A College Student's Guide to Studying Abroad

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During my years as an undergraduate student, it was my personal goal to study abroad, as should be yours. It wasn't until my sophomore year that I made the decision to go to Spain to study Spanish as a second language for a semester. I was naive, scared and broke yet determined to enhance my foreign language studies. Looking back, it amazes me that I even made it through the process of getting there, however, it can certainly be done. Needless to say, it changed my life and not just by means of my education but also my career. So for all of you college students out there, consider this journey; it's time to close the books and pack your bags!

Choosing a Program: When the time comes to choose the right program ask yourself, "What is it that I want to gain from this experience?" Is fluency in a foreign language? Networking with professors? Finding the best engineering program? The possibilities are endless and at the end of the day it's all up to you. I studied in Spain as an exchange student. Great news! You don't even have to be earning your degree in a foreign language to go abroad, although if you are, it's a must!

Funding: Both traveling and higher level education are not exactly cheap, so it's safe to assume that studying abroad is going to cost a pretty penny. Tired of taking out loans? Check out grants and scholarships to consider making it easier on your wallet (or mom & dad's). Note: if you are having a hard time finding suitable funds, contact your college department for details on what specific grants and scholarships that your university offers.

Advice: Chances are, you are going to need help through this process and this time your best friend isn't the person to go to. Most universities have a study abroad center with helpful tips, advisors and information on the different programs offered. Also, most professors have been abroad so don't hesitate to ask for their advice too. Remember, there's no such thing as a stupid question.

Passport Books: If you don't already have a passport, it's time to get one. The simplest ways to do this are to go to your local post office or if you qualify, order it online. The U.S. Department of State offers great information regarding the steps you need to take. Note: there will be an non-refundable fee of $110 but no worries, a U.S. passport is valid for 10 years so it's worth the expense.
**Student Visa:** If you have decided to go abroad for a semester or a year (more than 90 days), you're going to need a student visa. The best way to get your visa is by contacting the consulate of the country that you will be studying in. NAFSA offers great support on getting your visa. Note: do not wait until the last minute. This process can take up to several months.

**Credits:** Don't get me wrong, studying abroad is a blast but the fun and games are not entirely what it is ALL about. Make sure to double check with your home university to see what classes are available abroad that match up with the credits that are required for your degree track. That's one step closer to graduation!

**Timing:** Most colleges offer studying abroad for 3 different semesters: the fall, spring and summer. Usually the summer semesters are shorter (4-6 weeks) and are organized in groups of fellow classmates. By choosing to go for an entire semester or year, you'll probably be going solo aka doing an independent study. A longer duration allows for you to become more linguistically and culturally proficient. Keep in mind, not all classes are taught during all 3 semesters.

**What to pack:** Don't make the mistake of taking 5 suitcases stuffed with your entire wardrobe. Instead, pack these items: a power converter, appropriate currency, important medications, a laptop or tablet, a decent pair of walking shoes, a few study materials and a camera. Note: converting your currency before leaving your country makes your arrival much easier.

**Room and board:** Go ahead and delete your 'apartment search' app. The best ways to eat and sleep abroad are to either stay on campus or stay with a family. Living on campus provides the most convenience while staying with a family is more personal and allows for you to get to know the day-to-day life of a foreign family. Either way, both options are great for students and you're almost 100% guaranteed to pick up on the language and culture.

**Social norms:** Once you've decided on where you are headed, research the social norms: culture, customs, laws, etc. Saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time can land you in a sticky situation. In Scotland, a backwards peace sign is double the middle finger. Who knew?

**Explore:** You've proven to yourself that you not only love to travel but that you can travel abroad, so why stop there? Once you've landed across the ocean your travel options are endless, especially in Europe. Take the train, hop on a bus or even fly somewhere. I was able to visit 9 different European cities including, Madrid, Rome, Paris and Dublin during my study abroad. On a budget? Check out RyanAir where tickets are often less than 100 €. Also check out Airbnb instead of hotels and hostels for a cheaper yet more personalized experience. The more passport stamps the better!

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