

Fulfilling Your Wanderlust:
A College Students' Guide to Studying Abroad and Independent Travel

By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Honors Thesis

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Preface

The purpose of this document is to serve as a guide to studying abroad and independent travel for college students, aside from it being a required work for the University of South Florida St. Petersburg Honors Program. It is a working outline for an eventual E-Book. My plans with this outline are to update it annually as I gain more experience and knowledge that will contribute to develop this potential E-Book into the best version it can be.

The document is divided into two parts – the first covers study abroad and all the details accompanying one, while the second discusses planning and preparing for an independent travel trip. What I hope for my readers to get out of this document is, overall, a desire to travel. While I know that pursuing either a study abroad or an independent travel trip is not an easy, my hope is that my guide will help to alleviate any worry or doubt a student might have when considering one of these travel opportunities throughout their college career.

In conclusion, I know from experience that deciding to travel is no easy decision and the process can cause quite a few headaches. That is why I wrote this guide – in hopes that it will simplify the study abroad and independent processes and in turn get more college students interested in traveling. Using this as an outline for a future E-Book, I hope to have many more of my own experiences and to hear feedback from students who have had similar experiences to add more – and better – details about what students should and need to know before traveling during college. Finally, I hope this book can serve as a resource for any student – regardless of their age, major, or interests – and can help make their college career unique.

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Introduction

My name is Elizabeth Roslonowski, and just like you I am a college student. I am studying at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (USFSP) for my B.S. degree in Global Business and I will graduate in May 2015. I transferred in Fall 2014 from Eastern Florida State College in Melbourne, Florida where I earned my Associates of Arts degree. Currently I work as a Resident Assistant at USFSP, and I find myself encouraging my residents to study abroad, or travel in general, quite often.

While at USFSP, I decided to participate in the University Honors Program, and that required me to write an Undergraduate Thesis. When deciding what to write, my study abroad and self travel experiences inspired me to write a book that will help guide and inspire my fellow class mates and college students to come. Traveling can be one of the most rewarding experiences in a student's academic career - whether it is done through study abroad or independent travel. However, it is an experience that more than likely will seem daunting at first. The first thing you need to do when you want to travel is think about what kind of experience you would like to have by asking yourself where and when you would like to go, for how long, and what do you want to study - if you choose to pursue a study abroad. Once you have answered these questions, you more or less will know whether you want to travel with the university on a study abroad program or do a trip independently. Then, you can start planning accordingly! So before you read any further into this book, look over these commonly asked questions to better help you in your college travel decisions.

Where Do I Want to Go?

Just think of the saying - "the world is your oyster!" No matter if you decide to choose a study abroad program or a solo trip, you will have your limitations - but for a young college student, there is a wide range of options available to fulfill your wanderlust.

In order to decide where you want to go, I would first suggest you figure out the purpose of your trip. In our case is it to experience a study abroad program to receive credits for school, or is to just go and see the world? Next, close your eyes and imagine the place you want to be. Like I mentioned earlier, I dreamt of being in Paris looking up at the Eiffel Tower lit up at night. So I knew that I wanted to be in Paris, and I went. Finally, decide what you want to experience abroad. People vary as to what type of traveler they are. Some are strictly a true tourist and want to go to Paris for culture, food, sights, language, and shopping, while others may want to go to find an inspiration for personal and artistic endeavors.

By now you should have an idea of where you'd like to travel. If you are thinking of going on a study abroad program, however, be mindful that there may or may not be programs available in your desired area of the world, which is a negative aspect about studying abroad. Nevertheless, there is always the option of traveling on your own! Here, you really can go anywhere. But the most common hurdle for young travelers is coming up with money to fund these trips. But do not take these negatives to heart, as the programs vary from university to university and if you are as dedicated to traveling the world as I am, your parents may surprise you and pay to send you abroad!

When Do I Want to Go?

Whether you end up going or not it is always smart to plan early, as everyone's schedule is different. As travelling or studying abroad is an important decision, this is something you really need to think about (Baker, W.).

