

# STUDY ABROAD TIPS

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*For Students,  
By Students*

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Written by Harvard College students in  
collaboration with the Harvard Office of  
International Education



**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**

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# Traveling

## *Weekend and Spring Break Travel*

- **How will you get there?**
  - Remember that budget airlines, while sometimes a good choice, are prone to delays and charge many extra fees
  - 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
  - Traveling by bus is a great way to see areas around your city
- **Where will you stay?**
  - Airbnb is a comfortable option, and many rentals offer good locations for cheaper prices than hotels
  - 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?**
  - Remember that you have limited time on weekend trips; research your destination beforehand and decide what you absolutely must see and do
  - Look for free walking tours, museum tickets, and events
  - Figure out the easiest way to get around the city (public transportation, walking, uber, etc.)

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## *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**



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# 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

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# **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 wary 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

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### 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](http://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](http://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](mailto: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](mailto: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

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- Consult the Global Support Services' LGBTQ Guidance and Resources page ([globalsupport.harvard.edu/travel-tools/lgbtq-travel-guidance-resources](https://globalsupport.harvard.edu/travel-tools/lgbtq-travel-guidance-resources))
  - Contact the OIE ([oie@fas.harvard.edu](mailto: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

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- **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**
  - **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**



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# Extra Advice

## *Packing*

- If you can, keep things to one large suitcase and a carry-on
  - 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
  - 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!
  - Months from now, you'll want to reminisce
  - 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>