Spring 5-1-2012

Journey: Students' Perspectives on Studying Abroad

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Recommended Citation
Tjornehoj, Rachel, "Journey: Students' Perspectives on Studying Abroad" (2012). Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects. 134.
https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/134

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Between each short weekend trips, individual encounters on the street, comparisons between the United States and different countries, and thousands of photos, I can never tell the full story of exactly what studying abroad was for me. While I can’t share everything I did abroad for a semester in London and a semester in Santiago, Chile, I can say it was an unforgettable experience. As a tourist, I saw places I never thought I would and places I have always dreamed of visiting. As a student, I examined the United States from a different point of view and took advantage of classes in a different context. As a young adult, I became more independent and learned to face new experiences and challenges.

After returning from my year abroad, I started work on my Honors Capstone project. I choose to combine my abroad experiences and my graphic design major to create this magazine about positive study abroad experiences. I asked students to do exactly what I said can’t be done: tell me something about their study abroad experience in a short article. I worked with other students who have studied abroad with different programs and in different countries to help them share their stories of studying abroad. Each one had a different way of telling their story from illustrations to photos to interviews to an article they wrote. I compiled their experiences to create a varied image of what studying abroad can be.

Thank you to everyone who shared a story with me to make this magazine a possibility. Thank you also to my advisors and the Renée Crown Honors Program at Syracuse University program for their help throughout the Capstone process.

- Rachel Tjornehoj
Each year, 2,200 students study abroad through SU Abroad’s different semester, summer, short term, and World Partner programs. The programs invite students from Syracuse University and other universities to experience studying in another country. Syracuse University offers center-based programs in Florence, London, Santiago, Strasbourg, France, Beijing, Hong Kong, Istanbul, and Madrid. Students also have an opportunity to study abroad through other non-Syracuse programs, known as World Partner programs. According to SU Abroad, all of its programs have a liberal arts focus, allowing students to focus on their core requirements while they are abroad. This focus, they said, allows students from all majors to study abroad. Most students who study abroad, however, are architecture, business, or liberal arts majors, especially international relations or political science majors.

SU Abroad said there are many benefits to studying abroad. Students usually continue to mature and develop. Wendy Viggiano, a recruitment specialist with SU Abroad, said. They understand themselves better, become more independent, and become more well-rounded. In addition, Viggiano said that students gain “a different perspective of their own culture.”

Studying abroad provides more than just self-development benefits. SU Abroad noted its importance in career development as well. Students learn to be more flexible and adapt to different situations. Viggiano said that many students discover new interests that inspire them to change their major or pursue a second major or minor. She suggested students study abroad earlier in their college career, so they have the time to complete a different major. Most students wait until their junior year to study abroad. She suggests going abroad in your sophomore year, if you can.

As students consider studying abroad, Michael Calo, the Associate Director for SU Abroad, said, “Just do it.” It may seem intimidating or difficult to do, but he stressed the benefits of studying abroad. SU Abroad emphasized that the opportunity is accessible to most majors and is more affordable than many students think.
Since high school, Mitchell knew she wanted to study abroad. Before coming to Syracuse University, she had spent time in New Zealand and Australia and hosted an Italian exchange student. With all of the requirements she had to fulfill, Mitchell decided to take advantage of the short-term study abroad options SU Abroad offers. As a result, she was able to take advantage of three different, short-term programs.

The summer after her sophomore year, Mitchell had decided that she was going to take classes over the summer, but wanted to see if she could do an abroad class as well. Her first stop: London. As a theater minor, she found a class that satisfied both the requirements for her minor and another graduation requirement: Inside the London Theater. During the class, the professor brought producers and actors to talk to the class and together they saw 12 shows during the three-week program. In total, Mitchell saw 25 shows in 21 days. “It changed my outlook on theater,” she said. Before going to London, Mitchell would only go see Broadway shows. She was able to experience different types of shows in London from the West End to Fringe productions. Now she is more willing to go to new and different shows. Although she loved the theater, she didn’t get to experience anything else. “I didn’t really do things than just theater, and the theater was great,” she said. She knew she wanted to go back.

