



TIPS AND TRICKS, OR KNOW *BEFORE* YOU GO:

A Guide to Preparing for Your Trip Abroad

Whether you are traveling with a group in a facilitated study abroad program or you are planning a personal expedition, there are many things to take into account as you prepare for the journey. International travel can be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have, and we hear often from students who have such positive experiences while abroad they change their entire academic plan to pursue further international engagements.

As positive as travel can be, there are also times when being in another country is tough, when it tests your flexibility and patience, and also times when it is downright uncomfortable. Sometimes you get held up by a holiday you weren't aware of, miss a connection or encounter unexpected weather and you have to think on your feet to alter your plans- situations made all the more uncomfortable when you are unfamiliar with the language and customs. Some of these occurrences are fairly unavoidable and just become part of the travel experience, some can be avoided with a little planning. The best thing you can do is prepare in a way that eliminates the discomforts that are avoidable and plan ahead to have what you need in case something doesn't go as planned. Sometimes planning ahead, even in seemingly small ways, can make all the difference. Here we have put together some tips and tricks that the well-travelled study abroad ambassadors have found useful in their travels.

Regional Differences

Try to get advice from someone who has been to the exact country or region you're traveling to. Some travel advice will vary depending on the exact location of travel. For instance, when traveling throughout Europe, it's recommended that you take night trains to travel from country to country. As long as it's a long enough trip (say, from Paris to Rome) you can sleep on the train, saving the cost of a night in a hotel or hostel, and you don't give up an entire day in transit. The rail system in Europe usually offers sleeper cars, 'Couchettes,' which you can reserve for a few Euros above the regular ticket price, or in addition to stamping your EuroRail pass (to learn about EuroRail passes go https://www.raileurope.com/index.html?gclid=CJXkkJe_z8kCFZOBaQodPlsCkw). In contrast to night travel in Europe, it is recommended to take Guatemalan buses in the day time. The downside is you will spend the better part of a day on the bus depending on the length of your trip, but the benefit is that most Guatemalans travel at night so night buses are usually tightly packed with travelers, which makes them less comfortable and it can be extremely hard to sleep. Also, don't forget to bring food and something to drink on any long trip! Some buses, especially long trips in Latin America, will take about a half an hour to stop at a restaurant or market but it is always better to be prepared than to get stuck being hungry for hours on a bus that doesn't make any stops.

General

When traveling to the first world you can pretty much assume that, if you need it, it will be sold somewhere within range. All of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand sell toiletries such as shampoo, deodorant, toothbrushes, and other items like clothes, towels, and bathing suits. However, if you know you'll be needing certain items it is usually better to bring them than to have to hunt them down or spend unbudgeted funds. Sometimes specific brands are hard to find, and due to cultural differences some items



and products usually common in North America are hard to find abroad (try finding peanut butter in the Czech Republic or Brazil or Ibuprofen in Italy). That being said, it is highly recommended that you pack as light as possible. The most common mistake people make on their first couple of trips is to bring much more than they need. One way to avoid this to bring items that have multiple uses, are light and easily squished into full luggage, or are items you don't have a particular attachment to and don't mind letting go of if you need to make space for new things. The following is a list of travel items we've found useful.

Timing of Flights

Traveling internationally is not the time to be trying to get the shortest layover time possible. Flight delays due to weather or mechanical reasons will mean missing your flight if you have a short layover and possible a very long wait before you can get on another plane. Rule of thumb is allow yourself at least 3-4 hours for a layover and plan to read, play a game, watch a movie, shop, etc.

Baggage

The baggage itself - Keep it light and tough. This includes your carry-on. You don't want to have to leave stuff behind because your suitcase itself is heavy. Lufthansa only allows 8 kg (17.6 lb) for your carry-on. If your carry-on bag weighs 11 lb, this makes it difficult to carry even a laptop, toiletries and a change of clothes. And you want it tough, because it **will** be tossed around (literally) as it's moved from luggage cart to plane and back.

What to bring

A thin sheet, sari, or wrap - This is one item that has many useful applications in addition to serving as a sheet. It can be used in place of a towel for laying on the beach, works well to cover you up when you've had enough sun, and also seconds as a cover when sleeping in hot places where thicker blankets keep you too warm for comfort. It is also nice as a cover-up when sleeping in public places, such as on overnight buses or trains.

