

19 BIGGEST Study Abroad Mistakes

A special report on how to avoid the biggest mistakes most commonly made by first-time study abroad students.



Introduction

So you are thinking about studying abroad? Deciding where you want to go and what you want to study are just the first steps. There are a number of decisions you will need to make before you leave and a great many more which you will make during your trip. All of these choices will greatly impact your experience. Make the right decisions and this could be one of the best experiences of your life. Make the wrong decision and you may end up regretting your decision to study abroad.

This special report, “The 19 Biggest Mistakes When Studying Abroad” will help you make the most important decisions about your overseas study experience. Using our own experiences as experts in studying abroad, we have compiled a brief summary of the Biggest Mistakes first time students can make when studying abroad.

This report is divided into three sections:

Section 1: Study Abroad 101

This first section is what we like to refer to as Study Abroad 101. It answers basic questions on how to choose a program and plan your trip.

Section 2: Pre-Departure Tasks

The second section is dedicated to everything that needs to be done prior to departure. We walk you through the entire process, from selecting a specific program to advice on packing your bags to finally helping you leave your home and begin your adventure.

Section 3: While Studying Abroad

The final section is dedicated to the actual time spent while you are abroad so that you can maximize both the learning AND enjoyment aspects of your study abroad experience.

Remember, the biggest mistake you can make is to not read and follow the advice in this special report to increase the benefits and enjoyment of your experience!

Happy Travels!



Section 1: Study Abroad 101

Overview

The goal of this section is to help you find a study abroad program that is best for you. What is best for you may not be the best for your friends, your parents, your spouse or even your university. We all have different needs, desires, sensitivities and interests. As study abroad consultants, we're continuously amazed at how little people think about themselves when they are choosing a study abroad location. Too often, we hear comments such as, "my friend is going there" or "my sister went there last year" or "that is the only program my school offers." If you don't like the clothes offered in a store, do you buy those clothes because that is all that is offered? No, you go to the next store. Do you buy a meal because that is what your friend is ordering or do you order something on the menu that you feel like eating? Get the point?

There are thousands of study abroad programs in hundreds of cities around the world. Some are right for you while others will be more appropriate for others. You owe it to yourself to figure out what programs are best for you. Perhaps the original program you had in mind fits your needs, but what if it doesn't? Do you want to take that risk?

Biggest Mistake #1 – Not Knowing Your Motivations and Goals

Are you studying abroad for personal reasons or is it a requirement for your job or school? Here are some common reasons for studying abroad:

1. You want or need to learn another language.
2. You feel studying abroad will help your career or future career.
3. You need to fulfill professional or academic requirements.
4. You want to learn about other cultures.
5. To gain an international perspective by looking at the world from a different view.
6. You plan to find a foreign lover.
7. You want to party like crazy.
8. You want to get away and experience something different.
9. You want to travel to a specific destination and immerse yourself for an extended period.
10. You want to check out the location because you are thinking of moving there.

After you realize why you want to study abroad, you can start to identify programs that will allow you to accomplish your goals.

Biggest Mistake #2 – Not Knowing Your Limits

Sure, it sounds great and exotic to tell your friends that you are studying in Bolivia or somewhere else off the beaten path. The important thing to keep in mind is that you want to be comfortable where you are studying. It is hard enough to be in a place where you don't speak the language fluently or understand the culture, so don't add unnecessary challenges. If creature comforts are important to you, don't go to a developing country. If you have never lived in a big city before, think twice about studying in a huge city like Paris or Berlin. If you don't like the heat, make sure you know what the weather is going to be like when you plan to be studying. Make sure to do your own research on prospective locations; don't rely on stereotypes or someone else's opinion. If someone visited Guatemala even ten years ago, they would find it to be a vastly different place now.

Keep in mind that there are those people who really want to experience life outside the box, but there are also people who don't want to live in a house that, perhaps, raises live chickens. That's okay! Just be sure to pick your program based on what YOU want, what interests you and what makes you comfortable.

