

# AmeriSpan's Guide to **CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

Learn how to anticipate and overcome culture shock on your study abroad trip.



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## Introduction

Your flight has just landed – maybe you're in London or Paris, or maybe you're halfway around the world in Thailand or South America. Wherever you are, you might be a bit jet lagged, but your enthusiasm will undoubtedly combat that tiny nuisance. Everything around you is completely new – you're like that proverbial kid in a candy store, wide-eyed and thrilled to finally be seeing with your own eyes the sites you've been watching on television and flipping through in magazines.

The first few weeks of your study abroad experience will be so busy and so exciting, you'll have little time to stop and think, let alone feel homesick. There's so much to do: move into your accommodations, set up a bank account, start to learn your way around the area, get ready for the start of classes, and a host of other things you'll discover along the way. Okay, so you might feel a twinge of homesickness here and there, but for the most part you're getting acclimated to your new home. What could be better?

**Culture shock** refers to the anxiety and feelings of surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, confusion, etc. felt when people have to operate within a different and unknown cultural or social environment, such as a foreign country. It grows out of the difficulties in assimilating the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not. This is often combined with a dislike for or even disgust with certain aspects of the new or different culture.

Eventually, things will settle down and that feeling of elation will begin to slowly wear off. Let's put it this way: Remember the last time you were in love? The first few weeks of a new relationship are generally heavenly bliss, and neither of you can do wrong. Everything is perfect. If you're like most, that's exactly how your first few weeks overseas are going to feel. As though you've fallen in love, and everything is perfect.

Just like falling in love, the honeymoon period is going to wear off once you settle into a routine overseas. Don't worry! That doesn't mean things are going to get worse – it just means you'll fall back to reality, and you might experience culture shock.

The best remedy for culture shock is really just expecting culture shock. If you know what it is, and you expect it to happen to you, you will not feel so alone, scared, or confused. You will understand that while it is unpleasant, it is not insurmountable, and it is normal. It doesn't have to ruin your trip, and if you follow our guide, it won't!

# Dealing with Culture Shock

Culture shock is more than just a popular term – it's real, and you should at least be aware of the various symptoms. Remember you are no longer in the United States, and things are done differently overseas. Sometimes that adjustment can be difficult, but it is by no means impossible.

You may start to feel like you hate your host country. You may feel like your home is millions of miles away. You may start to hate everything about your host land. Remember that these feelings are not truly as earth-shattering as they seem. They are normal and temporary, and just part of getting acclimated to your new land. Remember to give it time; don't just throw in the towel the minute you feel the symptoms coming on. Stick it out! It will get better, we promise.

## Symptoms of Culture Shock

First, let's look at some of the symptoms of culture shock. However, keep in mind that everyone is different, so you may experience some, a few, or none of the listed symptoms:

- Loneliness
- Headaches
- Getting tired much more quickly than normal
- Severe homesickness
- Becoming irritable quickly
- Feeling hopeless
- Becoming reclusive
- Anger
- Loss of appetite

Sometimes the signs of culture shock are less obvious. Some of these symptoms can be:

- Unwarranted criticism of the culture and the people.
- Constant complaints about the climate
- Utopian ideas concerning one's home culture
- Continuous concern about the purity of water and food
- Fear of touching the local people
- Refusal to learn the new language
- Preoccupation of being robbed or cheated
- Pressing desire to talk with people who "really make sense"
- Preoccupation with returning home.

The good news is culture shock is combatable. And, it's nothing to be ashamed of – plenty of people experience, and overcome, it. You can too! Read on for some tips to help you overcome culture shock.

