**Preparing for International Study and Work:**

**A handbook for student travelers at the**

**Vanderbilt Institute for Global Health**

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*This guide was developed based on University of South Florida’s Education Abroad Office’s Pre-Departure Guide, accessed at: http://educationabroad.global.usf.edu/index.cfm?FuseAction=Abroad.ViewLink&Parent\_ID=68F3A9B5-26B9-58D3-F510C48834927734&Link\_ID=AB53E096-26B9-564D-D64C103566442EE5.*

# Before You Go

## Preparing for Your Trip

Knowledge is power, and the more information you arm yourself with, the better your experience will be. There are many ways to prepare for your journey. Visit websites and read books about the history, geography and customs of the countries you are visiting; study maps; read newspapers with good international news coverage; and watch videos of the places you'll visit.

* Review **websites to access daily issues of foreign newspapers** and for helpful information and advice.
* **Brigham Young University publishes an excellent series called** [***CultureGrams***,](http://online.culturegrams.com/) which are summary sheets on such topics as the people, customs and courtesies, and lifestyles of countries around the world. USF has hard copy versions of these in our resource room.
* The **Department of State publishes** [**Background Notes**](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/) **on 170 countries worldwide**. These are brief, factual pamphlets with information on each country's people, history, geography, economy, government, and current political situation.
* Talking with students who have studied or lived in the countries you'll visit can provide invaluable insights.
* Check out the **international travel sections of bookstores** and purchase one or two good student guides such as *Let's Go*, *Lonely Planet*, *Berkeley Guides*, or *Rough Guides*. USF keeps a few copies of these books, but we recommend that you purchase your own.
* If you don’t speak the language, **learn some key words and phrases**, and purchase a small phrase book to carry with you when you are out and about. Everyone likes to hear even simple words or phrases in their native tongue.
* Finally, make sure that you **know about your own country** – in general people are better informed about the U.S. than we are about the host country. In some cases, particularly with foreign, economic and environmental policies of the US, your hosts may be very up-to-date on current issues in the U.S.

*A true story – a group of students were arguing with a group of students in the host country (France) about US policy, and the French students were speaking derogatorily about the US president, when one student replied: “If I knew who your president was, I would say bad things about him too!” The French students laughed.…*

## Keeping Informed Before Departure

Between now and your departure, it is your responsibility to stay informed about developments in the country/countries where you will spend time (including any countries you'll visit that are not part of your study abroad program's itinerary). You can access the [U.S. Department of State’s](http://travel.state.gov/travel/warnings.html) Web page for information about the country/countries where your program will take you.

**On that page you will find three different types of information: Country Information Sheets, Travel Alerts, and Travel Warnings.** This information is updated based on current events worldwide. According to the Department of State...

* [**Country Information Sheets**](http://travel.state.gov/travel/warnings_consular.html)are issued as a matter of course, and are available for every country of the world. They include such information as location of the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in that country, unusual immigration practices, health conditions, minor political disturbances, unusual currency and entry regulations, crime and security information, and drug penalties.
* [**Travel Alerts**](http://travel.state.gov/travel/new_pa_list.html) are issued as required, and are a means to disseminate information about terrorist threats and other relatively short-term and/or transnational conditions posing risk to the security of U.S. travelers.
* [**Travel Warnings**](http://travel.state.gov/travel/warnings_current.html) are issued when the Department of State decides, based on all relevant information, to recommend that Americans avoid travel to a certain country.

**We ask that you read this information carefully before you depart the United States.**

## Travel Documents

### Passports

In recent years there has been an unprecedented demand for passports; therefore, **you should apply for a passport immediately.** You should plan on at least six to eight weeks for standard processing.

* 1. and non-U.S. citizens need a passport both to enter other countries (including Canada and Mexico) and return to the United States. If you already have a passport, make sure it is valid until at least six months after your return date (Note: some countries, such as Russia, require that your passport is valid for 18 months following the completion of your program). New U.S. passports are good for ten years. Apply early to avoid complications caused by misplaced original birth certificates and similar problems.

Passport forms are available at many Federal and state courts, probate courts, some county/municipal offices and some post offices. They can also be downloaded at the [U.S. State Department](http://travel.state.gov/passport/forms/forms_847.html) website. This site will also link you to the procedure and form for renewing your passport. This can take the same length of time as issuing a new passport.

You must submit your application to a post office. Please note that most post offices require that you have an appointment when applying for or renewing your passport. Passport photos can be obtained at the Post Office and at most drugstores such as Walgreens or CVS.

**Once you have your passport, be sure to sign it and fill in the emergency information page.**

### Visas

A visa is an entry/residency permit and official permission granted by the authorities of the countries where you will study or travel, which allow you to enter and remain in that country. The visa itself is frequently a stamp in your passport, not a separate document. **You will need a passport before applying for a visa and the passport plus visa process may take three to four months, so start early.**

Regulations, cost, and requirements for visas vary from country to country and change frequently, so check with the embassy/consulate of your host country. It is your responsibility to determine visa requirements for all countries you plan to visit while abroad; this includes countries that you plan to visit before or after your practicum. You can do so by consulting with a travel agent, calling the consular offices of those countries, or checking the [U.S. State Department Document Requirements](http://travel.state.gov/travel/documents.html) website or the [Travel Document Systems](http://www.traveldocs.com/) website.

You may be denied entry into, or be deported from, a country for which you have not obtained a required visa. Vanderbilt University is not responsible for obtaining visas nor are they in any way responsible for visa or entry denial. For some countries, certain medical requirements must be met before a visa will be issued. Many countries will not issue visas to persons with any type of police record!

**Note: If you are not a U.S. citizen, consult the embassy or consulate of the countries you will visit to learn their document requirements**. You should check the [U.S. State Department](http://www.state.gov/www/travel/consular_offices/fco_index.html) Web sites for Foreign Consular

Office listings and for the listings of [Embassies and Consulates.](http://www.embassyworld.com/) The procedures that you will follow may be different from those for U.S. citizens. It is important to initiate this process as soon as possible in order to assemble documents and allow time for lengthy procedures.

### International Student Identity Card

Your regular student ID may not be honored in some countries. The International Student Identity Card (ISIC) gives students a single, uniform document recognized worldwide as proof of student status. ISIC cards are around $25 and available for purchase from many travel agencies.

The ISIC card benefits vary widely from country to country, but may include student discounts on airfare, transportation, and accommodations, as well as reduced admission to museums, theaters, cultural events, and other attractions. When you purchase an ISIC, you will be given an ISIC Handbook that lists exactly which nations recognize the card, types of discounts, and the addresses and phone numbers of student travel offices around the world. Besides the student discounts, the ISIC provides free travel insurance (good for before and after your program dates), an emergency help line, and a communications system (phone card). If you should need to use the insurance benefits, you will need to have a copy of your card and proof of purchase for any claim.

Please note that there are varying reports on the usefulness of the ISIC. In some cases, the card was not honored as expected. The phone card can only be used at public phones. Usually the greatest benefit to having the card is getting the reduced airfare.

## Getting There

### Overseas Flights

Booking an overseas flight is one of your first challenges when traveling abroad. It can be the easiest thing you do or the most complex, depending on how early you start planning. If you start early, you will save yourself time and money, since the closer to your trip you get, the higher the fares generally become. Flights also become filled, so start early to ensure yourself a flight when you want it.

We recommend that all students traveling abroad purchase trip/travel insurance. Travel insurance can cover the cost of any unexpected changes in plan.

If you, or your parents, want to track a flight overseas or at your destination, [www.flightview.com](http://www.flightview.com/) will allow you to see where the flight is and whether it’s on time or delayed. All you need is the flight number and the airline and the website will track the flight for you!

If you have any special diet requirements, you must notify your airline within a week of your departure in order for them to secure arrangements. Vegetarian, light, and kosher meals are possible on most flights.

