

Is studying abroad right for you?

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For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to travel the world, and since high school, I have wanted specifically to go to Germany. Many of those with a sense of wanderlust have their own place they want to go to above others, whether it is because that is where their family came from or because they are fascinated with the history and culture.

Germany has a special place in my heart for various reasons. I am half German, with my ancestors most recently settling in America from there in the 1890s. I took courses studying the language and culture for all four years of high school, in addition to taking the Advanced Placement (AP) and two semesters of German in college.

For most of my life, the prospect of traveling was only a pipe dream due to various personal and health-related reasons that prevented me from building up the courage and investing my time and energy into actually planning a trip.

I started seriously considering a study abroad program during the Fall 2022 semester. After looking through options on the Millersville University International Programs and Services (IPS) website, I found an experience that would be perfect for me. I needed six credits of courses for my major, and the International Summer University (ISU) in Marburg offered what I wanted not just academically, but also personally. I would finally have the opportunity to visit my dream country - Germany! With the support of my family and friends, as well as the help of my study abroad advisor, I was able to make it happen. There certainly was stress and confusion involved, but I made it work.

There were multiple steps in the process, both before and during my trip, that I did not expect and certainly struggled with as I adjusted to being in a foreign country by myself for the first time. Because of this, I wanted to share some advice based on my experience, so readers who are in my place I was in feel less alone.

1. Find your purpose

One of the first and most mind-boggling steps to planning a study abroad experience is figuring out where one wants to study. Each program offers something for everyone, whether it is one referred to by the IPS office or an outside program or agency. These programs can range in structure, course offerings, and length of study. For instance, a person may want to study abroad but have commitments back home that would not allow them to leave for an entire semester or year. Shorter programs exist for this reason and can be just as valuable to students as those of a longer period. Narrowing down one's options based on the credits and courses one needs, how long they are willing to travel for, and what one hopes to get out of the experience can make the planning process much less complicated.

2. Do your research

With traveling to a foreign country inevitably

comes the bureaucracy of applications and fees. This can range from expenses such as acquiring a passport to international health insurance. Depending on the country one travels to, one may also need to acquire a Visa. Because of this, it is crucial to research what you need to prepare for before leaving for your study abroad experience. Keep track of deadlines and fill out applications and paperwork as soon as possible in case any issues arise. Buy plane tickets if needed four to six months in advance instead of four to six weeks - like I did - and make a checklist of what you need to pack, including clothes, toiletries, and medication. In addition, research safety and the cost of living in the city and country in which you will study abroad. Apps such as Noonlight and bSafe are excellent resources for staying safe in a foreign country. Websites such as Costoflive can be helpful for estimating the cost of groceries and other essentials.

While this is indeed quite a bit of information to process, most of the major steps are laid out in a pre-departure guide from the IPS office. Everyone who enrolls in a study abroad program IPS is also assigned a study abroad advisor who is there to help them with any questions or concerns they may have. That being said, make friends with your advisor - they are a huge help and it is their job to help guide you through this amazing journey. I personally do not know what I would do without my study abroad advisor!

3. Apply for scholarships

A common reason why someone may ultimately choose not to study abroad is because of financial concerns. Traveling to a country can indeed be expensive, which is why there are a variety of resources available. Various study abroad programs offer scholarships and financial aid. Using websites such as Scholarship Universe, for instance, is an excellent starting point for those looking to save money on their trip. These can range from general study abroad scholarships to awards specific to Millersville, your home university, or the specific program you are interested in. The applications may take time to fill out, but they are worthwhile if one wants extra cash in their pocket to cover tuition and transportation expenses. Applying for and ultimately earning scholarships helped me to alleviate the stress of saving money for my trip.

4. Learn the language and culture

I will admit that due to globalization and the substantial number of American and Western tourists traveling each year, much of the world accommodates English speakers, whether it be through street or airport signs or locals understanding at least basic English. Nonetheless, it is still important to learn the language of one's host country in order to better understand the culture and interact with others if needed. If the study abroad program does not offer or require you to take a language course, I would recommend using Duolingo or other language-learning apps that can help with learning basic words and phrases to get by in a foreign

territory. Each country also has its own culture and customs, so it is helpful to read and research what is acceptable or commonplace. For instance, one adjustment that I had to make in Germany was that many establishments are cash-only, making it imperative to carry cash or at least be aware of the location of the nearest ATM or bank at all times. Some cities may be prone to pickpocketing and scammers, which is why it is important to be wary and smart when carrying valuables in public.

5. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone

While studying abroad in a foreign country, one will undoubtedly face a multitude of unique scenarios and situations. Entering and living in a foreign land for a period of time with new people, places, and customs can indeed be daunting in itself. At the end of the day, however, studying abroad is about stepping out of one's comfort zone and enjoying astounding experiences that they likely will never witness in any other time or place in their life. Try new food, pick up a hobby, or explore places you normally would not go back home. Of course, it should also be noted that one needs to understand their boundaries and be safe and responsible.

This is also a major deal breaker when deciding if studying abroad is even the right decision - you will be thrust into independence in a much larger scope than just moving out to attend university, and therefore emotional maturity and responsibility of one's coping mechanisms is imperative for traveling abroad, especially alone. I would not have been able to study abroad in my freshman or sophomore year of college, and certainly not while I was in high school. I grew and changed as a person and as an adult, with my study abroad experience surely letting me see that for myself.

Studying abroad can certainly be an overwhelming experience, but is also one you will experience rarely in your life if you decide to do it. It is difficult and stressful to get through the airport, adjust to living in a new country, and maintain one's physical and mental health to boot. Nonetheless, it was an experience I will surely never forget and one I will be proud of myself for because of what I accomplished through it. Hopefully, my advice provides reassurance to those who need it and consider traveling in the near future.



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The historic town market in the heart of Frankfurt, Germany is best known as the Christmas Market in the winter months.