

Winning Entry

Top 5 Tips when studying abroad – by Patrice Scipio

1. **Prepare** - Traveling to a foreign country for the first time can be exciting, as well as, terrifying. It's much like a toddler being dropped off to their first day of daycare. Everyone looks like you, but they sound strange and they do some unfamiliar things. Adequate preparation can decrease the likelihood of potentially harmful and dangerous situations and their unintended consequences.
 - a. You can find up-to-date information on up to 170 countries on the following website, www.state.gov which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.
 - b. Familiarize yourself with passport and visa requirements by checking with the embassy of the foreign country that you plan to visit. Make sure that all your documents including your passport and visa are appropriately signed. For U.S. citizens, a list of health insurance and travel insurance providers can be found at http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/brochures/brochures_1215.html
 - c. Check with the embassy or consulate of your country for travel registration opportunities. U.S citizens can go to the following website <https://travelregistration.state.gov> to register your travel with the State Department. This is a free service and in case of an emergency, you can be easily contacted.
 - d. Create a file containing the names, addresses and phone numbers of your contacts including the nearest embassy, airport, your accommodations, educational site and travel insurance company.
 - e. Verify your housing arrangements prior to leaving your home country and if possible arrange to have someone pick you up at the airport on arrival.
 - f. Know where to go and what to do in case of emergency. Usually, the embassy is the first contact. U.S. citizens can reach the Office of Overseas Citizen Services outside the United States and Canada by dialing 1-202-501-4444. You can access travel warnings and country specific information by dialing the Office of Overseas Citizens Services hotline at (202) 647-5225 from a touchtone phone. The website www.state.gov also provides up-to-date travel warnings and alerts.
 - g. Leave copies of your important documents including your passport, visa, contact information and insurance documents with a trusted family member or friend.
2. **Safety is a must!** Make sure you know the laws and regulations of the country that you are visiting. Do not leave your personal belongings unattended. Also, never accept packages from strangers. By using bottled water on your trip, you can avoid some serious health hazards. As much as possible, avoid traveling alone- it would be great to have a trusted friend with you if things take a turn for the worse. Also, do not pretend to understand the language- you can end up on the other side of town if you pretend to understand what the bus announcer is saying! Ask questions when you do not understand!
3. **Be social** - Attend all your classes, make as many friends and practice the language as much as possible. Remember that you can potentially find the love of your life on your study abroad.
4. **Make your new living arrangements as comfortable as possible.** Whether you stay with a host family, friends or alone, your new environment can be challenging. If you stay with a host family or roommates, make sure that you establish what the rules of the house are. Will they cook for you? Are you expected to clean your room? If you stay alone, try to have regular dinners or outings with other students in the program so that you have a sense of belonging. Consider setting up a regular time to contact friends and family at home. Although, having access to the internet makes staying in contact a little easier. A phone call, letter or card is just as adequate.
5. **Find opportunities to practice your newfound language.** Get out and party clean! All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy! Take the time to learn about interesting sites in the country and squeeze as much sightseeing and leisure time into your activities. There is always an opportunity to experience something new whether you are traveling to a country for the 1st, 2nd or 3rd time. Make use of guidebooks, local guides and resources. If you plan to drive you may need an international driving license. Keep a journal of your experiences so that you can share with other interested parties. Also a digital camera is a wise investment if you do not already own one. Avoid the use of illicit drugs and excessive alcohol. Try to maintain control of your circumstances as much as possible.

Runner-up Entry

Top 5 Travel Tips – by Laura Chen

1. **Speak the language.** Sounds like common sense, right? I can't tell you how many times I heard Americans yelling at market vendors in English. "I SAID 50 PESOS. FIFTY. YES, FIFTY." People aren't deaf. They just aren't always fluent in English. The thought of Turkish or Korean visitors in NYC yelling in their language is pretty humorous. At least in Mexico, they're patient with us.
2. **Make friends with locals.** They know all the best places to go where the customers aren't families in matching "I love Paris" sweatshirts. Although people watching can turn into comedy with tourist watching, sometimes you just want to grab a good cup of coffee and eavesdrop on conversations in French.
3. **Eat the street food.** Okay. Our moms all told us not to as well. Now we're older, maybe not wiser, but more free to make our own choices. So bring your pepto bismal and chow down some authentic Egyptian falafel from the streets of Cairo. I promise it will be worth it.
4. **Wander.** Want to make your visit more fulfilling than a tour guide-filled weekend? You've got to take some time off and wander around for a little bit. Relax. You're away from home. Check out things that don't cost you anything, like how the trees here are different and the people walk with a slower pace. Make sure you visit a local park, attempt to read a paper, and bathe in some foreign sunshine.
5. **Go home.** Make a few contacts and keep in touch for a return trip. Drag your feet to the airport, you may, but you've got to get on that return flight. You can tell all your friends about your adventures and lessons. I know it's going to be hard, but you can always come back. Besides, your mothers would miss you too much and blame it on the food in the streets.