### Airports

Airports can be confusing places. This is especially true when you are in a country where you do not speak the language fluently or understand the culture yet. There are a couple of things that you can do to help yourself. Talk to your ticket agent or travel agent and try to get a copy of the layout of the airport you will be arriving at. If you are making a connection in a foreign country, find out what gate you will be coming into, what gate you will be going out of and how to get from one to the next. Even if you do all of the pre-planning in the world, complications will likely come up. Almost all airports have information counters where the staff will often speak English.

If you want to gather information about the airport (good idea for connections), go to the following site: <http://wwp.international-airports.com/>or simply search for the name of the airport in question.

In some airports, particularly in India and Africa, a print out of your flight confirmation is required in order to get into the airport at all. When you arrive in your host country, it is advised that you find out about these requirements before you leave the airport, or well in advance before you leave to come home, that way you can be prepared with the proper flight documentation.

You must also keep in mind that airports are potential crime areas. Please be careful with your baggage; **never leave it unattended, and stay away from any unattended bags or packages in public places. Do not check luggage for anyone else onto airplanes, railroads, or buses.** Do not borrow suitcases and do not allow anybody, not even a newfound friend, to put anything in your luggage if you want to avoid the risk of becoming a carrier of drugs or other illegal or dangerous materials.

## Health and Wellness Issues

Prior to your departure, you should review worldwide health information and country-specific health requirements for all countries in which you will study, as well as those you think you will visit. One of the best sources of information for international travelers is the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/travel) website. Note the special section under travel tips tailored to [study abroad students.](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/contentStudyAbroad.aspx)

If you have any questions regarding medical problems, immunization requirements, or other health issues that may affect your ability to successfully and completely participation in the program, you are expected to consult with either your personal physician or the Vanderbilt Student Health clinic. Even if the countries you plan to visit have no required immunizations to enter, but you have a pre-existing medical condition or are on regular prescription medications, you should visit a health practitioner to discuss managing your condition and/or your medications abroad. This discussion may also include obtaining recommended, but not required vaccinations.

For higher health risk areas where required or recommended vaccinations are likely, (i.e. Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Russia, and the Middle East), **plan to visit a health care professional at least three months prior to departure.**

Students traveling to countries with low health risks (i.e. Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) should discuss getting your routine vaccinations up-to-date with your physician.

### Immunizations

All countries recommend that travelers be up-to-date on routine immunizations (but check with your doctor or health care professional before getting any vaccine – particularly if you have allergies or other health conditions which could cause complications):

* Tetanus-diptheria-pertussis (DTP)
* Hepatitis B
* Polio
* Meningitis
* Chicken pox (Varicella)
* Measles, mumps, rubella (MMR)
* Influenza

Some immunizations require a series or spacing for protection (as long as three months for a series of shots), so allow as much time as possible for immunization. Neither the MPH program, VUSM, nor VIGH covers the cost of immunizations.

### Taking Medications Abroad

If you have a pre-existing medical condition that may require treatment or need prescription medication while traveling, be sure to bring an adequate supply in the original container as well as a prescription with your physician's explanation of the condition and generic and brand names of the medication and dosage information. Also, know that some common prescription medications in the U.S. are illegal abroad. Check with the [embassies](http://www.embassy.org/embassies/) of the countries you expect to visit to make sure your prescriptions and over-the-counter medications are permissible.

Do not plan on sending medications abroad since it will require customs paperwork and may be delayed in delivery. Be sure to maintain your usual dosage and pattern of taking your medication while you're abroad and ask your physician how to make adjustments due to any time zone changes.

### Mental Health Histories or Conditions

More and more students with mental health conditions or histories are attending college. Today’s students report struggling with bi-polar disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, stress management, family or other relationships, career decision-making, cultural identity, interpersonal concerns, sexual assault, and many others. With a combination of medications and therapy, the vast majority of these students have productive and enjoyable experiences at home and abroad.

Experiencing another culture is an exhilarating, but often stressful, experience that can sometimes cause symptoms or conditions to worsen, even if only temporarily. For these reasons, we recommend discussing the rigors of your program with your therapist and physician so that you are more prepared to handle them abroad. Things to think about:

* In many study abroad programs you will not have your own space, may not be able to choose your roommate, and may be surrounded by more people than you are accustomed to. You may be living with a

host family, and continually traveling with the same group of US students. Your access to private bathrooms and showers may be somewhat limited or non-existent.

* You are likely to have far less down-time and must often keep to a regimented schedule.
* You may have difficulty sleeping due to the change in time, full-schedule, change in diet and climate, and unfamiliar and potentially noisy surroundings.
* You may not have the benefit of understanding what is being said around you. Even if language is not a barrier, cultural differences are significant, and being a foreigner can be somewhat alienating at times.
* Over the past few years, there has been growing anti-American sentiment in some places around the world. Generally this has been directed at U.S. policy rather than individual Americans, but it can be difficult to remove yourself, as a U.S. citizen, from the criticism you may hear.

The benefits of study abroad far outweigh the difficulties, and if you find coping mechanisms to deal with these and other issues, you will have a very positive experience. In addition, we recommend that you identify ways of keeping in touch with support systems at home – family, friends, and your therapist – in the event that you are experiencing difficulties.

Recognize, too, that experiencing some level of depression or anxiety about your study abroad experience prior to departure can be expected. However, if you begin to doubt your readiness to participate or you fail to complete pre-departure requirements, you should discuss your feelings with a medical professional.

## Insurance

Determine what your current health insurance plan covers internationally. Students covered by Vanderbilt’s Gallagher Koster Student Injury and Sickness Insurance Plan can check here: [www.gallagherkoster.com/students/user-login.php?idField=1015](http://www.gallagherkoster.com/students/user-login.php?idField=1015) Ask about Worldwide Assistance Services by calling GK’s Scholastic Emergency Services at 1-877-488-9833 (toll free within the United States) or 609-452-8570 (collect, outside of the United States).

Depending on your current plan’s international coverage, you might require an additional short-term international plan through a provider like Frontier Medex (www.medexassist.com), HTH Worldwide (http://bit.ly/HTHworld), etc. There are several options, so take the time to find the one best suited for your individual health needs. **You must have coverage for the *entire* duration of your time abroad.** This may mean purchasing an additional month of insurance even if you’ll only be overseas for one day in that month.

### Travel and Trip Cancellation Insurance

Students are strongly encouraged to purchase travel and trip cancellation insurance which covers you for any problems/costs associated with your travel – stolen luggage, delayed /cancelled flights, etc.

## What and How to Pack

### General Guidelines

**PACK LIGHT!!** Really, we mean it. There will not be porters available, so you must be able to manage your bags yourself. Particularly for those programs which require travelling from location to location, you should only take what you, by yourself, can carry for 2-3 city blocks. Also it is important to note that fewer and fewer airlines are allowing travelers to check luggage for free. The more bags you have, the more costly it will be to fly, anywhere

$25-100 per bag. International flights have very strict limitations on baggage size and weight. If you are travelling on domestic flights within your host country, the restrictions are more stringent. Do not waste money on paying for over-weight baggage. Mark your luggage tags ahead of time with a clear indication of your name, address and phone number of your destination. Also keep this information inside your bags.

Keep your luggage close to you and locked with a TSA-approved lock!

If you intend to travel before or after your program, make arrangements for storage of your luggage. Do not assume that your luggage can be stored at your housing location during dates outside of the program. Daily storage charges in train stations and airports can be quite costly.

Get a backpack – they do not weigh much, are durable and it makes moving with your luggage easier. Wheeled bags can be good at airports, but in-country you may be walking on uneven cobblestone walkways and climbing stairs, which makes them very unpractical. Don’t bring anything you can’t easily replace or is of high-value.

Don’t bring many items that require dry cleaning or ironing; bring items that are easily washed and that dry quickly. While most locations will have laundry facilities, they may be limited, and you want to spend as little time as possible doing laundry and finding dry cleaners, which can also be very costly.