## **Start getting acclimated before you leave.**

Sound crazy? It's not. You can make your transition to your new home country much smoother if you go over prepared. Start doing research online. Find out:

- The type of weather you can expect – this will also help you when it's time to pack.
- The popular mode of transportation and the cost of transportation – knowing how you're going to get around, how much transportation costs and the schedule is going to make things much easier.
- The hours that stores are open – not every country has shopping on Sundays or late hours like stores have in the U.S. If you're going to Spain, for example, you'll discover that there's an afternoon siesta when all the shops and businesses close.
- Popular foods – knowing what dishes are common in your host country will make adjusting to the food, especially if you're picky, easier. (However, most countries have the Golden Arches these days, so you'll always have an alternative, if you ever want one.) You might even visit a local grocery store (many have sections of "foreign" foods) to see if you can find and try the cuisine ahead of time.
- Learn the language – you don't have to be fluent, unless, of course, your program requires it. But, knowing some phrases is going to help you immensely.
- Read the history. Do an online search and read about the country you'll be visiting: its history, the problems it may be facing today, and its latest news items.
- Find other people who've studied abroad, visiting your country, in particular. Ask them what you can expect, and ask for any tips they might have. Since they've experienced it, you'll find they can provide information about things you may never even have considered!

## **Make Friends with other Americans overseas.**

They're likely going through the same things as you, especially if they've just landed overseas. Having someone who understands where you come from – and who can discuss mutual experiences - is a great help. Ask other Americans how they've dealt with culture shock; you'll be surprised at how much you'll learn.

## **Have an open mind.**

Don't judge others based on your belief systems and values because not everyone shares that system. Things aren't done overseas like they are in the United States.

## **One of the most important things to remember:**

Things in your host country aren't better or worse than the United States, they're just different. Don't expect to find things as they are at home.

**Tip:** People don't build up an absolute immunity to culture shock. However, being sensitive to change means you also will be enriched by your experiences in your host country. Remember, each positive effort at stepping into the local culture usually opens yet another door of opportunity and diminishes the effects of culture shock.

# Combating Homesickness

No matter how you look at it, homesickness stinks. You'll probably suffer from those pangs a few times throughout your time abroad. Just keep in mind that homesickness is normal – we all go through it!

Of course, thanks to technology, you can help combat that homesickness by emailing your friends and loved ones back home, talking with them via instant messenger, or even video chat (although that might be a challenge, depending on time differences and facilities.) And, you can always pick up the phone and call home. If you have an International Student Identity Card ([ISIC](#)), it will help defray the costs – and you can also purchase calling cards to make the call cheaper. Telling them how you feel and laughing about some of your host country's idiosyncrasies can be the best medicine against homesickness.

**Tip:** ISIC is the only internationally accepted student ID card and proof of current student status in existence. These cards provide a world of benefits and services to the nearly 3.5 million people worldwide every year. More than an ID card, they also offer: discounts to more than 33,000 locations in 103 countries, mobile phone and a calling card communications package, insurance plan, and an emergency help line.

You might also want to keep in touch with your family and friends by snail mail - sure, it might take longer to receive a letter (and you can email in the meantime). But, there's nothing like getting a letter (or a package) in the mail with that familiar handwriting of someone you love.

The big thing to remember is not to let the homesickness keep you down – when you start to feel those pangs, do something. Meeting new people and making new friends is a surefire way to beat homesickness.

A word of advice: Your homesickness, or even as a result of culture shock, may make you lean toward fellow Americans. After all, they understand you, know where you're coming from and are a link to home. Even discussing, with other Americans, your problems or difficulties in adjusting to life in a new country can be a huge help. You can share tips on adjusting, the best places to buy groceries, the best route to take to get into the city and so on.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with making friends with other Americans, but make sure you also try to make friends with students (and others) in your host country. Don't let language barriers stand in your way – it's the perfect opportunity to hone your target language. You'll miss out on a lot of the culture and experience of being overseas if you only stick with Americans.

**Tip:** You might also want to keep a journal. Writing in your journal is a great way to express your thoughts and frustrations. It's also a wonderful memento. Years down the line, you'll be able to read your journal, and you'll likely remember moments and events that you'd long forgotten. Your words are priceless!