If you are thinking of participating in a study abroad program it is always a good idea to go to your major's academic advisor and talk about your desire to go abroad so they can help you make room in your schedule (Baker, W.). The earlier you have this conversation the easier it is to make sure you stay on track for graduation. Students who are interested in summer programs are welcomed at any stage or level of their education. Some universities - like USF - may require, however, that students be at least 18 years old at the time of participation; certain exceptions can be made with parental consent for younger students who may be enrolled. Students who are looking to go abroad for a semester must be of at least a sophomore standing the first semester they are away. Graduating seniors may not go abroad in their last semester as grades often take two or more months to properly transfer from overseas. Therefore, sophomore and junior year are the most popular times for students to study abroad for a full semester (Baker, W.).

My study abroad program to Costa Rica was a program in Summer 2014. I was a transfer student at USF St. Petersburg so this meant I was travelling the summer after my junior year and this was one of my last options to go unless I wanted to do a semester abroad. A semester abroad would not work for me because I needed to stay at USFSP to take specific credits in order to graduate on time in May 2015.

Traveling on your own is less restrictive when it comes to deciding when to go. There is no guideline that says this trip is happening in this specific week - no questions asked. Really the biggest decision on when to go on your solo trip abroad is when you have no outstanding requirements back home. Make sure that you're not interrupting any classes or schoolwork when you leave because you will want to enjoy being abroad - not being abroad doing schoolwork in a hotel room. Also, if you are working, make sure your employer is flexible to work around taking time off to travel.

When I went abroad to Europe I left in May 2014, a week or so after my study abroad to Costa Rica. I had decided not to take any summer classes, except for the study abroad course so I had nothing to interfere. Even though I had to take more classes in the upcoming Fall and Spring semesters, I could get the most out of experiences abroad by leaving my summer open. I was working for my boyfriends' mother at her jewelry store off and on that summer. But she had known for several months leading up to my trip that I would be gone and she had no problem with me leaving.

In sum, there's never a perfect time for anything. But college is an opportune time to travel as study abroad is made easily and readily available to students and with possible summers off you could even plan a trip of your own.

How Long Do I Want to Be Gone?

A good first place to start for most people is determining the desired length of the trip.

Study Abroad programs vary in length and each have its own advantages but you should first and foremost consider what type of experience you want to have. Summer programs, which are the most common study abroad programs, offer students a taste of a different culture and can easily fit in with a student's schedule and responsibilities at home (Baker, W.). These programs range anywhere from a week, to three weeks. Sometimes they can be longer but it really all depends on your program and university. Semester programs, on the other hand, allow a student to fully integrate into a host culture, and can be more cost effective in the long run (Baker, W.).

Summer programs, in general, can range anywhere from a single week to nine during the May to August period. Program dates vary but each are designed to maximize student exposure to their host cultures while providing an intensive academic study (Baker, W.). My study abroad to Costa Rica was a week-long summer program. Our trip director held two pre-departure lectures on campus and then one after the trip in order to review material for an exam and give us guidelines for the project that went along with the trip. In most cases, the trip director will do the same for your summer program.

Semester programs take place for the duration of Fall and Spring terms. These programs allow students to truly integrate into their host cultures and attend institutes, colleges, and universities overseas with other foreign and local students. In most cases, students may take courses from a range of majors as varied as the catalogue of their own university. It also allows you the opportunity to get to know

the people and culture as well as see and experience your discipline from a different perspective (Baker, W.).

When I participated in the study abroad program to Costa Rica at USFSP, it was one week long. I felt like this was perfect amount of time because the program was so well organized and we got to experience so many different aspects of Costa Rica. We were studying BOP (Bottom of the Pyramid Markets) in Costa Rica and during our trip we met with several businesses that are integral players to Costa Rica's economy. But even with all the work, we still got to play in a short weeks time. We had excursions to natural hot springs, volcanoes, and waterfalls.