Back in Syracuse, Mitchell started to think about choosing classes again. Meeting with her adviser to discuss her nutrition minor, her adviser said there was a class that would fulfill a requirement and included a short trip to Florence. “So here I go, I get to fill another requirement,” Mitchell said. Mitchell’s experience in Florence was a 10-day class trip with three days in the country working on a farm. She said the trip included a wide range of experiences. At times, it felt very touristy since they stayed in a hotel and everything was scheduled for them. During their three days in the country, however, Mitchell remembers it felt more like a homestay. Unlike her first trip to abroad, Mitchell was traveling with students she had been in class with all semester. As soon as the Florence program ended, Mitchell was on a plane to London.

This time, the focus wasn’t theater. Instead, it was a class called London 2012: Global Games, Local Perspective. “This time, I wanted to do more of London,” she said as she started her six-week program. While she took advantage of sights such as Hyde Park, Mitchell also found activities through Twitter. Through the Hard Rock Café’s Twitter, for example, she found out it was its 40th birthday, so she convinced her class to go eat at the Café.

Looking back on all of her experiences abroad, Mitchell offers a little advice for students considering studying abroad. “Do it,” Mitchell said after all of her experiences abroad. “You have to just go and do it. Yes, it’s scary the day before, but you have to just go.” Even if you can’t go abroad for a semester, she said there are plenty of opportunities for the summer or short-term programs. Like Mitchell, you can even take advantage of more than one program.

With all of the requirements for two majors and three minors, Eilish Mitchell could have had trouble studying abroad. Instead, she carefully researched programs to find creative ways to fulfill all of her requirements. With her research, Mitchell was able to go abroad not just once, but three times.
When Keith Rice thought about studying abroad, he thought about all of the new experiences he would have in London, England. Apart from traveling, Rice knew he still had to go to class, but he wanted to take advantage of the unique classes that London had to offer. “I wanted classes that would truly make the most of my European location, so classes like an Ethnic History of Britain and Food, Culture and Identity were ideal,” Rice said. One class that really gave Rice a new perspective wherever he went, however, was Introduction to Photography.

“I’ve never been very good at remembering to pull out my camera and take pictures in general, so I was glad to have this class force me to capture what I saw,” he said. As he traveled from London to Barcelona to Edinburgh to Rome, Rice had an excuse to take lots of photos to help with his class and to remember his travels.
Left: Albert Memorial in London's Hyde Park // Top: Line at Oktoberfest in Munich, Germany // Bottom: Guitarist in Barcelona, Spain
“This is China” became the title of one of my Facebook albums, my favorite Twitter hashtag, and the subject line of most of my emails. It was one of my most common thoughts and most frequently uttered phrases during my study abroad trip to Beijing, China in the spring semester of 2011.
I would whisper “TIC” to a friend as we were squished into a subway car at rush hour, or when we walked past an 87-year-old man who cracked open a bottle of beer with his two front teeth, or when a woman on the bus came over and asked to touch my blond hair.

Those three simple words allowed us foreigners to recognize something in China that was just plain shocking, as if to say “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” But “TIC” served as more than just a detector of humorous or awkward moments. It helped us identify not only materialistic and surface differences between the United States and China, but also the core differences between the two countries — values, identity, and goals.

When I first thought about studying in Beijing, my parents said, “But it’s so unsafe!” And I have to admit, I was scared too. But my fear was primarily based off of what I didn’t know. My impressions of China were from CNN stories, what my Chinese roommate told me, and the Disney movie “Mulan” — not the best sources of information.