# The Steps of Culture Shock

As we stated before, knowing what culture shock is and what to expect is the best way to keep it from ruining your trip. There are a few basic stages that you can expect to go through after you arrive in your study abroad host country:

1. **Excitement!** Also known as the “Honeymoon Phase.” At first, you might be elated. You will want to run around, and experience everything, and do everything. The food, the people, everything feels new and exciting. You are thrilled, and even the little quirks seem wonderful to you. You think of all the stories you will have to tell when you get home. You are meeting new people, making new friends, and having a grand old time.
2. **Shock sets in.** Unfortunately, that initial euphoria does not last. Soon, you begin to miss your home and your friends. You may start to hate your host country, or feel very alone. You will have the symptoms discussed above, and feel somewhat hopeless. Simple acts become problematic. You will want to take the first plane home. You may think about how superior the U.S. is to your new home. Do not despair—it will get better.
3. **Adjustment.** Suddenly, you start to realize that things are not all bad. You get settled into your new home. You realize that while you still miss home, you can deal with it. You are again having fun in your new home, and learning and experimenting with your new culture and language.
4. **Adaptation.** In this final stage you will settle in and make your new home into your real new home. Certain things may still bother you, but you have learned to laugh about them and deal with them. You get into a routine, and learn what your likes and dislikes are. You now feel more at home and more comfortable. Don’t worry—you will get to this point!

Always remember that laughter is the best medicine. Little things like slow services or cramped quarters can seem like a huge deal at first, but you will get used to them, and you will have great stories to tell everyone at home! Just relax and try to bear the storm—things will get so much better that the heartache of homesickness and culture shock will feel worthwhile.

Also remember that feeling down in the dumps is no reason to neglect your studies. Keep up with your work as best you can, even if it sometimes feels a little bit overwhelming. You will be happy in the long run.

*“Basically, the first thing you have to do is begin to know your new culture. Try to seek the cultural patterns behind situations that are strange or different. If you really want to have a good time, you should try to make friends with host country nationals.”*

– Survival Kit for Overseas Living, Robert L. Kohl

# Easing Cultural Adjustment

Whenever you study abroad, you experience some cultural adjustment. However, when you are participating in a language immersion program, this cultural adjustment is normally greater because you are living with a family of strangers who don't speak your native language. By immersing yourself in the culture, you will learn much more than vocabulary and verbs, you will learn how to communicate.

## Common Cultural Differences in Latin America

- **The never say “I don't know” mentality:** In general people in Latin America try to be as helpful as possible. They don't like to say they don't know. The most common example is when you are asking for directions and get pointed in the wrong one. This is not intentional, the person is only trying to be helpful.
- **Quiet and peaceful households, a rarity:** Whether it is dogs barking, roosters crowing, street noise, neighbors or relatives visiting or a señora banging around the kitchen making a meal, much of Latin America is just plain noisy. Get used to it, and if you are a light sleeper bring earplugs.
- **Reality check: Things don't always work:** Telephones are still a rarity in much of Latin America and reliable telephones are practically unheard of. Don't throw toilet paper in the toilet because it will get clogged. Be patient because, “hey”, you are on vacation.
- **Family that stays together, lives together:** It is common for three generations of families to be living together under the same roof. It is a way to increase the household income and to help one another. Can you imagine living with all of your relatives every day?
- **Respect for the elders and parents** is required and expected in Latino/Hispanic families. The family shares financial and emotional support with one another. Together the families provide support and protection for children and the elderly
- **Macho, macho man...:** Most men in Latin America are proud of their machismo and view whistling at women as a compliment. Ladies, take it in stride or see above... about earplugs.
- **Different schedules & routines:** In much of Latin America, lunch is the big meal of the day which causes business to close for an hour or two each afternoon. In some countries like Argentina, dinner is eaten at 10:30 or 11:00 at night. When in Rome do as the Romans do.
- **Cash is king, what's plastic?:** Sure, credit cards are accepted in Latin America, but not everywhere and usually with a 5-10% sur-charge. If you want to live off plastic, use your credit card to get cash advances at the bank or at the ATM machines popping up everywhere.
- **Certain topics are taboo:** Although nosiness is common, certain subjects are taboo e.g. abortion, casual sex, social politics, etc. Listen first to get the norms.
- *And don't forget . . . Time takes time, lots of time:* Punctuality may be a concept of the future. “*Hora Latina*” is different, enjoy it, don't take it personally.