Independent travel is open to however long you want - and are able - to travel. Again, since there is no structure to this trip except for the one you make, you have to look at your own availability and requirements and work around those to determine the length. It is true, for both studying abroad and going solo, the longer you are available to experience a country, the more you will get out of it. A week is about an average length of time that someone will plan to travel on their own, budget and time-off permitting.

I knew when I went abroad on my own that I wanted to experience several different countries. In order to get the most out of each, I would need to stay abroad for a decent amount of time. I ended up choosing 4 weeks and allotted different periods of stay to each city I was visiting based on the attractions I wanted to see there. In the end, I spent too many days in some cities where the overall length of my trip could have been cut down, but it was a learning experience!

What Do I Want to Study?

This next question only applies to those who are thinking of participating on a study abroad program. Depending on what academic requirements you are looking to fulfill can greatly influence the program you select (Baker, W.).

Summer programs have a variety of available courses but can be limited. For example, there might be a limited amount of faculty members available to plan and lead a study abroad program due to other commitments. Students should check the individual program pages and descriptions to see what classes are offered on these shorter programs. Also, they should always speak with the academic department they are looking to get credit from to be sure to see how the summer courses will transfer back to their university (Baker, W.).

Semester programs offer students the greatest selection of courses, as the entire course catalogue of the foreign school is normally open to students studying for a semester or a year. That being said, students may be limited in language of instruction in the case of countries where English is not the primary language; in most, courses will be available but it is wise to double check (Baker, W.).

First and foremost, you have to look at your available classes. That is why going to an academic advisor early in the planning process is very important. If you have decided on a major, I would advise looking at the available programs within that major and see how they fit into your classes. There will be both semester and summer programs available, for the most part so this will help you decide what program to choose and therefore what to study. If you have not decided on a major yet, I feel that this gives you even more freedom in choosing your program. A few

residents, since I have become a Resident Assistant, have come to me inquiring about study abroad but were hesitant to look for any programs because they have not yet declared a major. I suggested that they look at the available programs first and find some that interest them. This may help them decide on a major after they participate on a program.

Since I started at USFSP, I knew I was studying Global Business and there was a required study abroad in that major. The available programs during the summer that I could participate in were located in Costa Rica and China. Since I had an independent trip also planned, the study abroad in Costa Rica fit my schedule better and was geared more towards my interests. After going and meeting with the different agricultural business in Costa Rica, it has now narrowed down the types of careers I want to work in after graduation.

In conclusion, not having declared a major should stop you from going on a study abroad. Sometimes going on an experience like a study abroad will help you decide what to study for the remainder of your college career.

Part I: Studying Abroad

My study abroad experience is not very extensive – meaning that I haven't been on twenty-something trips or something like that. But participating on a study abroad is something that I am extremely passionate about after having experienced the ones that I did. I encourage everyone in college, if they can, to partake on one because it can open you up to a world of experiences and change the way you look at things and even help shape your career after college.

I first went on a pseudo-study abroad during high school. It was a trip offered for students who were in a certain level of the foreign language classes, and I qualified for the trip. It was held over the spring break of my sophomore year of high school and included a trip to Paris, Barcelona, and Madrid. However, this trip did not count for any credits but it did give me a taste for going abroad. That is also how this desire for travel was sparked and when I knew I needed to go abroad again while I was in college.