Biggest Mistake #3 – Taking Too Many Class Hours

If your goal is to learn a language as quickly as possible, you'll notice that the majority of standard programs only offer three, four or five hours a day of classes. Can't you learn faster if you take six or even eight hours per day of class? There are many reasons that most programs only offer about half a day of classes:

1. Just like learning music, learning a language takes practice. After you are introduced to a new song in music, you have to let it sink in, memorize it and practice it. In language study, just writing down a concept, a verb conjugation, or a new vocabulary word doesn't mean you have "mastered" it. Too often students who take too many hours find that they never master anything and end up retaining less than others who take fewer class hours.
2. Study Abroad programs are immersion programs. This means that your entire day is theoretically "class", whether you are eating dinner with a host family, asking for directions or talking to that cute local. The best way you can speed up your learning is to take what you learn in the classroom and use it in the real world.
3. Learning a language is more than learning words and verb conjugations; you need to learn how to communicate. Every culture has a different way of communicating. If you utilize your free time to explore and sample the culture, it will help you learn to communicate effectively in that culture.

Biggest Mistake #4 – Not Staying Long Enough

If you want to learn, then spend enough time in the country. Obviously, many people have scheduling concerns, and any amount of time spent studying abroad is better than no time.

If your schedule allows it, then stay abroad as long as you can. If you can't afford to take classes the entire time, then try to stay a minimum of three to four weeks in class and then stay on without classes. Volunteer programs are a great way to get an inexpensive immersion experience. Usually in volunteer programs, participants take a couple of weeks of classes, followed by a couple of weeks of volunteering (or longer). Generally, a person learns twice as much in three weeks versus two weeks. This has to do with growing comfortable and relaxed with your surroundings as well as the cumulative effect of hearing and speaking the language every day.

Don't get frustrated if you don't have enough time, you can always study abroad again. Some people like to return to the same program because they can hit the ground running while others like to try new locations and programs to start a new adventure.

Biggest Mistake #5 – Not Doing Enough Research

All programs are NOT the same! The highest priced program isn't always the best! University-sponsored programs aren't the only way to receive transferable academic credit! There are many ways to arrange study abroad programs including:

- Study Abroad Organizations (sometimes referred to as providers or agents).
- Your university study abroad departments.
- Study abroad departments at other universities.
- Directly with the foreign university or language school.
- In-person. Believe it or not, you can often start a program by showing up the morning of the first day a course begins. But beware that not all schools are able to do this and that schools may be full during the summer and winter breaks and other high tourist seasons.

Aside from the internet, you can learn about programs through your teachers, guide books, as well as through study abroad directories published by Petersons and IIE (Institute of International Education).

TIP: Satisfaction Guarantees

Look for programs that offer quality or satisfaction guarantees. These can vary from saying we review the school to offering free classes or programs if you are not satisfied.

Biggest Mistake #6 – Assuming You Are An Expert in Study Abroad

Reading a bunch of websites or catalogs does not make you an expert. Trusting what language schools say on their website is dangerous. You should contact people who really know including:

- **Past Participants** – Good programs should make it easy for you to directly contact past participants via email or telephone.
- **Study Abroad Departments at Universities** – Even if you don't attend the university, most will be more than happy to recommend a few programs if you drop by or give them a call.
- **Study Abroad Organizations/Providers/Agents** – These organizations choose which schools to work with based on a variety of criteria. Virtually all foreign study abroad programs and language schools want to be marketed by as many study abroad organizations as possible. Study abroad organizations get to choose the programs they like the best and if they recognize a problem, the organization can switch to working with a better school or program.

Biggest Mistake #7 – Not Budgeting Properly

Nothing is worse than running out of money abroad. We have heard stories of people missing flights because they couldn't afford to get to the airport or couldn't pay the airport [departure tax](#). If you don't have unlimited funds, then you must take budgeting seriously.