## Language & Communication in Latin America

Trust is an essential element of building relationships with Latinos/Hispanics. Once trust is established, Latinos/Hispanics are much more likely to reveal personal information. Latinos/Hispanics are more likely to trust and bond with a person rather than an agency or company.

- Latino/Hispanic culture is formal.
- When addressing someone you should use “Mr.” and “Mrs.”
- “Please” and “Thank you” are words used with everyone.
- To ignore someone is very rude. When you first see a person during the day, you must always recognize them and say “hello.” Before leaving, you should say “good-bye” and wish them well.
- Latinos/Hispanics prefer face-to-face human interaction.

**Respect is highly valued.** To respect someone means to listen when he or she speaks and follow his or her advice. The elders have a special place in the community because of their wisdom and they are highly respected.

**Religion & spirituality:** Personal devotion to the church is important for many Latinos/Hispanics. They maintain strong beliefs. Catholicism is the primary religion, but more and more Latinos/Hispanics are converting to Protestant Christianity.

**Education:** To Latinos/Hispanics education includes not only what one learns in school, but also manners, behavior and religious beliefs. Education plays a very important role, as persons with higher degrees are respected for their knowledge.

**Health care:** Some members of the Latino/Hispanic community still use traditional herbs or medications from their native homelands.

- The use of home remedies is a common practice in Latin American countries.
- Some countries use the traditional witch doctor called “curandero.”
- Latinos/Hispanics are not used to preventative medicine. They only go to the doctor when they are really sick.
- Mental illness is viewed as “craziness,” and some people are reluctant to seek help because of fear of how their neighbors or families will react.
- Diabetes is a very common illness among the Latino/Hispanic population, and given the nutritional habits of the Latino/Hispanic culture, it is hard to control without very close supervision by professionals.

### **Golden Rule N<sup>o</sup>1: Standards of living vary, especially in Latin America.**

Most participants are coming from a country with a higher standard of living where modern day conveniences are taken for granted.

## **Common Cultural Differences In Europe:**

**Family definitions & flexible expectations:** In Europe, it is not as common to have 3 generations of family members living together. In Spain/Portugal hosts tend to be a widow/widower, a divorcée, single parent or it could be an entire family of five. Your experience with all can be just as rewarding! Western Europeans have a more reserved nature. It may take a while for your hostess/host to warm-up, be persistent and engage them in conversation. Going to your room or staying “out of their way” may be perceived as you don’t want to be bothered.

**Reset your stomach-clocks:** In Spain lunch is eaten between 1-4pm, and is usually the main meal of the day. The evening meal, “dinner” is lighter and served between 8-11pm.

**Macho, macho man...:** Even in Spain/Portugal you will need to take the whistling in stride. Men here are also proud of their machismo.

**City chic:** Europe is very cosmopolitan, and Spaniards and Portuguese usually dress accordingly. In the cities dress is fairly formal (meaning no shorts, but nor do you need suits). You might want to bring something for special occasions or for the evening, as the nightlife is an integral part of everyday European life.

**Driving:** Except in major cities and on super highways, avoid driving at night in Eastern Europe. Night driving can be hazardous because some roads are narrow and winding, and horse-drawn vehicles and bicycles may be encountered at any time on any road.

**Traffic regulations:** Especially those related to driving under the influence of alcohol, traffic regulations are very strict. An international driver's license is usually accepted and, in some cases, required by Eastern European governments. You may obtain an international driver's license from an automobile association.

**Political statements or acts:** In countries where there is political unrest, refrain from political comments and activities that might be construed as interference in the internal affairs of the host country. Avoid photographing or becoming involved in demonstrations.

**Photography:** There are restrictions on photography in Eastern Europe. In general, refrain from photographing military and police installations and personnel as well as scene of civil disorder or other public disturbances. In some countries, also avoid photographing border areas and industrial structures, including harbors, bridges, rail and airport facilities. For more information, consult local authorities or the U.S. embassy or consulate in the country.