Finalists

Top 5 Tips When in Mexico – by Natalie Billick

The Mexican food in Mexico isn't like Mexican food in the U.S., and they aren't joking about the water

1. Bargaining is normal, and expected
2. Get used to "los pirpos".
3. Ride the bus.
4. Hone your karaoke skills prior to arriving

Top 5 Tips When Learning a Language – by Stephanie Thomas

1. **Stop memorizing and translating!** You will never speak a foreign language with any real proficiency if all you are doing is spitting out memorized words and phrases and translating to and from English.
2. **Don't be afraid to make mistakes!** Your 2 year old didn't suddenly go from babbling Mama and Dada to spouting Shakespeare and neither will you. You have to start somewhere and in the beginning you will sound like a toddler, but if you don't make mistakes and learn what you did wrong you'll never get any better.
3. **Practice, Practice, Practice!** You didn't learn how to play the piano overnight and you won't learn a language without some help and some real effort either.
4. **Have some fun!** You'll give up on your new language pretty fast if all you're doing is reading through boring textbooks. Pick up some CD's and DVD's in your target language. Listen to some salsa music...rent a French film. It will be a great chance to listen to how the language is really used and much more fun too!
5. **Travel and study abroad!** Way more fun than just sitting in a classroom all the time...plus the best way to pick up a language is to be forced to use it 24/7. You'll be surprised how fast you learn when you have to.... so call AmeriSpan right now and start planning that trip today!

Finalists (continued)

Top 5 Tips When Learning a Language – by Todd Campion

1. Force yourself to “Think” in your target language. Often times when I was in Quebec City I would replay conversations in my head and think of different ways I could have responded in French. By thinking in my target language at night, I was more likely to have dreams in French, which was very cool.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to ONLY speak the target language while you are there. This is tougher than it sounds, but I found that when I let all my new friends and host family know what my goal was, I had no choice but to speak in my target language.
3. Go to a local music store and talk to the sales person. Ask for some current music from Artists in the area. Not only does the music help you learn, you are also exposed to culture
4. Find events that you can volunteer your time with. You can ask your host family or pick up a local paper. By volunteering my time during my stay, I was exposed to all sorts of new people and new events. I found that the majority of the other people volunteering were natives that did not know how to speak my native language, forcing me to communicate in their language.
5. Make an effort not to just hang out with other students. You are less likely to talk in the target language when you ONLY surround yourself with other students. Ask your professors where a good place to hang out and meet people may be.

Five Tips for Traveling Abroad with Middle School Students - by Lisa Friedman Morales

Here are the five most important things to remember when taking students ages 12-14 with a limited Spanish vocabulary to a foreign country.

1. Never, ever take the parents. I mean it. You will be sorry if you do. If Johnny is in the Prado Museum drawing a mustache on the upper lip of Princess Margarita in Velázquez painting *Las Meninas*, you'll want to be able to reprimand him affectively without mom and dad's concern of stifling his creativity.
2. You can never have too much toilet paper. This is especially true in Mexico where we were once given the funnies section when entering the bathroom. One very obtuse student commented that he wouldn't have time to sit and read since the bus was getting ready to leave.
3. Imodium is your friend. I would advise buying stock in it before leaving the country for anywhere in Latin America. Teenagers love to test 'the don't drink the water theory.'
4. When traveling in a tropical land, always check your shoes before putting them on. 14-year-old girls and scorpions do not mix well.
5. Disregard the amount of times you say each trip, “ I'll never do this again”. You will do it again. It's like childbirth. You'll quickly forget the excruciating pain and the sleepless nights and only remember what it feels like to be seeing things once again, for the first time, through the eyes of the young.

Finalists (continued)

Top Tips When Studying Abroad – by Lindsay Bailey

1. Try the food. Even if you gain some weight from trying everything, it's worth it because you'll miss it when it's gone. Maybe you can try to cook the same things back at home, but it just isn't the same.
2. Talk to people. You'll get to practice a new language, learn to laugh at your mistakes, and make lasting friendships in the long run. Natives know you are trying to speak their language and respect you for that. Don't be embarrassed!
3. Smile! It's a universal gesture, and no one will misinterpret that.
4. Get Outside. Staying inside on the internet or phone for more than an hour means you are missing out on the culture around town. You'll learn more from window shopping and eating out than you will talking to your friends back home on Facebook.
5. Humility. Learn to accept it. A lot of what you say or do is not going to be perfect, but that doesn't matter! It's the thought that counts. As long as your heart is in what you're doing, you're getting along very well. Laughing at yourself truly is the best medicine.