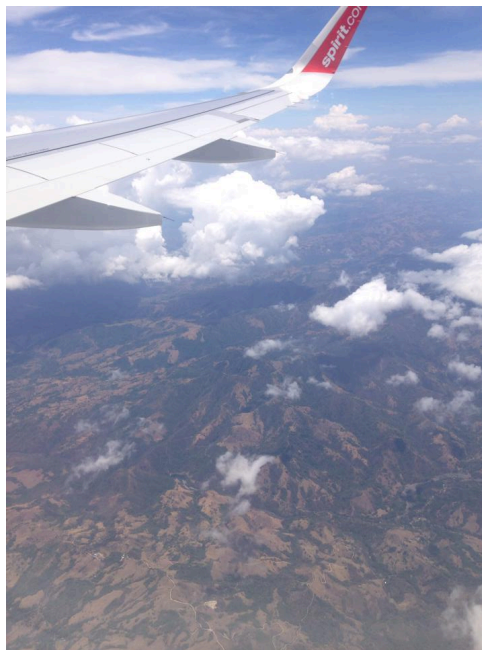


When I started college at USFSP, I was a junior because I had transferred from a community college in my hometown of Melbourne, FL. Therefore, I had to declare my major early on since I was coming in with so many credits. I chose to look into the Global Business degree and found out that it required you to participate on a Study Abroad. This sold me on the major and I was finally getting to go back abroad after all those years since my first overseas experience in high school.

The program I chose was for one week to Costa Rica. The focus of the program was on doing business in bottom-of-the-pyramid, or developing, markets. The trip itinerary included on site visits to businesses in Costa Rica, and some that would come to us and speak to us at the hotels in the banquet halls. Of course the trip was not all work, and we had opportunities to play. This included climbing the side of a volcano, a visit to natural hot springs, a tour of the coffee plantations, and spending the final day on an excursion of our choice.

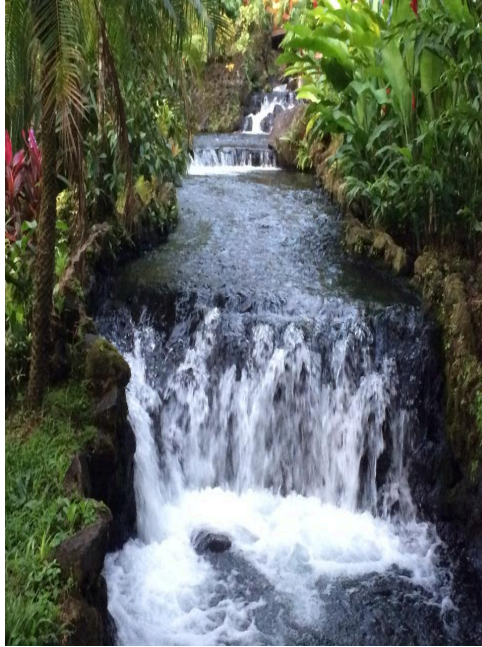


The trip came and went, and it was better than I could have imagined. I will admit now, I was nervous going to a country that was still developing. After all, I had only ever been to Spain and France and my standards for international travel were set high after that. The way that the program was set up with company visits gave me, as a global business student, a lot of potential opportunities to apply with these companies in the future. Also, in just a week's time, we learned so much about the country's culture, education system, government, and lifestyle because these companies, which we visited, had to know their customer base and in return shared their knowledge with us.



Of course, when we weren't meeting with companies and working, per se, the adventuring was even better! From the rainforest to the beach, Costa Rica has a rich biodiversity and it is no wonder why it makes for such popular vacationing destination. The hot springs were an experience that I would have never done myself if it had not been for going on this trip. Also, for my optional excursion I

chose to hike through the rainforest along a trail to see a number of natural waterfalls.



All of these experiences are the ones I will remember for a lifetime. And if I can speak for my classmates who were on the trip with me, I would say they feel the same way as me. To conclude, a study abroad is work and it is play. There is a process to get there, but it is one that has such a great reward, and many more memories to go along with it.



Chapter 1: Choosing Your Program and the Registration Process

If you have decided that participating on a Study Abroad program is right for you, then the first step is to choose a specific program. Earlier in this book, questions such as where would you want to go, for how long, and what would you like to study were posed to help you get ideas of where you might want to study abroad. At USF St. Petersburg, and similar to most other college campuses, a website is devoted to providing the available study abroad programs for each semester. These options can be filtered by term, country, region, area of study, credits offered and more so that each student looking for their ideal program can find one. Sometimes this can help but if there are just so many places that interest you in such a small amount of time, there are other ways to find the best program for you.