**Crime:** One result of the changes taking place in Eastern Europe is an increase in street crime in almost every major city in the region. Car break-ins have become a problem. Some cities have groups of pickpockets that use various gimmicks to distract their victims. Be especially careful on public transportation, in crowded shopping areas, and in all places frequented by tourists. Watch your purse, passport, wallet, travel documents, and other valuables.

**Loss of a passport:** In some locations can mean a wait of a day or more while local authorities process a new exit permit, without which it is impossible to leave the country. It is therefore strongly recommended that you make every effort to safeguard your U.S. passport from loss or theft. Carry a copy of your passport data page with you in a location separate from your passport.

## **Common Cultural Differences in the Middle East**

**Family and honor:** Throughout the Middle East Family and Honor are possibly the two most important cultural aspects. It is important that you are always respectful to those who treat you with respect and that you do your best to accept generous offerings (to a certain extent) as it can be considered rude to refuse. When in discussion, Middle Eastern people will most often side together and it is important not to press any issue to the point of offense.

**Women in society:** A woman's role in society in the modern Middle East can vary depending on location. Major cities may show greater leniency towards women in power but it is important to remember that tradition roles of a woman are still limited. It is also important to respect those around you by dressing properly in public. Clothing should always cover the shoulders and fall below the knee as not to disrespect the general public around you.

**Politics:** Political issues are rife throughout the Middle East and often debated freely. As a Westerner it may be wise to shy away from such conversations as certain opinions may offend your company.

**Religion:** Islam is the foremost religion throughout the Middle East and entails designated prayers throughout the day and vigorous Religious holiday celebrations. While you are never expected to partake in Religious happenings it is very important to be respectful of those who do. In many cases, to dishonor their religion is to dishonor their existence... the result of which does not make for a comfortable vacation.

**Isreal:** A taboo topic throughout most of the Middle East, it is key to remember that many regions do not consider Isreal a state so much as 'occupied Palestine.' If you are traveling through Israel at all, it is wise to avoid presenting authorities with any documents containing Israeli Visa stamps as they may not respond favorably (Israeli authorities are aware of this and willing to provide separate documents if they are informed in advance).

**Homosexuality and public display of affection (PDA):** Much of the Middle East is still very conservative in the Social arena, especially in public. Therefore, it is advisable to refrain from overtly passionate behavior when in public or any flirting with locals. To dishonor a woman or insinuate adultery is still punishable by death in certain regions. Homosexuality as well is not to be discussed or displayed in a public setting as it too is highly punishable under state laws.

### **Golden Rule N<sup>o</sup>2: Keep your expectations realistic.**

The number one reason for unsatisfactory experiences is unrealistic expectations. If you are unsure of something or have a special request, check with us. We'll give you a straight yes or no answer.

## Common Cultural Differences in Asia

**Thailand** - The traditional Thai greeting is called the *wai*. In general, the younger person greets first, by placing the palms together at chest level and bowing slightly. The higher the placement of the fingertips, the greater the respect; the highest *wais* are reserved for monks and royalty. If someone should *wai* you, it is polite to *wai* back (except to children.)

**China** - Bowing or nodding is the common greeting; however, you may be offered a handshake. Wait for the Chinese to offer their hand first.

**India** - *Namaste*, for an Indian it's a way common way of greeting outsiders and elders. Both palms placed together and raised below the face shows respect for others.

**Nepal** - You may accept handshake offered by both sex male or female, but never offer your hand first to women. Instead you do 'Namaskar' Its considered rude for a man to touch a women even shaking a hand, especially married women. Hand shakes are more gentle not strong, so don't feel the person isn't interested, it's just their way.

**Japan** - Bows can be generally divided into three main types: informal, formal, and very formal. Informal bows are made at about a fifteen degree angle and more formal bows at about thirty degrees. Very formal bows are deeper. The most common greetings are *ohayō gozaimasu* or "good morning," used until about 11am but may be used at any time of day if it is the first occasion that day the two people have met; *konnichiwa* which is roughly equivalent to "good day" or "good afternoon" and is used until late afternoon; *konbanwa* or "good evening"; and *oyasuminasai* or "good night."