There is no universal way to come up with a budget. Each person will have different needs and expectations, so it is important that you think about how often you will want or need to eat out, buy food, pay rent, buy souvenirs, have cocktails, go to museums, travel in the area, buy random items or pay for transportation. Each city and country has different exchange rates and costs, which can be easily researched online before you leave. Good organization will give you an idea of what to expect. But remember, it is always better to bring or have access to more money to be on the safe side. Remember that many shops overseas do not accept credit cards or your home country's currency. Also, it is advisable not to take too much [cash](#), nor too many traveler's checks because there are usually ATMs where you can use your debit card, often with very favorable exchange rates. And just like at home, be safe with your money. Be cautious of using ATMs at night or displaying your cash. Finally, be sure to check with your bank to see if they charge extra fees to withdraw cash abroad!

TIP: Be Careful When Paying Non-refundable Deposits & Fees

Personal, professional & academic situations can occur which may cause you to change, postpone or cancel your study abroad program. Avoid committing too much money that you won't be able to get back if your situation changes. Look for flexible refund & cancellation policies, as well as money back guarantees.

Biggest Mistake #8 – Paying Too Much for Study Abroad

Be careful! Study abroad programs which offer almost identical content can vary greatly in price, sometimes to the tune of thousands of dollars. Some programs may look more expensive but may be all-inclusive while others may look like a good deal until you add in all the required fees. In general, university programs are the most expensive but they may include more benefits like academic credit or traveling faculty and chaperones. Many special offers are available if you book early, are going with a friend or are traveling in low season (September–April, excluding January).

TIP: Price Guarantees

Look for a price guarantee where they beat any price at comparable programs.

Biggest Mistake #9 – Not Investigating Financial Aid and Scholarships

There is a ton of money available to study abroad including scholarships, financial aid and student loans.

- **Scholarships** – Search the internet or go to: www.studyabroadfunding.org. In addition, many study abroad organizations provide a variety of scholarships or discounts. However, some of these may only be available if you attend a university that is affiliated with the organization. If your university isn't affiliated, you might try to encourage your university to affiliate so that you can obtain that scholarship.
- **Financial Aid** – In general, if you are earning academic credit, you are allowed to receive financial aid from the US Government and directly from many states. If your university says that they won't grant financial aid there are two reasons; (1) they have chosen to block the use of financial aid for programs they don't control (legal but PROFIT-driven) and (2) they may not realize that study abroad is eligible for financial aid. Check out www.ed.gov/finaid and work with your study abroad or foreign language department to research the process.
- **Student Loans** – there are a variety of student loans available, but be careful, as they may have high interest rates and/or require a guarantee.

Section 2: Pre-departure tasks

Biggest Mistake #10 – Taking Too Much Luggage

The rule of thumb is to bring only what you can comfortably carry! Besides being annoying to lug around, taking too much luggage makes you a target for thieves. Too much luggage means that you will not be able to carry everything comfortably, and this means you will be setting your bags down frequently. Unattended bags are magnets for thieves. If you are going to be taking cabs or public transportation to and from the airport (or doing any traveling while on your trip) you are only going to regret bringing all of that extra stuff. Remember to leave space in your bags for the things you will be buying to bring home (another trick is to bring a small, collapsible duffel bag for souvenirs), and remember that the streets in many countries are not smooth or conducive to rolling suitcases that you cannot lift. All airlines have strict baggage weight restrictions for flights not originating or going to the USA (can be as low as of 20 kilos or 50 pounds) so anything over that, you'll be paying extra – a lot extra! For domestic, in-country flights, the maximum weight is usually less and you don't always have the option of paying extra to get your bag on the flight. That means that you just can't take the bag(s) on the plane and you'll have to travel on without them.