Consult travel guides and talk with people who have lived or visited the countries where you will be living about acceptable clothing for your destination. What is “in” here may be unacceptable in many countries, or may serve as a way of accentuating your national identity in an unflattering way. For example, in many countries, most people do not wear shorts unless at a beach, and in some, particularly for women, showing your legs is categorically unacceptable. Men should not wear pants that show undergarments, hats are not to be worn inside buildings, and very baggy and loose t-shirts and jeans are not to be worn in many places around the world. Also note that many of the popular places of worship (such as many of the cathedrals in Vatican City) require you to be completely covered. Particularly for women, knowing where you are going and what is acceptable is very important; often in many countries and cultures, men will take what you wear as an open invitation. If you have the opportunity to speak to someone from the country to which you will be travelling, ask how the styles here differ from those in their home country.

### Electrical Appliances

Electrical service varies throughout the world. Most outlets will not accept the two- or three-pronged plugs that are standard in the United States. Therefore, if you intend to take small appliances you will need a set of adapter plugs that will “adapt” U.S. plugs to the plug system of your host country. Additionally, you will need a voltage converter to “convert” the U.S. voltage of your electronic device to the local voltage. These items can be purchased at electronics stores such as Radio Shack or Best Buy. Electric appliances, such as curling irons and hairdryers do not normally work well on foreign voltages even with a converter. If you are going to be in a country for some duration, it is often advisable to purchase these items abroad.

If you are bringing expensive electronic equipment such as a computer, obtain all necessary conversion information from a professional before departure.

### Things to Bring

All medications in original bottles with back-up prescriptions. Remember this goes for vitamins, supplements and over-the-counter drugs too – do not condense into smaller packages or you’ll risk confiscation or difficulties getting through customs here and abroad. Make sure that everything that you are bringing is legal in the country to which you are going. Check out [www.embassy.org/embassies](http://www.embassy.org/embassies) to make sure that all of your OTC and prescription drugs are allowed.

Prescription glasses (2 sets preferred) and contact lenses and contact lens solution. These can be difficult to find in many countries so bring more than you would normally use just in case.

Contraceptives, feminine hygiene products (in countries where these items are not easily found), etc. Remember that AIDS and STDs are world-wide epidemics – condoms in some countries may be of sub-standard quality.

First aid kit: band-aids, alcohol swabs, anti-bacterial lotion, skin lotion for any conditions you may have, anti- diarrhea medicine, small quantities of aspirin, or pain-relief medicine, preferred cold treatments, insect repellent, sunscreen, etc. (Please also speak with your faculty director, EA advisor and Hillsborough County Health Department for required travel medicines – malaria prophylaxis, salt tablets, water purification tables, etc.).

Toiletries: bring whatever you will need (deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, soap, hand and body lotion, sunscreen, cosmetics), but remember that if you are going to be in-country for a long period of time, most of these items are easily purchased abroad.

Minimum amount of clothing that is appropriate for your destination and type of program (e.g. if you are an archeological dig in Italy, you would bring very different items than if you were studying in Florence).

Bring an empty bag to bring what you have purchased in-country home.

### Carry-on Luggage

We suggest you include:

* An extra pair of eyeglasses or contact lenses and cleaning solution (less than three ounces)
* A map or directions to your destination
* any medications you use (keep medications in their original labeled container to make customs processing easier; carry a letter with you from your physician attesting to your need to take them, especially if your medications contain narcotics)
* Basic toiletries (containers must be less than three ounces each and all must be placed in a quart-sized, clear plastic bag)
* A sweater or sweatshirt
* A change of clothes.
* **Do not pack** any sharp items such as jackknives, scissors, etc. in your carry-on luggage.
* **Do not pack** personal documents (passports, visas, airline tickets, etc.) in your carry-on luggage.

## Personal Document Safety

* Leave at home all keys and other items not needed abroad.
* **Make photocopies of your valuable documents and maintain an “emergency file” at home** containing: airline ticket, passport, traveler’s checks, driver's license, blood type and Rh factor, eyeglass prescription, name of doctor and dentist, supplemental insurance policies, and the credit cards you take abroad. **Leave one set at home and keep another with you in a separate place from the originals**. **Leave a copy of your itinerary and contact information with family or friends at home**.
* We highly recommend scanning important documents, so that original copies can be retrieved in the event of loss or theft.

**NEVER pack your passport or any other important documents in your checked-in luggage or your carry-on luggage**. Passports (including visa page), credit cards, and money should be worn in a pouch or a money belt as close to your body as possible. Be aware that certain reading material or literature may offend officials of some countries.

If your passport is lost or stolen abroad, contact the nearest [U.S. embassy or consulate](http://usembassy.state.gov/) for assistance.

## Money

Before you go:

* Call your bank and credit card companies to let them know that you will be travelling.
* Make sure that you have made arrangements for your bills to be paid while away.
* Have a source of funds for emergencies: extra credit card, back-up ATM card, ways that parents or friends can put extra cash into your checking account or wire to you if needed.
* Get traveler’s checks – American Express or similar brand ($300 –depending on destination). Traveler’s checks can be purchased at a bank or local travel agency (American Express, AAA, etc.) in a variety of denominations and currencies. They can be used for payment at many local establishments or can be exchanged for cash at any bank or exchange agency. Traveler’s checks come in both US Dollars and in many foreign currencies and can be replaced if lost or stolen. Make sure to keep a list of the serial numbers from each check in a safe place so it can be given to the bank representative for replacement! More information about traveler’s checks can be found on the American Express website or from your bank/AAA.
* Get $75-100 in the foreign currency from your bank or at the airport from a Cambio/Currency Exchange kiosk.
* Create a budget – talk to the faculty director, read books and talk to other students who have been to where you are traveling to understand financial needs.
* Inquire with your bank regarding partner banks in the country you will be visiting – this could reduce fees charged to your account for withdrawals.
* Research your host country’s policy regarding credit card usage. Many countries have no switched to “chip-and-PIN” cards, which include an encrypted chip in addition to the magnetic strip. Most American card companies do not include the chip on their cards. It is important to know if your host country has regulations regarding whether or not you can use cards with or without the encrypted chip.

## Research Tools:

* View travel warnings and area information: [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov/)
* Traveler’s Health from the Center for Disease and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov/)
* Emergency Notifications and On-site contacts: [www.osac.gov/Posts/index.cfm](http://www.osac.gov/Posts/index.cfm)
* U.S. Embassy and Consulate Abroad: [www.usembassy.state.gov](http://www.usembassy.state.gov/)
* State Department Safety Tips for Going Abroad: [www.studentsabroad.state.gov/html-](http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov/html-) site/Emergencies.html
* CISI Insurance: [www.culturalinsurance.com](http://www.culturalinsurance.com/)
* Different Cultures: <http://kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html>
* Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada: [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries\_pays/menu-](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/menu-eng.asp#C)  [eng.asp#C](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/menu-eng.asp#C)
* US Customs: <http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/>
* Links to Foreign Embassies: <http://www.embassy.org/embassies/>
* Global Scholar: <http://www.globalscholar.us/>
* Students Abroad: <http://studentsabroad.com/>

# While Abroad

The majority of students rely on ATMs to withdraw funds while abroad. While you do not want to pay transaction fees unnecessarily, it is also important that you do not take too much cash out at a time. If you are traveling away on a weekend, particularly if you are going to a remote area, plan ahead – you may not have access to ATM machines, and in certain places, credit cards are not accepted. Also note that debit cards do not function as credit cards in many countries like they do in the U.S., and may charge up to $5 or 5% of the purchase for each transaction. Whenever possible, we recommend using a credit card for purchases – you can often get a better exchange rate.