**Taiwan** - Greetings are formal and the oldest person in a group is always greeted first. Handshakes are the most common form of greeting with foreigners and many Taiwanese look towards the ground as a sign of respect when greeting someone. You need not follow their example as they understand that westerners tend to smile warmly when introduced.

**Korea** - Greeting and saying thank you are very important to Koreans. These words are always said with a bow of the head. The depth of the bow depends on the relative seniority of the two speakers. As a related note, seniority grants one important/preferred status and respect in Korea. And, as such, you may often be asked somewhat personal questions about your age, education and marital status (sometimes-even wealth), these questions are not meant to pry or offend, just to determine your status and how you should be addressed.

**Host families in Asia:** Families can range from parents with their children to having 3 generations living in the same home.

**Customs in business:** Seniority is very important. Instead of addressing the other party as Mr. or Mrs., it is always appropriate to address the other party by his designation i.e. Chairman, Director or Manager. When giving out name cards and business cards, make sure you start with the most senior person before moving down the line. Also ensure that you are handing them the card with both hands and remember that the card you are giving must face the recipient. Gifts are always appreciated if you are meeting someone for the first time, make sure the senior people get a better gift or at least gifts perceived to have a higher value than their junior staff. Formal dinners are common in business situations and may include drinking, karaoke, etc. It is impolite to refuse to take part in this. If your business acquaintances are hosts for the night, all bills will be picked up by them for the night, including all entertainment. It is impolite to fight for the bill or worse, split the bills. Similarly, if you are the host, you are expected to pick up all bills for the night.

**The concept of 'saving face':** Face has to do with the image or credibility of the person you are dealing with. You should never, insult, embarrass, shame, yell at or otherwise demean a person. If you do, they will lose "Face". Awareness of face and its impact is an extremely important cultural issue. In the business world, negotiations should be conducted to assure that the person at the other end of the table maintains face even if the deal should not successfully conclude. Face shows up in many ways and really begins early in life. Chinese children learn it as they are growing up. Parents will not discipline by saying "bad girl" or "naughty boy". They will discipline with "no" or "wrong". As the child grows, face creates a strong pressure for an individual to excel. Because this is such an important issue, you need to train yourself to recognize where this can become an issue, and to avoid having your contact lose face.

**Golden Rule N°3: Respect your hosts.**

If you are going to miss a meal, inform your host family before they have cooked the meal.  
If you will be out late, tell your family so that they don't worry.

## Common Cultural Differences in Africa

When traveling through Africa it is very important to respect local traditions. There are so many customs and cultures that it's smart to observe the people around you and try to follow their conduct. In general modesty and respect are the most honored social habits.

- **Clothing Statements:** Please be respectful with this issue, especially in Muslim countries. It is not acceptable for people, especially foreign women to wear revealing clothing. For women this means no low-cut shirts or even shorts. For men this means keeping your shirt on.
- **Greeting:** It is very important to greet someone before speaking to them. Ask how they are doing, about their family, animals, etc. before getting to the topic at hand. Family and community, as topics of conversation, are much more important than material possessions or personal interests.
- **Which Hand?** In many countries the right hand is used for eating while the left hand is used for wiping. This means always shake and pass things with your right hand.
- **Who's Paying?** When inviting someone to a social event it is expected that the person doing the inviting will pay for everything. Be careful not to be rude by trying to go Dutch.
- **In Public:** Great displays of anger, or being loud, is not advised. Generally drinking alcohol and smoking in public are looked down upon. Just pay attention to who's around you. If you notice that everyone is joining in the fun it's probably OK.
- **Catcalling:** Women should be prepared for catcalling by men. This is usually harmless. Just ignore it.

**Ghana** - When greeting a group of people in Ghana it is important to greet all members present and shake hands going right to left; never left to right. Never shake with you left hand or touch the back of your hand to someone's palm, this is considered an insult.

**Kenya** - Try not to point at anyone, as this is considered rude. The best way to indicate something or someone is to nod your head in their direction.