TIP: How to Avoid Over-packing

1. **Wear your bulkiest clothes when you are traveling.**
2. **Consider layers for warmth, instead of a bulky coat.**
3. **Focus on one neutral color like black or khaki which allows you to go casual or dress up. Add a color or accessorize so you'll have different looks with fewer clothes.**
4. **Dark colors don't show dirt as easily.**
5. **Don't pack for more than five to seven days.**
6. **Don't pack for every season, research the weather and pack accordingly.**
7. **Try to get by with only two pairs of shoes, but make sure one is comfortable for walking.**

Biggest Mistake # 11: Having Unrealistic Expectations

You should not go on your study abroad adventure with expectations so high that you are bound to be disappointed. Your lodging is not likely to be at a five star hotel, the weather will not be perfect everyday and you are not going to love every class, teacher, or person that you meet. Even though the internet, your email and magazines are filled with offers of learning a language in hours, days or a couple of weeks, logically, this just isn't the case. Learning a language takes hard work and time, so set reasonable goals for yourself. A beginner can expect to be able to survive in the study country after one to two weeks, be communicative after three to four weeks, and obtain a certain level of fluency after 10 to 14 weeks depending on a wide variety of factors. These include the target language, how hard you study, how immersed you are and how well your language skills develop.

Biggest Mistake #12: Not Bringing Important Info

Before leaving home, organize your important documents, including phone numbers, addresses, emergency contact info, travel documents, prescriptions and copies of credit cards/travelers' checks. Make copies of all of this and keep one copy in your packed bags and another copy in your primary carry-on bag. Leave another copy with a friend or relative. Email copies of all important information to yourself, as well. Nothing is worse than getting to a new country and not knowing where to go or who to call because your contact information is in your checked baggage, which has been delayed or lost.

TIP: Important Info To Bring

1. [Passport](#) (keep copy in luggage)
2. Air Ticket (keep copy in luggage)
3. Entry [Visa](#) (if needed)
4. Study Abroad Confirmation
5. Lodging address & telephone #
6. Copy of prescriptions
7. Home doctor telephone #
8. Friend and Families contact info
9. [Travel Insurance](#) Info
10. Credit Card Int'l Telephone #
11. Travelers' checks ID #'s

Biggest Mistake # 13: Not Anticipating Culture Shock

Be prepared for bumps in the road and frustrations along the way. Not everything is as "efficient" and "organized" as you may be used to. For example, Latin America has an entirely different concept of time which is more relaxed than you may be used to. For example, locals refer to people being late as "*Hora Latina*." Further, get used to standing in lots of lines, from airports to train stations, even in local shops. Additionally, marked prices are simply a place to start negotiating in much of the world. Expect that things will be late, will go wrong or will not work perfectly. Hey, it's an experience that you're after, right? Your mishaps will make for good stories once you get home!

TIP: Examples of Things That Don't Work The Same

- Used toilet paper is never thrown in the toilet in many lesser-developed countries.
- Electrical outlets and voltage vary around the world, your favorite curling iron, MP3 charger, etc. may not work. In some countries, you have to ask for alkaline batteries, as most are lithium.
- Cellular systems vary worldwide and roaming can be very expensive, one option is to purchase a pay-as-you-go [international cell phone](#).
- Credit cards and travelers checks aren't widely accepted and if they are the surcharge can be as high as 10-15% extra in some countries.
- Eating habits vary from the main meal being lunch in some countries to the dinner hour being after 10 at night in other countries.
- Appropriate dress, especially for women varies greatly around the world.
- Telephones don't work the same, try to familiarize yourself whatever [codes](#) need to be dialed when making local, long-distance and international calls in that country. Public phones may require the use of a phone card.

Section 3: While Studying Abroad

Biggest Mistake #14 – Not Taking Care of Your Health

Your mind knows that you are away, but don't let your body find out the hard way! Get enough sleep, eat right and drink plenty of liquids. Your body is already working overtime from traveling, adjusting to a different time zone and schedule and adjusting to different foods. In other words, your body is already vulnerable. Staying at that club all night, not eating or getting dehydrated from too much booze and not enough water will make you sick. If you get sick, your entire experience will be affected. Proactively taking care of yourself and listening to your body is the best medicine. Bring preventative over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen and imodium so when you do get sick you don't have to attempt to read foreign labels!