Some other tips:

* For the first 1-2 weeks of the program, write down what you are spending money on and make sure that you are spending it wisely, and that you will have enough money to last the duration of the program.
* Make sure that you understand the currency exchange rate. People have purchased $80 umbrellas by mistake, or thought that the Italian pair of shoes they bought was $50, when it was actually $250.
* Make sure that you know how much you are spending on your cell phone.
* Know whether or not it is acceptable to barter – in many countries it is expected.
* Understand whether or not you have to tip or pay gratuities in restaurants.
* Do grocery shopping where the locals go, not in the places that “cater” to foreigners. You should also be aware that many grocery stores in Europe require you to purchase bags.
* Do not go out to nightclubs and drink too much – you will drink away all of your savings.

## Communication

It is vitally important that you communicate with your family while you are abroad. Equally important is that you communicate with your fellow participants in the event that you go away, whether for a weekend or just for a night. Remember that we will come looking for you if you are missing even if you have just spent the night out, so call in and let someone know where you are. It is a lot less embarrassing than having to explain to the resident director, faculty member, EAO, and possibly your parents that you were just crashing at a friend’s house.

### Cell Phones

You should check with your carrier to see if your phone will work at your destination and any travel destinations you plan to visit. If so, you may be able to activate the international roaming service that would allow you to receive and make calls while abroad. Consider having your provider unlock your phone so that you can replace your U.S. based SIM card with a local SIM card (each SIM card comes with its own number). Having a local SIM card would ensure that you can make and receive local calls, in addition to calls to the U.S. without incurring roaming charges.

Students have also found it easy to buy a cell phone upon arrival at their program site. You can usually rent or purchase from local vendors for an affordable cost after you arrive. When purchasing a cell phone and SIM card abroad, you will most likely pre-pay your minutes as you go.

### Internet Calling

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) is a service that allows you to make phone calls with a web service provider using a computer with an Internet connection. Skype and Vonage are both companies that are becoming popular and easy to use. It is typically free to sign up and use if you’re speaking with someone using the same VoIP service accounts. You can also call regular land lines and cell phones for a reasonable per minute charge. If you use this type of service, you’ll want to set up your account before you leave.

## Safety & Wellness

Participants’ safety and wellbeing are paramount to Vanderbilt University. Because of the added stresses associated with operating in a foreign culture and language, even the safest foreign locations are likely to carry more risk to your safety and health.

After booking your flights, **create a Personal Travel Locator through ISOS, an emergency medical and evacuation service free to Vanderbilt students and employees**. ISOS does not take the place of international health insurance; it ISOS provides emergency evacuation, repatriation and other travel support services to Vanderbilt travelers.

* Registration link: [www.internationalsos.com/MasterPortal/default.aspx?membnum=11BSGM000066](http://www.internationalsos.com/MasterPortal/default.aspx?membnum=11BSGM000066)
* Instructions on how to register: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vio/resources/pdfs/PTLScreenShotGuide.pdf>
* Summary of services: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vio/resources/ISOSonepage.pdf>
* Vanderbilt ISOS membership number: 11BSGM000066

**You must keep the ISOS card on you *at all times* in your wallet while abroad.**

ISOS offers email alerts and country guides you can access right away through their website: <http://www.internationalsos.com>

Additionally, you should **register with the Department of State’s STEP Program** (<https://step.state.gov/step/pages/common/citizenship.aspx>). This is a free service that allows the State Department to locate you in case of emergency, and help in the event that you lose your passport or have other difficulties.

When you sign up, you will automatically receive the most current information about the country where you will be traveling. You will also receive updates, including [Travel Warnings](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_1764.html) and [Travel Alerts](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_1766.html) (where appropriate). You only need to sign up once, and then you can add and delete trips from your account based on your current travel plans.

### Mental Health Abroad

*As mentioned earlier, there are a number of stressors that are associated with study abroad*: jetlag; sleeping problems; new and alien living arrangements; different food; strange language; different cultures; home-sickness; loneliness; fear of new places; unfamiliarity with your surroundings, etc.

Note that culture shock is a normal developmental phase of adjustment to a new cultural environment, not a psychological disorder. However, reactions to culture shock can mimic more severe psychological problems such as clinical depression and anxiety.

You may in fact hate the experience at the end of the first week – but wait, give yourself a bit of time to adjust and use the suggestions out-lined in the section on Culture Shock. When students are transitioning into a stressful environment, it is important that they learn to assess their levels of stress and to then use the best coping mechanisms to help them return to normal stress levels.

*Some common manifestations of stress are:*

* Irritability over small things
* Difficulty concentrating
* Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
* Queasy stomach
* Desire to run away
* Constant feeling of tiredness
* Psychosomatic illness
* Excessive criticism of others
* Poor work performance
* Difficulty making decisions
* Eating disorders
* Being unusually introspective
* Feelings of guilt, loneliness, worry and anxiety

*Poor coping choices include:*

* Resorting to heavy alcohol use
* Staying in bed 12-14 hours a day or staying in your quarters all day
* Eating excessively
* Avoiding friends and neighbors
* Escaping into sexual relationships

*Better coping choices:*

* Immerse yourself in study/reading that is satisfying or keep a journal of your experiences
* Find a local person with whom you can talk regularly
* Make a healthy routine, such as taking a walk through the park every day after lunch.
* Practice your faith through prayer, meditation, reading, etc.
* Write letters/e-mails (or make audiotapes) to family and friends
* Visit fellow students
* Meet with Resident Director/Faculty to talk about the stress
* Eat healthy and get regular exercise

### Everyday Safety Tips

While you are abroad, you must exercise the same safety precautions you would at home. Don’t take the attitude that you are protected and safe because you are anonymous and no one knows you. Don’t travel with anything you are not prepared to lose. Use your common sense, avoid confrontations, try to blend in as much as possible, try to familiarize yourself with the area, ask the locals where the safe part of town is, and if you feel insecure in a certain place, don’t go there. Do not expose yourself to unnecessarily dangerous situations.

It will be difficult to fully hide the fact that you're a foreigner. That may make you more vulnerable to theft and crime. While you can't control everything that happens to you at home or abroad, you can sway the odds by being aware of your appearances and actions and by communication:

*Appearances: (Stay Undercover!)*

* Do not wear expensive clothes or jewelry, or carry expensive luggage.
* Whenever possible, speak in the local language.
* Avoid using U.S. logos on your belongings or clothing, especially athletic and collegiate wear.
* Don’t stand out. While “safety in numbers” is a good rule to follow, traveling as an identifiable group of

U.S. students will attract attention and possibly cause problems. Try to fit in with the surroundings and be “invisible”. It is vital to remain alert within your environment – always be aware of what is normal and commonplace where you live and work to immediately detect the unusual.

* Be aware that pickpockets exist and tend to prey on people who look lost or who do not seem to be paying attention to their surroundings.
* In large cities and other popular tourist destinations, avoid possible target areas, especially places frequented by U.S. Americans.
* Keep all valuables on your person in a discreet place, preferably stowed away in a money belt or a pouch that hangs around your neck and under clothing. Do not leave valuables unattended.

*Actions:*

* Try to avoid arriving late at night in cities with which you are not familiar, and take along a reliable guidebook that lists resources and hotels/hostels.
* Try to stay on well-lit, heavily traveled streets. Avoid shortcuts through alleys. Stay in the middle of the sidewalk; avoid walking close to the street or buildings.
* Walk against the flow of traffic so oncoming vehicles can be observed.
* It is preferable to travel with another person. It is not advisable to sleep on a train if you are traveling alone.
* Do not agree to watch the belongings of a person whom you do not know.
* Do not borrow suitcases. Ensure that nothing is inserted into yours.
* Take off your luggage tags after arrival.
* Remember that hitchhiking can be as dangerous abroad as it is in the United States. Hitchhiking is not advisable.
* Understand and comply with the terms of participation, codes of conduct, and emergency procedures of the program.
* Never leave handbags/purses/baggage unattended and make sure they are locked. If the item has a shoulder strap, wear it crossing the strap over your body. Do not put valuables in the exterior pockets of book bags or backpacks or in bags that are open at the top.
* Behave in a manner that is respectful of the rights and well-being of others, comply with local laws, regulations and customs of the host country, community, institution and study abroad program, and encourage others to behave in a similar manner.