One is to look at your area of study and find programs that match with that. Sometimes if your program is specialized or university is small, this could end up making your search somewhat difficult. But do not dismay – another way to get the study abroad experience is to look at doing exchange programs with other international universities. At USF St. Petersburg, the exchange programs that are offered are generally for the length of the fall and spring terms, but occasionally can be offered during the summer. All in all, it takes time and research to find a program that will align with your field of study.

Next, if you have not yet declared a major, then look back at your classes that you have already taken and find a few that speak to you. By narrowing down the topics you like most, this can help narrow down programs that focus only on, for

example, art, marine science, or business. This can help in the long run, too, by deciding your major or field of study for the remainder of your college career.

It is best to act early when choosing a study abroad program because the available spaces in each program can fill up and the registration processes may take time. However, do not get dismayed by the idea of a lengthy, detailed, registration process. A current study abroad applicant, Walter Acosta, says:

“My experience on the process of studying abroad has been one that has had some minor challenges along the way. My professor Dr. Merchant to begin is an excellent professor and I did enjoy his classes and always looked forward to it. I had found out about the program through Dr. Merchant as had told us all about the trip and had a fellow classmate that attended in 2014, come and speak to us first hand about the program.

This study abroad program will have been the first time I've traveled outside of the country. With that I had to apply for my first passport, but first had to get all of my documents in order and take a passport photo. Going and filling all the paperwork for the passport was simple and painless if you have everything in order. After that, it is just a six-week wait until it arrived. In the meantime I started the registration and application process, first by meeting with an academic advisor and receiving the first forms that needed to be signed. I then contacted Dr. Merchant, my program leader, and informed him of what I had dropped off for him to sign and review. Once receiving that you have to submit it back to a counselor to sign the form. Once that was all completed, I submitted everything to the study abroad office to review.

Furthermore, I had started the application process that has to be done online. There were a lot of rules and forms that have to be read and electronically signed as well as sign up for a pre-departure meeting that is required to help better prepare students for their study abroad experience.

After all that is completed and you are accepted into the program, you have to pay your deposit to secure your spot. From that point on, it's smooth sailing and just submitting any further information that may be required as time goes on. It is honestly a painless process if it is kept up with during the whole process. At the end you will be studying abroad and enjoying your time in a new country and having a great time seeing different parts of the world!"

Chapter 2: Preparing to Depart

Once you have completed the registration process, probably the only thing you can think about now is packing and leaving for your study abroad. But the preparations for a study abroad trip are far more extensive than just packing a suitcase. Since a university facilitates a study abroad program, you have to prepare both individually and collectively with the host university. Each university has their own way in preparing the students for their trip so there are no cookie-cutter instructions, per se, to include in the book as far as what to expect from the university. However, in this chapter we will look at the individual preparation process during certain time periods leading up to your departure since this is pretty standard for each traveler, despite your study abroad program.

Again, your individual preparations are much more than packing all that you own into a suitcase a few nights before you depart. Preparations can start as early as 6 to 9 months before leaving! During this 6 to 9 month time period, it would be wise to familiarize yourself with the host-country's language and culture – especially if you have never been there before (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). Looking up videos on the Internet on sites such as YouTube can be great starting points. Also just a simple search on your country will bring up lots of fun facts and interesting information about your country that could be beneficial to know. More than likely, your campus library will also have books on the country you will be visiting, too. Also, the faculty member leading your study abroad program or other faculty members who have lead them are great personal resources and can help with making you aware of the possibility of culture shock. Finally, and most importantly,

it would be wise to apply for you visa(s) and passport (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). Even if you are still unsure at this point in time if you will actually end up going on a study abroad program, it is better to be safe than sorry. The processes for visas and passports can sometimes take up to 6 months so get started on this early!