**Tanzania** - Do not be offended if no one thanks you for anything, it's just not the custom to thank verbally.

### Golden Rule N<sup>o</sup>4: Take the differences in stride.

If everything were exactly the same as what you are used to, where would the fun be? A few weeks or months with some inconvenience makes you appreciate your own life in a different way. More importantly, think of all the great stories you'll have!

## Staying Safe

Part of cultural adjustment and culture shock is learning how to stay safe. Now that you are actually in your host country, these are some things worth reviewing and heeding.

- Know your surroundings. Keep your eyes open, stay alert and trust your instincts. This is one of the best ways to ensure your safety. If you feel the situation around you is unsafe or if you see a suspicious person, turn and go the other way or put some distance between yourself and the situation. Don't get on the elevator with a "shady" person. Feel free to be cautious—don't worry about other people's feelings, worry about yourself.
- You'll likely want to hit the nightclubs in your host city, but remember that staying sober is much safer than drinking too much. If you're intoxicated, you won't have the same capability to recognize what's going on around you. Staying sober means staying safer.
- Blend in with the crowd. If you've ever traveled abroad before, you already know Americans are easy to spot in a crowd. They're usually dressed like tourists – with fanny packs, t-shirts with names or artwork of American cities, like New York, and cameras dangling around their necks. Of course, this is just a generalization, but the point is you don't want to stand out in the crowd. When you're overseas, be inconspicuous: don't be loud and obnoxious, dress or act like a tourist. Tourists are often the target of scam artists and pickpockets. By blending in, you'll protect yourself and your wallet.

**Tip:** Be careful when you meet people. Don't give your trust away too soon. Of course, you want to make friends but just be cautious about it. Keep in mind that not everyone is always as genuine as they may seem. Don't give away your address or phone number to people that you just met.

- Instead of hanging out at the local McDonalds or Pizza Hut, or a place where a large contingent of Americans are known to frequent, head to local restaurants and establishments. You'll not only blend in, but you'll also get to experience the real culture of your host country.
- Don't carry large sums of money. Don't open your wallet so people can see, and flash your money. If you do, you're just inviting trouble. A good thing to keep in mind is to only carry as much money as you can afford to lose, should your wallet be stolen. The safest way to carry money overseas is by using traveler's checks.

## Staying Safe, continued...

- Know where the hospital and police station are. This will prove to be helpful if you run into an emergency and need help. Make sure you know what the local equivalent of “911” is.
- Avoid crowds when possible. The more people around you, the greater the chances of having your wallet pickpocketed. However, there are times when you can’t avoid crowds – such as on public transportation and local events – so just stay alert and keep your belongings (purse, backpack, etc) close to you to prevent pickpockets.
- Safety in numbers. If you’re going out, go with friends, especially at night. Never leave with somebody you don’t know. At night, stay in well-lit places. When you do go someplace alone, be sure you tell a friend where you’ll be and when you expect to return. Then make sure you check in with that person when you return, so he/she doesn’t worry.

**Tip:** Always have photocopies of the front page of your passport. The last thing you want to have happen is losing your passport without having a copy of that front page. (You should also leave a copy or two at home with your family and email yourself a scanned copy if possible.) If you carry your passport with you, make sure you keep it in a place that a pickpocket can’t easily reach. Or, to be even safer, leave it in your dorm, apartment or room and carry only a photocopy with you.

- Don’t do drugs. Every country has drug laws – do you know your host country’s laws? Some countries have harsh penalties for being caught with drugs – ranging from lengthy imprisonment to death (yikes!). Regardless, it’s better to play it safe than sorry. Keep in mind that when you’re in the host country, you must abide by their laws. Don’t litter, don’t put up graffiti, etc.
- Never leave your bags, your purse or any of your belongings unattended. If you must have someone watch your bags, make sure you know the person well. Don’t trust someone you don’t know, or have just met, to watch your things.

Following these safety tips will help ensure your study abroad experience is the best – and most worry-free – it can be.