*Communication:*

* Keep up with the local news through newspapers, radio and television, and, in the event of disturbances or protests, do NOT get involved.
* Develop with your family at home a plan for regular communication so that in times of heightened political tensions or local incidents, you will be able to communicate directly with your family about your safety and well-being.
* Be aware of local conditions and customs that may present health or safety risks when making daily choices and decisions and promptly express any health or safety concerns to the program staff or other appropriate individuals.
* Become familiar with the local emergency number (comparable to 911) and the procedures for obtaining emergency health and law enforcement services in the host country.

Did you know...?

* Traffic and swimming accidents are the leading cause of death in travelers.
* You should always use clean water for brushing your teeth and for drinking.
* You should swim only in well-maintained chlorinated pools or in unpolluted rivers or parts of the ocean.

**Be aware of common scams in your host country!** Use helpful resources, such as the Department of State website, to prepare yourself for scams that are widespread in your area. Pickpocket’s are experts at what they do and are becoming ever more cunning in their methods of deceit. For example, the “Trojan Horse” scam is often used in Europe and includes a local with a hollow suitcase on wheels who waits for tourists to look away from their bags and then swoops in an places the suitcase over the tourist’s bag and wheels it away!

### Emergency Preparedness

Once on-site, your program leader should discuss appropriate emergency preparedness steps with you. These steps might reflect preparing for natural disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes, as well as communication protocols for electrical outages or cell tower overloads. For more information on personal emergency planning visit the [U.S. State Department’s Emergency Assistance to American Citizens Abroad](http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/emergencies/emergencies_1212.html) website. It is **also important to create an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) before going abroad.**

For your EAP, you should:

* *Know Where to Go*: in case of an emergency, where should you go and what transportation should you take? Know the location and numbers of the following:
  + Airport
  + Bus Station
  + Train Station
  + Metro Station
  + Rent-A-Car
  + Boat/Ferry/Port Authority
* *Know Your Emergency Contact Information*: in addition to your personal contacts, you should also know the numbers for the following:
  + City or country’s 911 equivalent
  + Local government/ visa office
  + Consulate/Embassy
  + Police
  + Fire
  + Hospital
  + Translator Service
  + Lawyer
  + Red Cross
  + Insurance Hotline
  + Other

In case of an emergency, the EAP plan follows these steps:

1. Stay calm. Take a deep breath. You will need a clear mind to focus on your next move.
2. Assess the situation/ Get advice from the program staff. Identify in what kind of emergency situation you find yourself. An emergency crisis can be:
   1. Personal: Accident/Injury, Death, Illness, Sexual Assault, Kidnapping, Arrest, etc.
   2. Regional: Natural Disaster, Political Uprising, Terrorist Attack, War Outbreak, etc.
3. Take action. Exercise good judgment. Follow your evacuation plan/ written instructions/ maps your have developed as part of your EAP to help remove you from the emergency and get you to a safer location where you can get help. Remember the alternate transportation options available in your area.
4. Get in touch. Now that you are in a safer and more stable location, update others about your situation. Using a method of communication at your disposal, get in touch with your emergency contacts so they can help you. Have them assist you in finding what you need (medical care, a transport, lawyer, etc.).
   1. Take care of yourself. While you are waiting for your contacts to assist you, or in case you cannot reach anyone to assist you, use your emergency kit. Take out supplies you need to keep yourself healthy (bandages, food, jacket, etc.). You may need additional/continual medical care and/or personal/psychological counseling.
   2. Keep trying. If you cannot get a hold of anyone to help you (because phone lines are down, you are trapped, etc.) don’t give up. Try alternate methods of communication and transportation until you are able to reach someone. If you need to move to another location, let others know and leave a written description of where you are going.
5. Move to a more permanent location. After you have removed yourself from any immediate threat, regrouped at a safer location, and gotten in touch with your emergency contacts, you may need to move to a more permanent location for treatment/assistance. Consider your transportation options and try to

get yourself to the appropriate location (hospital, police station, embassy/consulate\*, contact’s home, counseling center, etc.).

1. Stay in touch. Maintain contact and update your emergency contacts on your condition. It would be useful to have a “communication tree” whereby your emergency contacts can collaborate to help you through the emergency situation (you may need to have privacy release forms in order for this to happen).
2. Finally, evaluate and revise your EAP. After the emergency is over, and once your condition has stabilized, evaluate your EAP and use what you have learned to revise it in case of future emergencies.

\*Note that in case of a terrorist attack, you should call your local embassy, but do not go there unless you know it is safe.

## Alcohol & Drugs

### Alcohol Policy

Many of the injuries sustained by study abroad students are related to drunkenness and the associated condition of temporary loss of judgment.

Although alcohol misuse may not carry the same legal penalties as use of illegal drugs, it can create dire circumstances for you, your participation in the program, your safety on site, and the future of the program. **Remember that you are serving as an ambassador of Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, and the United States.**

Although there may be no minimum or a lower drinking age in your host country, the customs regarding alcohol use may be very different from ours. You may be tempted to slip into - or maintain - patterns of alcohol misuse while abroad. Such use may occur for a variety of reasons: a mistaken impression of how alcohol is used in your new surroundings; cheaper costs in some countries; a lower minimum drinking age; more lenient laws against drunkenness; or a desire to experiment or fit in. Alcohol abuse and misuse are not tolerated globally and will not be tolerated on USF study abroad programs. Violation of local laws and/or Vanderbilt University regulations or policies may result in (i) immediate dismissal from the program; (ii) academic withdrawal from the University for the semester in progress; and (iii) disciplinary action upon return to campus.

During your orientation you will be informed of program requirements and host country laws regarding alcohol consumption, as well as the consequences for misuse. Most countries, with the exception of those with religious prohibitions, tolerate social drinking. Intoxication, public drunkenness and inebriating behavior, however, are seldom allowed under any circumstances. If you attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings in the United States, check the AA Web page for information about meetings abroad.

Alcohol misuse is defined as any use that is harmful or potentially harmful to self or others. Alcohol abuse is planned, systematic misuse of alcohol.

**Alcohol misuse will not be tolerated on Vanderbilt University abroad programs.**

What is “alcohol misuse?” Alcohol misuse is present when:

* A student misses any scheduled event because of the effects of alcohol consumption;
* A student becomes ill due to the effects of alcohol consumption;
* A student engages in inappropriate behavior toward other individuals that is the result of alcohol consumption;
* A student becomes so intoxicated that he/she cannot walk unassisted;
* A student engages in destructive behavior toward property that is the result of alcohol consumption;
* A student does not abide by the laws of the country in which he or she is staying due to alcohol consumption;
* A student engages in behavior that causes embarrassment to the other members of the group, the faculty member(s) or the in-country host(s) as a result of alcohol consumption;
* A student engages in behavior that causes his/her companions concern for the safety of the individual or the group;
* Students in a group encourage or ignore a fellow student who is misusing or abusing alcohol; or
* Students who transport quantities of alcohol to program sites with the intent of sharing the alcohol with members of the group.

Students are encouraged to use good judgment if consuming alcohol at private homes or other accommodations during non-program hours. Student groups are encouraged to discuss issues related to alcohol abuse by other members of their group with the faculty leader or resident director. Peers should look out for each other and keep each other safe.

If a student becomes incapacitated due to alcohol overuse, or if he/she is in need of medical attention, others are strongly encouraged to contact a local emergency medical service immediately, in order to protect the health and well-being of the affected student. Peers are encouraged to make the responsible choice to notify program or emergency personnel quickly. The person (or persons) making the call will not be subject to disciplinary action.

