepted in the U.S.
  - Try not to take offense to these comments, unless you feel unsafe
- Do not go out alone at night and be vigilant at bars and clubs
- It is usually forbidden to travel on a plane with pepper spray and using it is illegal in many countries

**Tips for People of Color**

- Research local laws, cultural norms and the general attitudes towards race
  - Contact the OIE (oie@fas.harvard.edu) to find out if there is student of color who has traveled in your country or region
- Talk to local program administrators for more city and country specific advice

**Tips for BGLTQ**

- Research local laws, cultural norms and the general attitudes surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity
Consult the Global Support Services’ LGBTQ Guidance and Resources page (globalsupport.harvard.edu/travel-tools/lgbtq-travel-guidance-resources)

Contact the OIE (oie@fas.harvard.edu) to be connected with a BGLTQ student who has traveled in your country or region

- Most travel guides include BGLTQ tips

Staying Connected

With Harvard

Academics

- Communicate with the OIE if you have any questions about your abroad experience and communicate with specific academic departments for questions regarding concentration, secondary, or citation credit
- Submit the OIE Abroad Course Enrollment online form as soon as possible (at least 10 days before your program’s Add/Drop)
- The credit transfer process cannot begin until the OIE has received a complete and official transcript, so request that your program send an official and complete transcript to the OIE at 1414 Mass Ave as soon as possible
- Stay informed about deadlines (i.e., thesis, plan of study, graduation requirements, postgraduate fellowships, etc.)
- If you study abroad junior spring, you can still write a thesis! Studying abroad can help you research or decide on a topic
  - If you are studying abroad junior spring, talk to your DUS about finding an advisor
- Occasionally update professors on what you’re doing, especially those who wrote you a recommendation

Summer Planning and Interviewing

- Plan ahead and stay informed of deadlines; applying from abroad can be overwhelming, but not impossible
- Email OCS or URAF advisers, professors, tutors, and friends early for advice on applications, resumes, and cover letters
- Take the 20-minute OCS on-campus interview program quiz to qualify to participate despite missing in-person meetings
• Some employers have separate deadlines for study abroad applicants; speak to them directly

Friends and Extracurriculars
• Keep up to date on campus happenings via email, but consider switching your email lists to digest mode
• Some clubs will allow you to run for board positions from abroad; inquire early
• Forget Harvard FOMO; use social media to give your friends study abroad FOMO

With Home
• Figure out your plan for your phone ahead of time
  o Will you use an international phone plan, get a SIM card, or buy a cheap phone in-country?
• Use apps like FaceTime, Facebook messenger, and Viber
• Think about mailing letters and postcards
Extra Advice

Packing
• If you can, keep things to one large suitcase and a carry-on
  o You’d be surprised how much you can buy in-country
• Check with your program if you need to buy your textbooks ahead of time
• If there’s a weekend trip that you know you’re positively going on which would require clothes that you wouldn’t ordinarily need in your country, pack them
• Bring one “I can’t live without it” comfort item

Souvenirs
• Leave some room in your suitcase while packing
• While it’s great to buy gifts for family and friends, make sure to also buy things for yourself
  o If you can, budget some money to buy yourself one nice item
• Try to buy things which you can only get in that country

Remembering Your Time Abroad
• Take photos!
  o Months from now, you’ll want to reminisce
  o Still, don’t live through your phone; be present
• Consider keeping a travel journal

Returning Home
• Reverse culture shock is real! There are resources to help (i.e., OIE re-entry events).
• Think about sending belongings back ahead of time by mail or with visiting friends/family to avoid excess luggage fees.
• Leave gifts behind for your host family and friends! They will sincerely appreciate it.
• Remember to get your Harvard housing and administrative needs in order.
• Visit the FAQs for Returning to Harvard:
  http://oie.fas.harvard.edu/pages/term-time-faqs