After researching crime in China and having a few conversations with the program director, I was sure that Beijing was one of the safest cities in the world. While abroad, I never felt unsafe; not only are Chinese citizens banned from holding, using, or purchasing firearms, the punishment for stealing from or harming a foreigner is death in most cases. When walking home from the library at 2 a.m. across the Tsinghua University campus, I had very little to worry about, and a faint “TIC” would escape from my lips.

During my first weeks of classes, my advisor asked if I wanted to teach conversational English to migrant workers on the weekends. After saying yes, I rushed home to research what a migrant worker was. I learned that there is still something of a caste system in China, which creates classes based on whether you are born in the country or the city. Migrant workers move from the country to cities in search of an education to improve their career opportunities.

What turned out to be a whim decision became one of the best choices I ever made. My students ranged from 16 to 22 years old and were some of the most mature and respectable individuals I have ever met. Their sense of understanding and devotion to their role in society was humbling. These students risked never seeing their families, hometowns or friends again all in order to make money and send it back home. But it did not stop there. Those classes taught me what it means to be part of something big, without wanting to change it or lead it. In my American education, teachers have stressed the importance of individualism and an entrepreneurial spirit. In China, however, students work with each other to inspire change. Do I even have to say it? “TIC.”

I am not sure if it was the large photo of Chairman Mao in the classroom or the warped propaganda stories in their textbooks, but the “All for One - One for All” attitude was overwhelming. This team-focused approach was also evident when I noticed that my students would copy each other’s papers. I had them write for five minutes about their family and I would often get three of the same paper from the girls that sat together. Copying is not seen as a weakness in China. As long as the paper has correct grammar and good content, the students have completed the assignment. Do I even have to say it? “TIC.”

I learned quickly that China is full of contrasts. It is rich and poor, modern and ancient, democratic and communist, ruthless and compassionate, orderly and chaotic. I would see a rickshaw pulled by a Mercedes Benz, a Starbucks Coffee shop next to a “stinky-tofu” stand, an old woman pushing her granddaughter in a stroller playing with a Barbie and a Subway restaurant next to the Great Wall. China is difficult to describe, explain and even love. “TIC” can only go so far. You have to see it to believe it.
Late

Though she studied abroad 10 years ago, Jessica Reed’s memories of her time studying abroad in London have not faded

Story and photos by Jessica H. Reed

Since my five months living in London, England and traveling throughout Europe, I went on to finish college, complete graduate school, work in a variety of organizations, buy a house, and get married. Despite all of the life-changing experiences since my travels during the spring of 2002, my feeling has not faded that studying abroad is a completely life-changing and valuable experience that no college student should miss.

In my junior year at Lycoming College—a very small liberal arts college in Williamsport, Pa.—I studied abroad in London. Although Lycoming had a “sister school” in London called Regents College for students who wished to study abroad, I chose to go to London through Syracuse University’s Abroad program. Part of the decision was financial, but as a communications major there were some really great and interesting courses being offered through Syracuse’s program that I couldn’t wait to try.

So while three of my close friends from Lycoming made arrangements to attend Regents College together (and be roommates), I chose to branch out for a different school, a different experience, and what turned out to be an opportunity to meet some wonderful people.

I opted for Syracuse’s prearranged housing option. Most students visiting the London center spend their first week in England in a hotel, choosing a roommate, and apartment hunting in the city of London. While this seemed like a great option for the Syracuse students who had friends and acquaintances going to London, it seemed like a pretty daunting task to me, going into this situation knowing nobody in the program. How would I connect with someone fast enough (in the first day or two) to know I wanted to live with them? And finding an apartment in a city I didn’t know in such a short time seemed like a huge hurdle. So I made the decision to leave it up to chance, sign up for prearranged housing, and let fate take its course. As it turned out, this was one of the best decisions I could have made. I shared a flat in a great area of London with eleven other students in the program, and it was one of the best and most entertaining parts of my trip. We were a mix of students from different schools from across the country, different backgrounds, studying different things, with different interests—but it worked. It reminded me a little of the show “The Real World” on MTV—twelve strangers, picked to live together in a five-bedroom flat in London... It was a lot of fun and I met people I still consider friends today. If I had gone to Regents College with my friends from Lycoming, I would have missed out on meeting and living an international life with a really fantastic group of people.