### Illegal Drugs

Vanderbilt University has a zero-tolerance policy regarding the possession, use, manufacture, production, sale, exchange or distribution of illegal drugs by students participating in Vanderbilt University abroad programs. Violation of this policy may result in (i) immediate dismissal from the program; (ii) academic withdrawal from the University for the semester in progress; and (iii) disciplinary action upon return to campus.

Each year 2,500 U.S. citizens are arrested abroad. One third of the arrests are on drug-related charges. Many of those arrested assumed as U.S. citizens that they could not be arrested. From Asia to Africa, Europe to South America, U.S. citizens are finding out the hard way that drug possession or trafficking equals jail in foreign countries.

There is very little that anyone can do to help you if you are caught with drugs. You are operating under the laws of the host country and the regulations of the local institution. Neither the U.S. government nor Vanderbilt University will be able to secure your release should you be caught.

It is your responsibility to know the drug laws of a foreign country before you go, because "I didn't know it was illegal" will not get you out of jail. Some laws may be applied more strictly to foreigners than to local citizens; therefore, don’t assume that just because local people are using drugs, it’s acceptable for you to use drugs.

Information regarding drug penalties of your host country is available at the [State Department](http://travel.state.gov/travel/warnings_consular.html) website. It is important to note that many countries have varying consequences regarding illegal drugs, including jail time or the death penalty without a trial. The rules and regulations of your host institution will be provided during on-site orientation.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women arrested abroad. These women serve as drug couriers or "mules" in the belief they can make quick money and have a vacation without getting caught. Instead of a short vacation, they get a lengthy stay or life sentence in a foreign jail.

* 1. Americans have been arrested abroad on drug charges for possession of an ounce or less of marijuana. The risk of being put in jail for just one marijuana cigarette, or for other illegal substances, is not worth it.

If you are purchasing prescription medications in quantities larger than that considered necessary for personal use, you could be arrested on suspicion of drug trafficking.

Once you're arrested, the U.S. consular officer **CANNOT** get you out of jail!

You may say "it couldn't happen to me," but the fact is that it could happen to you if you find yourself saying one of the following:

* + - *"I am a U.S. citizen and no foreign government can put me in their jail."*
    - *"If I only buy or carry a small amount, it won't be a problem."*

If you are caught using illegal drugs by Vanderbilt University on-site or by host-country personnel, you will be immediately dismissed from the study abroad program. If you are caught by local authorities buying, selling, carrying or using drugs -- from hashish to heroin, marijuana to mescaline, cocaine to Quaaludes, or designer drugs like ecstasy, it could mean:

* + - interrogation and delays before trial including mistreatment and solitary confinement for up to one year under very primitive conditions
    - lengthy trials conducted in a foreign language, with delays and postponements
    - weeks, months or life in prison (some places include hard labor, heavy fines, and/or lashings), if found guilty
    - death penalty in a growing number of countries (e.g., Malaysia and Pakistan)
    - Note that when entering countries that issue capital punishment for illegal drug crimes, many airports issue “random” drug tests to passengers on flights coming from areas with less strict drug policies, such as Amsterdam. If drugs are found in your system, regardless of where you partook, it is considered criminal and you will be held accountable.

Although drug laws vary from country to country, it is important to realize before you make the mistake of getting involved with drugs that foreign countries do not react lightly to drug offenders. In some countries, anyone who is caught with even a very small quantity for personal use may be tried and could receive the same sentence as a large-scale trafficker.

A few words to the wise...

* + - A number of countries, including the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico and the Philippines, have enacted more stringent drug laws that impose mandatory jail sentences for individuals convicted of possessing even small amounts of marijuana or cocaine for personal use.
    - Once you leave the United States you are not covered by U.S. laws and constitutional rights.
    - Bail is not granted in many countries when drugs are involved.
    - The burden of proof in many countries is on the accused to prove his/her innocence.
    - In some countries, evidence obtained illegally by local authorities may be admissible in court.
    - Few countries offer drug offenders jury trials or even require the prisoner's presence at his/her trial.
    - Many countries have mandatory prison sentences of seven years to life without the possibility of parole for drug violations.
    - If someone offers you a free trip and some quick and easy money just for bringing back a suitcase...SAY NO!
    - Don't carry a package for anyone, no matter how small it might seem, and pay close attention to your luggage to ensure that no one can place anything in yours.
    - The police and customs officials have a right to search your luggage for drugs. If they find drugs in your suitcase, YOU will suffer the consequences.
    - You could go to jail for years with no possibility of parole, early release, or transfer back the United States.

### Arrests Overseas

If you are arrested while abroad for any reason, it is important that you know what the U.S. government CAN and CANNOT do for you.

The U.S. Consular Office CAN:

* + - visit you in jail after being notified of your arrest
    - give you a list of local attorneys (The U.S. Government cannot assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of these individuals or recommend a particular attorney)
    - notify your family and/or friends and relay requests for money or other aid - but only with your authorization
    - intercede with local authorities to make sure that your rights under local laws are fully observed and that you are treated humanely, according to internationally accepted standards
    - protest mistreatment or abuse to the appropriate authority

The U.S. Consular Office CANNOT:

* + - demand your immediate release or get you out of jail or the country
    - represent you at trial or give legal counsel
    - pay legal fees and/or fines with U.S. government funds

## Emergency Assistance

If your host country emergency services are not readily available and you feel there is a threat to your personal safety, use the following emergency contacts:

1. Primary VIGH Contact: Doug Heimburger
   * Cell phone: 205-790-0871
   * Home: 615-385-2601
2. Alternate Primary VIGH Contact (1): Muktar Aliyu
   * Cell phone: 615-243-0157
3. Alternate Primary VIGH Contact (2): Anne Neubecker
   * Cell phone: 615-423-3282

Be sure to: (1) Tell the person what is wrong; (2) Tell the person how to contact you; (3) Respond to questions and listen carefully to any instructions

## Road safety

Road safety is not something that you may necessarily think about in planning your study abroad experience, yet the Association for Safe International Road Travel (ASIRT) reports that road crashes will soon become the third greatest global health concern. In fact, death and serious injury from road crashes are among the greatest risk for healthy travelers. And, contrary to popular belief, 85% of such crashes occur in industrialized countries. You can minimize your risk by assessing road culture in your areas and implementing safe precautions.

ASIRT suggests that you:

* + - Select the safest form of transportation in your area
    - Avoid late night road travel in counties with poor safety records and/or mountainous terrain
    - Understand how seasonal hazards affect road conditions
    - Know the dates of local holidays (when road accident rates rise) Additional suggestions for **pedestrians** are:
    - be aware of traffic patterns in your area and what other pedestrians are doing (they may be very different from the US)
    - be especially alert at intersections
    - wear reflective clothing if jogging at dusk or dawn (especially in locales where jogging may be uncommon)
    - do not walk where you cannot be easily seen
    - remember most road fatalities are pedestrians
    - do not hitchhike

Additional suggestions for **passengers** are:

* + - avoid riding with a driver that appears intoxicated, irrational, or over-tired
    - always ride in the back seat of a taxi cab
    - wear seat belts whenever possible

Many students are tempted to rent cars, mopeds, or motorbikes during their time abroad, but often do so without regard for the risks of driving in a country whose rules of the road are unfamiliar. Therefore, while we understand that some students choose to rent such vehicles largely for economic reasons, we do not recommend it. In the past, study abroad participants have been injured and even killed while riding in vehicles with drivers unaccustomed to local driving practices and traffic patterns. To prevent such accidents, some countries also limit the minimum age for drivers to rent a motorized vehicle. Also, note that most countries will require an international driver’s license, and driving without one could result in a severe penalty.