Biggest Mistake #15 – Not Trying Local Food

Part of experiencing the culture is trying the local cuisine. Mealtime is a great way to share the moment with your host family or the people that you're traveling with. Sure, noshing on guinea pig on a stick in Peru or devouring cow brains in Paris might be too exotic for you, but there are plenty of other foods to try. Try to check your neuroses about food at the airport. Like mom always said, one bite won't kill you, and neither will a few extra fat grams or carbs. Eating meals is a great way to experience traditional recipes, but remember if you don't like it, please don't spit it out, make faces, or any other rude gesture. It is an insult in many countries to not take food that is offered to you. If you are cooking for yourself in less developed countries, eat only well-cooked food and peeled fruit and vegetables.

By the way, guinea pig tastes like chicken, but then again, what doesn't?

Biggest Mistake #16 – Acting Like a Tourist

Sure, you love the USA or wherever you call home, but not everyone else shares your same nationalistic pride. Leave the stars and stripes T-shirt at home with your Budweiser hat and your "I Love NY" jacket. There is no need to call attention to the fact that you are a tourist. All this does is make you a target for harassment, and more importantly, thieves. Dress in nondescript clothing and remember, if you are a woman, cover up a bit more in more conservative countries. No matter what gender you are, leave the ratty cap, nasty T-shirt, and old, dirty sneakers at home. Dress appropriately for each occasion, from museum hopping to pub-crawls and this way you will always look okay. Remember that in Europe more formal clothing is the norm. Try to avoid cultural bloopers whenever possible. The same hand gestures that might mean something nice here might mean something not-so-nice where you are studying. Get a guide specifically designed for the area you are traveling to so that you can brush up on local customs and colloquialisms. Also, avoid getting into heated arguments or discussions about politics and religion. People may take things more seriously than you are used to. Politely avoid questions that you feel could lead to an incendiary discussion. Leave the camera at home sometimes when going about your daily routine. Some people are so preoccupied to make that perfect shot that they forget to enjoy the moment or never really join the scene they are trying to capture.

Biggest Mistake #17 – Blowing off Your Homework or Class

If the “study” part of study abroad is secondary to the “going abroad” part then pick a program where the course work is minimal. You can make your peers dislike you fairly quickly if you continually come to class unprepared. Don’t skip class because class is where you not only learn the key building blocks to successfully intermingle with the culture, but it is also where you will make lots of new friends.

Biggest Mistake #18 – Not Interacting With the Locals

You are likely to meet other American students or English speaking foreign students, and that’s great. You can make cool new friends and feel a little less homesick. But do not limit yourself to one group of people. Get out and practice your newfound language skills on the locals. Native speakers are often flattered that you are trying to speak their language, and are usually very friendly with people attempting to use their home tongue, so do not be afraid to use the language just because you are not fluent! You will never truly experience the local culture if you spend all of your time with only American students and speak English. Even when you’re with your American friends, try practicing your new language. You can help each other, it’s fun and the mistakes are usually a riot. You will be surprised by how well you can communicate with your new skills if you practice all of the time!

In the case you do need to use English, it is polite to approach someone in the local language first anyway. Asking, “Do you speak English?” in Paris will almost certainly get a rude, “*Non!*” in response. However, a careful, “*Parlez-vous Anglais?*” will usually get you what you’re looking for – “Of course!”

Biggest Mistake #19 – Not Having Fun

Some of this list may seem like you shouldn’t have any fun on your trip. I’m telling you not to party too much, make sure you do your homework, get enough sleep, watch out for thieves, don’t do this or don’t do that. But aside from these typical pitfalls, the point of your study abroad experience is to have a lot of fun while learning a lot about a new country. You should treat this as an adventure no matter what you are doing. If you prepare in advance and avoid making my 19 Biggest Mistakes, then your experience will allow you to learn a new language and learn about a new culture, all while having fun and enjoying yourself.