While in London, I had the opportunity to take some really interesting and amazing courses, including marketing, advertising, and theater classes, which afforded me the unbelievable opportunity of seeing a different play at a different London theater every week. I also took photography, using my five months abroad to hone my shooting and printing skills, all the while creating images that mean the world to me now that the trip is over. Another thing that made my study abroad experience unique is that I spent one day a week at an intern in London at the end of my study abroad experience. I spent spring break in Italy, visiting the Londo

Since London is a major European hub, it was easy to plan and execute trips to many countries to experience many cultures. I spent spring break in Italy, visiting the Londo

onas and beautiful places. While traveling through such fascinating countries as Scotland, Ireland, and Belgium. In addition, I spent a really lovely weekend doing a homestay in Cornwall, England, experiencing the English countryside with the guidance of a generous English couple that welcomed study abroad students. After packing up my flat in London at the end of my study abroad experience, I spent a little over a week in Paris, France.

Every day that I was studying abroad I made a specific effort to take advantage of all experiences that came my way and not miss out on anything. In the years that have passed since I returned home from the adventure of a lifetime, I look back fondly and with pride that I made sure to have the most interesting and exciting time possible.
It is easy to visit a city and see only the top ten tourist sites. Stop, take a photo, buy a souvenir, and check each one off the list. While in Florence, Italy and during her travels throughout Europe, Emily Ramon experienced cities differently as an illustration major. In Florence, she took a sketchbooking class, where she was pushed to try new mediums each class. The students were encouraged to go out and draw the city around them. “For me drawing allows my own interpretation of the place,” she said.

Beyond her class, drawing became a way to experience all of Europe. “In Paris, we sat in a coffee shop in Montmartre for half an afternoon just talking, sketching, and sipping,” she said. “It is so much more contemplative than just passing through; I felt like I was experiencing the city, especially a city like Paris, the way it was supposed to be experienced.”

Paris was not the only place throughout her travels that Ramon stopped to draw. “In Dublin we did drawings in the Trinity library, which was so beautiful and had so many interesting details that wouldn’t be appreciated by just passing through,” Ramon remembered. For her, drawing proved a way to truly look at the city and see it differently than most tourists.

For Emily Ramon, stopping to sketch scenes she saw throughout her travels in Europe allowed her to see the continent differently and appreciate details.
As an American student abroad, it can be easy to compare your country of study to the United States. But when you study abroad in three different countries, like Liz Zimiles, it becomes natural to make comparisons between countries, too. Zimiles decided to study abroad through the International Honors Program’s Cities in the 21st Century program. During the semester-long program, she traveled to Delhi, India, Dakar, Senegal, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. In each city, Zimiles attended lectures and worked on a field study. At the end of the trip, each student had to complete an independent project about the semester as a whole.

After studying in Delhi for about four weeks, the group went outside of the city to complete their field study. Zimiles said the field study was an intense, week-long project completed in groups of five to nine students. In Delhi, Zimiles’s focus was environmental sustainability. Her group had a translator and contacts in the suburb where the group was staying, helping them to look at how the area was growing without attention to water and other environmental problems.

Two long flights later, Zimiles arrived in Dakar. Like Delhi, Zimiles stayed with a host family and attended classes everyday. At the end of her time there, the program took her to a village outside of Dakar that had never been visited by study abroad students before. “They had never seen white people before. They had no electricity. We had to kill chickens for three days. We had to wake up and crush millet. It was very interesting. It was hard, even for three days, it was tough,” she remembers of her time in the village. After being in the village, Zimiles focused on rural versus urban food practices for her project in Dakar.