Top 5 Travel Tips When In Costa Rica – by Erin Stephenson

1. Most Important: Tico Time! The locals of Costa Rica are called Ticos (Males) and Ticas (Females). Costa Rica is a very laid back country and almost nothing is done in a timely matter. Although you may make plans for a specific time with a local, it is not considered rude to show up late!
2. Asking for Directions- "No" is not a common answer in Costa Rica. If you ask someone for directions they may not want to say they don't know because this would not be helpful, even if they do not know they answer. Watch for body language when they answer and if unsure, always get a second opinion. This can also occur when making arrangements to meet someone. Always double check on plans as to not be disappointed with a "no-show".
3. In the City: be very careful in the streets. Pedestrians do not have the right of way like they do in North America. In cities, such as San Jose and Heredia, the streets are very busy. Also be careful of pic-pockets and never leave your bags, even for a few minutes.
4. Traveling the Country: Public buses are super cheap, safe, easy to take and run to almost everywhere from San Jose. Costa Rica is a small country so the longest bus rides are about 5 hours. For example, San Jose to Playa Jaco (2 hours) and Samara (4 hours).
5. Food and Water- Little family run restaurants called "Sodas" can be found almost anywhere serving typical Costa Rican food (always including Rice and Black Beans) which is generally cheap and delicious. Water is safe to drink in major cities (San Jose and Heredia) but its suggested to be more careful with the water when traveling to other locations.

Top 5 Tips When Studying Abroad – by F. Scott Ball

1. Go alone! I have traveled in groups and I have traveled alone. I have to admit that my most memorable trips, the trips that I have taken the most from, have been trips that I have experienced alone. Every time I tell someone new about my experiences of traveling abroad, I hear the same response, “I can’t believe you went alone!” People are naturally afraid of the unknown. The only way to get over the fear of the unknown is to experience it. A little fear is good. It keeps you on your toes and keeps you safe. Once you get over your fear, you are free and can do anything you want. Traveling alone when studying abroad offers many benefits. It forces you to meet people who you generally would not meet when traveling with a companion. It guarantees that you practice the language you are in the country to learn. I have witnessed many people traveling in groups from their own countries and they are always seen speaking together in their mother tongues. If you travel alone, you can meet people who are there to practice the same language as you, as well as, people who use the language you are learning as their first language. Trust me, if you go alone, you won’t be alone for long. Now I have a free place to stay in more places than I can think of. I definitely won’t have any problems if I ever find myself stranded in Estonia. I’m set.
2. Budget more money than you plan on spending. Unfortunately, studying abroad does require you to spend money, but it’s worth it. You get to experience things that you would never experience in your home country and have memories that will last a lifetime. I think this is worth saving a few extra pennies in your piggy bank. You may feel you are good with money and know you can stick to your budget, but unexpected things do happen. Situations occur and new adventures come your way that you will not want to pass up. I’ve seen many travelers stressed over the situation of spending over their budget, so having a little extra money will help alleviate the tension and help when you are in a pinch. Remember, you are studying abroad to have an experience of a lifetime, not to worry about your funds.
3. Be careful and keep yourself safe. I was told the same thing from countless people before leaving on each of my study abroad experiences; don’t trust anyone! I am not going to suggest this to you as I have met many individuals that I would trust with my life; however, you must keep in mind that you are alone on this trip and need to remember that the only person that can protect yourself 100% is you. I’m sure you will meet great people and will eventually gain their trust, but in the meantime, you really don’t want to find yourself in a dangerous situation. I can tell from experience that once you are in one of these situations it will feel like you will never get out. I am not saying this to frighten you, but to educate you and keep you from finding yourself in a situation that you cannot remove yourself from. I suggest you learn what you can about the country you are visiting (culture, customs, laws, restricted areas etc). Read travel blogs to learn about other travelers’ experiences. Learn about things that are safe to do and things that you should never do. Educate yourself and you will have a safe and happy experience.
4. Choose a good quality school. Do not choose a school because it’s the cheapest and you think you are getting a great deal. It will honestly be a waste of your time and money. I have experienced good quality schools and not so good quality schools. Believe me; you get what you pay for. You will feel the comforts and learn more if you spend a little extra money. A school does not have to be state of the art, or luxurious for you to be comfortable and learn. It is important to have an educated and experienced teacher, who is part of a school that can provide an atmosphere conducive to learning with the essential materials required to help you achieve your language learning goals. There is nothing worse than paying for a language course where you feel that you know more grammar than your teacher. Once you have to correct your teacher more than a handful of times you will shoot yourself in the foot for choosing the cheaper school.
5. Be a proud ambassador for your own country. Be proud of your country and share it. Be open-minded and show everyone you meet what a great person you are. This will reflect well on you and your country. Bring various objects and items from home to share your culture with your new friends and host family. I have learned that people will really appreciate it and remember you for it. It also gives you things to show and tell in your language class and makes it easier to break the ice when meeting people. These items don’t have to be expensive and act as great keepsakes for various individuals at the end of your trip. Bring pictures, books, maps, postcards, coins, banknotes, flags, etc. Anything you can think of will be interesting to others. You are in a new country to learn about the culture, but why not also share yours too. In a language school you will meet people from all over the world. Many people might not know much about your country, or have never even heard of it before. I have shared many things from my country and the majority of people I have shared with have said, “I wish I would have thought of that”. Wouldn’t you want to see things from countries you have never been to? Anything you can share would be great. Trust me, this works wonders!