## Returning to the United States: Re-entry

By the time you're ready to return to the United States, you'll already be fully acclimated to your host country. You'll have made new friends and adjusted to a new way of life. Returning home – or re-entry – is going to mean readjusting to the United States. After all, you've most definitely changed since you left, and others may not realize this. Because you've changed, you may find your relationships with people in the States have changed as well. Having spent a semester or a year (or more) abroad is going to make you view the U.S. through a new set of eyes, and you may not always like what you see.

### Some of the Symptoms of Reverse Homesickness Include:

- Becoming easily bored
- Feeling lonely and isolated
- Depression
- Frustrated because your friends and family aren't as eager to hear about your experience as you are to tell them about it.
- Missing your host country and the friends that you made there

Keep in mind that readjusting can take time – you may get frustrated, which is normal, but don't worry. As time passes, you'll become more accustomed to life in the United States as the person you now are.

### To Deal with Reverse Homesickness:

- **Be prepared.** It's going to take time to readjust to life in the United States. Don't expect everything to be the same as it was when you left – both you and the people around you will have changed. Be prepared for the time it's going to take to readjust.
- **You'll probably have matured, and your values and beliefs may have changed.** You're likely not the same person you were when you left. Your friends and family may not be prepared for those changes, so give them time to adjust.
- **Realize homesickness is normal.** Don't be surprised if you become homesick for your host country. After all, you've spent an extended period there and formed a bond with both the people and the country. Keep in touch with friends overseas. You might also try to find organizations or clubs in your area with international members, or members from your host country. This will help ease your reverse homesickness and help you stay connected with the international community. Look at photos and remember the fun you had, but also remember the fun that you are going to have at home!

## Tips to Make a Smooth Return to the United States

- **Share your experiences.** Many people who travel or study abroad often return home with a ton of great stories, and want to share their experiences. Unfortunately, many find that most people aren't willing to listen. If this happens to you, try asking your friends or loved ones about what has been going on in their lives first. Then, start telling them about your experiences.
- **Take time to catch-up.** Things will have changed in the U.S., especially culturally. You'll likely have to catch-up on the current events and latest news, the hottest and newest television shows, the latest trends, what everyone's talking about and the list goes on. Enjoy yourself – it's as though you're relearning your own culture! Also, take the time to get in touch with friends and family and to catch up on them.
- **Don't compare home and your host country.** Playing the comparison game with family and friends isn't going to endear you; in fact, it may anger or put your family and friends on the defensive. Don't completely praise your host country while downing the U.S. and vice-versa. Try to give a balanced view of both for your loved ones. Put yourself in your shoes: think about how you'd feel if a friend or loved one returned from abroad and constantly praised his host country while pointing out the U.S.'s flaws. It would probably make you feel defensive, right?
- **Talk with others who have studied abroad.** You're not the first person to deal with the challenges of re-entry, and you certainly won't be the last. Reach out to others who also studied abroad.
- **Journal.** Don't stop writing in your journal because you're returned home. Continue the story. When you feel homesick, open your journal and read what you wrote while you were abroad. Then write how you feel today, reading back on your experiences.
- **Stay involved.** If you are in college, ask your Study Abroad Office if you can volunteer to help other students prepare for their study abroad experience and help students who are returning home. You can help students who are experiencing the same range of emotions you did. Being able to help will also keep you connected to your own experience.

## Conclusion

Cultural adjustment and are normal occurrences that almost everybody who studies abroad will experience. By being prepared with our tips and strategies, you have laid the groundwork to combat culture shock, homesickness, and even reverse homesickness. The most important thing to remember is that all of these things are normal and you are not alone!

Another important reminder: Keep up with your new language! Your trip gave you the most amazing new skill—a whole new language. Impress your friends with your new skills. Join groups with members that speak your new tongue, so that you can get some practice. Take your friends or family out to a restaurant and show off your skills by ordering everything in the native language. Have fun and keep working hard to hone your language skills. Another thing – now that you know two languages, learning a third will be a piece of cake! Why not try out another language—you'll be one hot commodity in the working world!