The last stop of her semester abroad was Buenos Aires. To Zimiles, who is from the New York City area, it felt the most like home. After the two other cities, she felt prepared to explore Buenos Aires. She was able to leave Buenos Aires for five days to go to a ranch. She remembers it fondly as time to relax with the other students from the trip, to see the countryside, and to organize the group’s final presentation. For her portion of the presentation, Zimiles focused on time and pace in each of the countries. “I loved my comparative analysis. I loved just studying time and pace within these cities and how it changed,” she said. From Indian Standard Time, that made it socially acceptable to arrive 20 minutes late, to the concept in Senegal of “valuing people over punctuality” to the “craziness” of Buenos Aires, Zimiles found the differences very interesting.

Dishes at a street fair in Recoleta, Buenos Aires (top), cart on a beach in Dakar (middle), performer at a street fair in Recoleta, Buenos Aires (bottom)

Liz Zimiles traveled to three different countries, each with a different way of life. For her final project, she compared time and pace between the three countries.
EL AÑO NUEVO MAPUCHE

Celebrating the New Year with the Mapuche

Dancing at the New Year’s celebration in Pudahuel
To me, June 25 and 26 is the beginning of summer. The start to barbecues, beach trips, and time by the pool. During my semester abroad in Santiago, Chile, I celebrated a different kind of barbecue in June 2011. To the Mapuche, the indigenous group in central Chile, it marks the new year. I was invited to two celebrations in two different Mapuche communities in the Santiago area to celebrate the new year.

Girls prepare for dancing (above), Chilean fried dough known as sopapillas (bottom left), South American tea, mate (bottom right)
Both ceremonies centered around a tree: the cinnamon tree. For the Mapuche, it is considered a sacred tree that is now in danger of extinction. By the tree, each community brought a collection of bowls of food, such as katuto (an integral wheat bread), fruits, vegetables, and sopaipillas (fried dough).

In the ceremony at Pudahuel, the community gathered around the tree in the morning for a blessing. As the blessing finished, dancers circled the tree, expressing the happiness the community felt around the new year. I could still feel the happiness as all of the community members started greeting each other in the traditional Chilean way, with a kiss on the cheek and a hug. Even though my friends and I were not a part of the community, we were immediately welcomed in and greeted with kisses on the cheek, hugs, and “Happy New Year”s.

Soon after the ceremony, everyone went back inside the lodge to celebrate with a feast. Each family brought lots of food and were all eager to share with us. We sat with one family, while children from other families timidly brought us sopaipillas or salads their families had prepared.

I felt so welcome in the Mapuche community. I had never visited this community before, yet all of these families were so willing to share their culture, tradition, and food with us. Soon after eating, more dancing began inside the lodge. The young girls began dancing with baskets to mimic the harvest or with shawls as wings to mimic the birds. The whole community joined the young girls in one dance. They even reached out...
and invited my friends to join them in dancing.

The ceremony at La Pintana centered around not just a tree, but an altar as well. The altar had four faces that reminded me of a totem pole. The leader and organizer of the celebration explained to me that the four faces represented the Mapuche divinity: father, mother, young man, and young woman. In front of the rehue, or altar, the community placed offerings, just like the community at Pudahuel. They also placed a jug of water in the center. The service began in front of the altar. Just like in Pudahuel, there were prayers and dancing. As I stood in front of the altar, I was handed branches from the tree behind the altar. Throughout the ceremony, we shook the branches to bring out the good energy. In the middle of the ceremony, everyone was invited to take the branches, dip them in the water jug, and sprinkle the water on themselves as an act of cleansing. The water itself was water from the mountains, pure water, instead of water from the tap. I watched as everyone in the community stepped forward to cleanse themselves. Soon I was encouraged to participate as well and sprinkle myself with water.

For me, holidays are usually family events. As I spent time with the Mapuche in Chile, I was invited to be part of the community and welcomed as a family member. Everyone was willing to share the food, culture, and traditions. We were not outsiders observing, but rather active participants, singing, dancing, eating, and celebrating along with the Mapuche.