Traveling in some developing countries may pose additional road risks. Public transportation in some areas may consist of overcrowded, overweight and top-heavy minivans or buses. Taxicabs may not appear in good condition; drivers may or may not be licensed. Sidewalks may or may not be lit, or exist at all. In these cases, follow the advice of the on-site staff or your faculty leader. They can teach you how to minimize your risk when selecting various modes of transportation.

For more information about safe international road travel, visit the Association for [Safe International Road Travel](http://www.asirt.org/) website: [www.ASIRT.org](http://www.asirt.org/)

## Culture

When going abroad, students will experience differences in manners, beliefs, customs, laws, language, art, religion, values, concept of self, family organization, social organization, government, behavior, etc. All of these elements combine to form your host country’s rich and unique culture. It is important to learn about the different customs

of your host country, so that you do not offend or are not offended by somebody due to a simple misunderstanding. A new culture can be disorientating when you are only accustomed to American culture, because other’s actions will seem wrong to you.

Different cultures have their own social norms; gestures as simple as nodding or pointing or even looking someone in the eyes can be seen as rude or aggressive. For example, in America it is traditional to exchange a quick, firm handshake when meeting someone, in Africa a loose but lengthy, handshake is preferred and in many Arabic countries you would only shake hands with men in business situations, but never with women. In Bangladesh, the “thumbs up” gesture is considered obscene, in Japan it is rude to tip, and in some South American countries it is offensive to “toss” things to somebody rather than just handing them directly.

Though there will probably be many cultural differences in your host country, doing just a little bit of research will make a huge difference. Websites such as studentsabroad.com are a great tool in helping you learn about culture. Also, simply following cultural cues once you are in the country itself is usually enough to get you by. Observe how the locals act and follow in their footsteps. For example, if somebody takes their shoes off before entering a house, make sure you follow suit. All these changes might cause culture shock at first, but before you know it, they will become as normal to you as your own customs!

For a **great website about culture in different countries** go to: <http://kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html>

### Culture Shock

*“The process of adapting to a foreign culture is mostly about change, and the change must occur in you. If you are to function happily and productively in a culture foreign to you, then you have to meet that culture on its own terms, because it’s not going to meet you on yours” (from Culture Shock!-Morocco, Orin Hargraves).*

Culture shock comes from:

* + - Being cut off from cultural cues and known patterns with which you are familiar.
    - Living and studying over an extended period of time in a situation that is ambiguous.
    - Having your own values brought into question.
    - Being continually put into situation in which you are expected to function well, but where the rules have not been adequately explained.

### Stereotypes Work Both Ways

In adjusting to your study abroad environment, you will have to deal with real as well as perceived cultural differences. Keep in mind that people of other cultures are just as adept at stereotyping Americans as we are at stereotyping them - and the results are not always complimentary.

The following, for example, are a few of the qualities (some positive, some negative) that others frequently associate with the “typical” American:

* Outgoing and friendly
* Informal
* Hardworking
* Generous
* Sure to have all the answers
* Wealthy
* Lacking in class consciousness
* Disrespectful of authority
* Racially prejudiced
* Ignorant of other countries
* Promiscuous
* Politically naïve
* Wealthy
* Informal
* Loud, rude, boastful, immature
* Extravagant and wasteful (energy use too!)
* Always in a hurry

While a stereotype might have some grain of truth, it is obvious when we consider individual differences that not every American fits this description. Keep in mind that this same thing is true about your host’s vis-à-vis your own preconceptions. Remember that you are an ambassador from USF and the United States. Avoid falling into any of the “ugly American” categories.

### Working Through Culture Shock and Homesickness

Going abroad requires that you adjust to the same sorts of things as if you would move to another part of the United States: being away from family and friends, living in an unfamiliar environment, meeting new people, adjusting to a different climate, and so on. These changes alone could cause high stress levels, but you will also be going through cultural adjustments and you may experience “culture shock.” In another cultural context, you will often find that your everyday “normal” behavior becomes “abnormal.” The unspoken rules of social interaction are different and the attitudes and behavior that characterize life in the United States are not necessarily appropriate in the host country. These “rules” concern not only language differences, but also wide-ranging matters such as family structure, faculty-student relationships, friendships, gender and personal relations.

One way to handle these social and personal changes is to understand the cycle of adjustment that occurs.

**Excitement/Honeymoon Phase**

You can expect to go through an initial period of euphoria and excitement as you are overwhelmed by the thrill of being in a totally new and unusual environment. This initial period is filled with details of getting settled into housing, scheduling classes, meeting new friends, and a tendency to spend a great deal of time with other U.S. students, both during orientation activities and free time.

**Withdrawal Phase**

As this initial sense of “adventure” wears off, you may gradually become aware that your old habits and routine ways of doing things are no longer relevant. A bit of frustration can be expected, and you may find yourself becoming unusually irritable, resentful and even angry. Minor problems suddenly assume the proportions of major crises and you may grow somewhat depressed. Your stress and sense of isolation may affect your eating and sleeping habits. You may write letters, send e-mails, or call home criticizing the new environment and indicating that you are having a terrible time adjusting to the new country.

Symptoms include anxiety, sadness and homesickness.

**Adjustment Phase**

The human psyche is extremely flexible and most students weather this initial period and make personal and academic adjustments as the months pass. They may begin to spend less time with Americans and more time forming friendships with local people. They often forget to communicate home.

**Enthusiasm Phase**

Finally, when the adjustment is complete, most students begin to feel enthusiastic, and that they are finally in tune with their surroundings, neither praising nor criticizing the culture, but becoming, to some extent, part of it.

Recognizing the existence of and your vulnerability to culture shock will certainly ease some of the strain, but there are also several short-term strategies you can use beforehand as well as on-site when you recognize culture shock and are faced with the challenge of adjustment.

**Become more familiar with the local language**

Independent study in the local language should facilitate your transition. Continue your study of the foreign language before and throughout your program. Rent and watch foreign films to become accustomed to the rhythm and sounds of the language of your new home. Do not become so concerned with the grammar and technicalities of a language that you are afraid to speak once you are abroad.

**Examine your motives for going**

Although you will certainly do some traveling while you’re abroad, remember that your program is not an extended vacation. Set realistic academic goals, particularly if you are studying in another language.

Reduce your expectations or simplify your goals in order to avoid disappointment or disillusions and don’t forget to study!

**Recognize the value of culture shock**

Culture shock is a way of sensitizing you to another culture at a level that goes beyond the intellectual and the rational. Just as an athlete cannot get in shape without going through the uncomfortable conditioning stage, so you cannot fully appreciate the cultural differences that exist without first going through the uncomfortable stages of psychological adjustment.

**Expect to feel depressed sometimes**

Homesickness is natural, especially if you have never been away from home. Remember that your family and friends would not have encouraged you to go if they did not want you to gain the most from this experience. Don’t let thoughts of home occupy you to the point that you are incapable of enjoying the exciting new culture that surrounds you. Think of all you will share with your family and friends when you return home.

**Expect to feel frustrated and angry at times**

You are bound to have communication problems when you are not using your native language or dialect. Even if they speak English in your host country, communication may be difficult! Moreover, people will do things differently in your new home, and you will not always think their way is as good as yours. Once you accept that nothing you do is going to radically change the different cultural practices, you will save yourself real frustration. Remember that you are the foreigner and a guest in the other culture.

**Do not expect local people to come and find you**

When was the last time you approached a lonely-looking foreign student with an offer of friendship? Things are not necessarily any different where you are going. If you are not meeting people through your classes, make other efforts to meet them. Take advantage of the university structure and join clubs, participate in sports, attend worship services, participate in volunteer and service-learning projects, and attend other university-sponsored functions. Maintain a sense of meaning to your life and allow time for leisure activities.

**Keep your sense of humor and positive outlook**

Almost all returned study abroad students have wonderful stories about how much fun they had during their time abroad. If you have a terrible day (or week) abroad, remember that it will pass. Time has a way of helping us remember the good times and turning those horrible times into fascinating stories!