3 to 6 months before, the idea of departing on trip is starting to become more real. First and foremost, keep watch on your G.P.A., because many programs have a minimum level and will not let you participate if yours falls below. Another wise idea would be to apply for an international credit card, such as offered by American Express, Visa, or Mastercard (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). A huge benefit of an international credit card is that it could be more widely accepted at places than other credit cards. Finally, if your study abroad or exchange program is a semester long one, try and find things that you are interested in, in the host country. For example, if you are interested in soccer, look into different club or teams that might be in your host country. This will help you to make connections abroad and keep you engaged in the culture (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”).

Now you are 1 to 3 months prior to departure. This is the time to notify important people of your approaching trip – this would include landlords, employers, etc. (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). Next, with confirmation that everyone who should know about your trip does, it would be a good time to book your flight. Always do some research to get the best flight you can. Sometimes your study abroad director or program leader may have a particular flight in mind so be sure to double check with them before booking your flight. Finally, it would be

wise to sign up for a comprehensive physical to receive vaccinations and immunizations if they may be needed in the country you will be visiting (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). Also, your study abroad registration may ask to include your medical records and this would be a good opportunity to get a copy of that, but in any case, you should receive a copy to keep it with you while traveling to be safe.

With only a few weeks left before your departure, the task list may get a little more overwhelming. But my best piece of advice to you is to let it stress you out because you are doing all of these things to ensure you have the best possible time while abroad. First, if you need to, stock up on any prescriptions you may need while you are abroad. This includes prescription drugs, contacts, and even eye glasses in case you lose or break them. In any case, getting a copy of your prescriptions would be advised to have with you if you will need to refill them while there as well (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). Next is to look into purchasing medical and travelers insurance for your time abroad. Medical insurance is often times included in the study abroad program fees; so before you purchase it, look to see if you already have it. Travelers insurance is there to cover the replacement costs of lost or stolen items (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). More often than not, this is something you will have to buy outside of your program fees, but if it were something you are interested in having, your program director would probably be the best source in helping you find the best insurance. Finally, if you are studying abroad for an extended period of time, consider filling out a

change-of-address form. This will forward all of your mail to your permanent address while abroad (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”).

The countdown is coming close to an end and there is only one week left before you leave! Start by exchanging your currency for the local cash of the country you will be staying in. \$200 is the recommended starting amount and if you get a credit card that is able to work worldwide you should be just fine. Another tip – remember to ask for smaller bills rather than larger ones when exchanging currency (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”)! Next thing to do is to confirm your flight. Make sure that you will have a ride to the airport and that your flight is in order. Thirdly, consider purchasing a power adapter or converter. Most likely you will be bringing a laptop and cell phone with you abroad, and in order to charge them, you will need a power adapter to use your charger cords. Finally, you can start packing! A good way to do this is to put everything you think will need into your suitcase and take everything out and separate it into two categories – essential and sentimental. Once you have all of the essentials packed, see if you can carry it all easily on your own, and if you can’t, it is a sign that you need to let more go (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). However, by now, packing should be pretty easy since you should have an idea of the culture, climate, and customs.

The night before your trip is a good time to double-check all of your preparations you have done thus far. Also, be sure to re-confirm your flight online and make sure everything is on time, you know which airport you are going to, how to get there, and that you have a ride. Packing your carry-on bag the night before is also advised. In here you should consider packing your passport, airline ticket if

printed online, any emergency contact information, a change of clothes incase your flight is delayed, toiletries, wallet, cash and credit cards, documents, and valuables (“An Essential Study Abroad Checklist”). These are just standard and common suggestions but anything that you may readily need is suggested to go into your carry-on bag.

With all of this done and completed you will be all set to leave for your study abroad! It may seem overwhelming reading it at first, and you are not alone. Traveling abroad for any length of time is definitely a lot of work but it is an experience that is worth a lifetime. Since it can be overwhelming, use the simplified the checklist at the end of the chapter to help guide you during the months leading up to you trip to ensure that you are fully prepared for your study abroad program!