**Adopt coping strategies that work for you**

Keep in touch with friends and family but not to the point you are consumed with calling and e-mailing that you miss out on the study abroad experience. Exercising can also contribute to improved mood and better sleep.

## Adjustments for Women

The overwhelming majority of students who study abroad are women and they report back that they have had incredible experiences. However, in certain locations and programs, women may have a difficult time adjusting to attitudes they encounter abroad, both in public and private interactions between men and women. Some men openly demonstrate their appraisal of women in ways that many women find offensive. It is not uncommon to be honked at, stared at, verbally and loudly approved of, and, in general, to be actively noticed simply for being a woman, and in particular, an American woman. Sometimes the attention can be flattering. Soon, it may become very annoying and potentially even angering or frightening. Local women, who often get the same sort of treatment, have learned through their culture how to respond to the attention.

Eye contact between strangers or a smile at someone passing in the street, which is not uncommon in the U.S., may result in totally unexpected invitations, and some women feel forced to avoid eye contact. You will have to learn the unwritten rules about what you can and cannot do. Women can provide support for each other; you may wish to get together several times early in your stay abroad to talk about what does and doesn’t work for dealing with unwanted attention. U.S. women are seen as liberated in many ways and sometimes the cultural misunderstanding that comes out of that image can lead to difficult and unpleasant experiences.

These cultural differences may make male-female friendships more challenging. Consider the implicit messages you are communicating, messages you may not intend in your own cultural context. Above all, try to maintain the perspective that these challenging and sometimes difficult experiences are part of the growth of cultural understanding, which is one of the important reasons you are studying abroad.

Female travelers may be more likely to encounter harassment such as unwanted sexual gestures, physical contact, or statements that are offensive or humiliating. Such uncomfortable situations may be avoided by taking the following precautions:

* + - Dress conservatively; while short skirts and tank tops may be comfortable, they may encourage unwanted attention, and in some countries it is entirely inappropriate – like a woman walking around in a bra and underpants.
    - Avoid walking alone late at night or in questionable neighborhoods.
    - Do not agree to meet a person who you do not know in a non-public place.
    - Be aware that some men from other cultures tend to mistake the friendliness of American women for romantic interest.

If, after acknowledging cultural differences, you still feel uncomfortable with what you interpret as sexual harassment, you should talk with your leader, resident director, or other on-site personnel. This conversation may provide you with some coping skills and a possible action plan to avoid future encounters. It may also help you gain a different perspective by understanding the local customs and attitudes. It could be possible that the behaviors you feel uncomfortable with are behaviors that are also considered unacceptable in the host culture.

## Dating and Sex

It is important to note that different cultures have different norms in regard to gender. Women and men should both be aware that the ways people interact vary widely by region and country, and issues around dating and sexuality can be particularly difficult in a cross-cultural setting. Such things as eye contact, the way one dresses, and body language can send very different messages by region and culture. Observing interpersonal interactions within a culture can be useful in helping you choose the way you communicate verbally and non-verbally with others in that country.

Some people consider traveling an aphrodisiac. Meeting new, exciting, and different people may stimulate action that you would not have taken under similar circumstances in the United States. Don’t be foolish in assuming that you are invulnerable because you are a visitor in the country and no one is judging your behavior. Ask yourself why you are choosing to be sexually active and be aware of and set your boundaries and partner expectations.

If you choose to be sexually active, practice safe sex and protect yourself and your partner against unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, and misunderstanding about the meaning of the relationship. Sexually-transmitted viruses and bacteria do not respect national borders. Take a supply of condoms with you since conditions of availability and purchase may be limited, and conditions of manufacture and storage may be questionable. Emergency contraception (EC) is birth control that prevents pregnancy after sex, which is why it is sometimes called "the morning after pill" and can be very effective if you think your birth control failed, you didn't use contraception, or you were forced to have sex.

Be responsible if using alcohol or other drugs because they can affect your behavior and ability to make decisions. Don’t leave the country with anything you didn’t bring: this means a pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, or AIDS.

**Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Adjustments**

It is important to realize before going abroad that although many countries have made great strides in the acceptance of LGBT rights, there are also many where students may not only feel judged or discriminated against, but where being homosexual is even punishable by law. LGBT students are encouraged to use the support of fellow USF students and faculty to help them if they ever feel out of place. You can find a thesis written as a guide to resources for LGBT culture abroad: <http://global.usf.edu/educationabroad/out-predepart.php>.

# Home Again

For many students, meaningful cross-cultural learning continues in the weeks and months following the study abroad experience. This section of the handbook details what you can do to ensure a smooth return to the U.S. and to **continue your international and inter-cultural learning back home.**

## Customs Information

The government requires you to pay duty on goods purchased abroad and brought into the United States. You should know and understand these requirements before leaving, so there are no problems when you return. You must declare expensive and/or foreign goods you will take with you before leaving the United States so that you are not charged duty on them when you return. If you are taking imported articles such as cameras, binoculars, watches, laptops, etc., register these foreign-made articles with Customs (before leaving the U.S.) to avoid extra duty charges upon re-entry.

Your exemption is $800 (retail value) on articles acquired abroad, if:

* + - Articles are for personal use or gifts.
    - Articles accompany you.
    - You have been out of the country at least 48 hours (Mexico and U.S. Virgin Islands are exempt from the 48-hour limitation).
    - You have not claimed the exemption within the preceding 30 days.
    - Articles are not prohibited or restricted.

Upon your return, group purchases together and keep receipts ready for Customs inspection. Should you bring back foreign pharmaceuticals, have the prescriptions ready to present.

You must declare, at the price paid, everything acquired abroad, including gifts given to you and articles worn or used. If you fail to declare or understate the value, penalties may be severe. You cannot bring meat, fruits, vegetables and Cuban cigars into the United States.

Check [Know Before You Go](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg) for more customs information  [http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/.](%20http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/.)

## Post-Travel Health Recommendations

There are a few health issues you need to consider when returning from travel abroad:

* + - If you become ill within 12 months after traveling, make a medical appointment and inform your physician of the countries you visited while abroad.
    - If you have been taking anti-malarial medication, continue doing so for the prescribed length of time after you return home.
    - Schedule an appointment with a health care provider for a sexually transmitted disease check if you were sexually active while abroad.
    - Remember that your study abroad accident and sickness insurance covers you only while you are abroad, so make sure you have adequate coverage in the United States.

## Culture Shock Revisited

As difficult as it is to adapt to an entirely new culture**, it can be just as challenging to come back home** after being away for any period of time. It is best to know what you might encounter in order to prepare for this adjustment period.

Expect to experience some measure of reverse culture shock. Reverse or re-entry shock can be defined as the “unexpected confrontation with the **familiar**” (R. Michael Paige). Remember that the world at home hasn’t stopped while you were gone. Upon your return home, you may find you aren’t the only one who has changed during your absence. Everyone and everything else will have changed too! Remember to take time to readjust slowly.

You’ll notice that you may think differently about the United States. You’ll spend time reflecting on the differences between the U.S. and your former host country, just as you did when you left. Friends and family may be interested in stories or photos for a while, but “really don’t understand.” It may be difficult to express your feelings in words, or accept the fact that some of your friends and family don’t understand your perspective or excitement. Remember that many people may have difficulty relating to what you are saying because it hasn’t been part of their experience.

Avoid experiencing anxiety about getting a job when your return home. Your study abroad experience can open employment doors for you, so be creative while abroad, ask for interviews by e-mail and promote the self-reliance and maturity you have gained through your experience.

The University of South Florida’s Education Abroad Office’s website has important links to different resources that may be utilized in coping with culture shock: [http://global.usf.edu/educationabroad/out-predepart.php](http://global.usf.edu/educationabroad/out-predepart.php%20)