Closed toed shoes - Having a pair of closed toed, **comfortable** shoes is a must, even when traveling to warmer climates. You may find yourself touring a farm, hiking, walking in dirty city streets, or even visiting venues that do not allow open toed shoes such as some cathedrals, museums, and the Hotel Monte Carlo in the south of France. A pair of lightweight tennis or hiking shoes will suffice in all of these situations and can be squished into luggage or tied onto the outside of a traveling backpack without taking up much space. If you're a runner bring your running shoes, which are usually very lightweight, and that way you can to keep up your workout schedule. Be aware, that tennis shoes may identify you as an American.

Washcloth, baby wipes - A washcloth or baby wipes will allow you to freshen up after a long trip on an airplane, bus or train, when you don't have the time or facilities for a proper shower. Antibacterial wipes can be used to sanitize your hands when access to soap and water is limited (especially applicable when traveling in developing countries). Dry shampoo for long and disposable toothbrushes are also desirable.

Extra batteries - for any electronics, flashlights, etc. You can usually find batteries while traveling, but sometimes they can be harder to find than you would think and they can be really expensive. Batteries are small items to pack, so worth buying ahead of time and bringing with you. Replace all batteries in your devices before travel so you start off with full power.



Pillow - Many hostels, and even home stays, do not provide you with a pillow. If you bring your own, you are sure to have one. Having a pillow with you also allows for better comfort when sleeping on a train, bus, or plane.

Kleenex packets - Developing countries often do not supply toilet paper, so it is recommendable that you purchase packages of Kleenex to keep in your bag, pocket, or purse.

Long sleeved shirt - Always bring at least one long-sleeved shirt. Even when traveling in very warm regions there are times when the weather becomes unexpectedly cold, or when higher altitudes mean cooler nighttime temperatures. A long-sleeved shirt will also protect you from over exposure to the sun, and from biting insects such as flies or mosquitos. Bringing one long sleeved T-shirt as well as a sweatshirt or hoodie gives you variety and can also be doubled up and worn together if temperatures are cold enough to warrant the extra layers.

Dressy(er) clothes - While you may not want to bring a suit or cocktail dress, it's a good idea to bring something that can be dressed up with a blazer/sports jacket, tie, jewelry, etc. to allow you to transition at least to business casual if necessary.

Tupperware or container - Small plastic containers with compartments, often sold as fishing supplies, help protect fragile jewelry and other small items from being damaged during packing and travel. If you like to collect small souvenirs like pebbles, small shells or seeds having one of these with you can help organize and protect them throughout your trip. (be mindful that shells and seeds, especially seeds, can be considered contraband when traveling across borders and flying back to the United States)

Converters for must have electronics - Most cell phones, cameras and computers are built to handle both AC & DC, 110 and 220 V. You'll need to check. For other items, such as hair dryers, you may need either a voltage converter or an appliance made specifically for travel. The appliance is going to be much lighter to carry than the converter.

Phone

(See below: Technology/Staying in touch with home.) You will need to make sure your cell phone or other device is compatible with international use. If you do choose to use an international data service offered by your provider, familiarize yourself with applicable fees and charges, and program your phone and other devices to warn you when charges will be incurred.

Sometimes, it is easier and/or cheaper to buy a phone locally once you arrive at your destination or get a local SIMS card. Talk to others who have traveled to the country and get their advice.

Hard Copies of Important Documents

Map and itinerary printed out. I would highly suggest this even if you are used to relying on GPS. In some Less Developed Countries, GPS is actually less useful than a map. If you simply study the map prior to going, you will also save a lot of time and frustration. How many times have you been lost or heard of people turning down a wrong road. While having GPS will point you to a specific destination, it often won't give you the FULL PICTURE, so make sure you get a decent map to save yourself a lot of trouble.

What not to bring.

Cathryn A. Clement 12/9/2015 9:50 AM

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Your favorite clothing or other cherished items - Travel is hard on clothing and if you bring your favorite things chances are they will get worn out or dirty. Also, as you find new things you like along your trip, you might want to get rid of some of what you brought with you to make room in your luggage and it can be a tough decision to get rid of things from home, or things you like a lot.

Medical

If you have any food allergies make sure you understand how to ask questions about the food you are allergic to in the common language. If you don't have access to mobile translation, Google translate will translate English words or phrases into just about any language, and you can either print this out or write it down before you leave for use while traveling.

Medicine

Prescriptions - When packing your prescription medications make sure you pack enough to last you your full trip or have planned ahead to be able to get more when you need them refilled. Another thing to consider is make sure your medications are legal in the country that you are traveling to. This information is usually available on the country's embassy website.

Over the Counter - Many over the counter drugs can be different in other countries. Pack a light kit of allergy and pain medication that you can carry with you.

Original bottles/packaging - For both prescription and over the counter drugs, keep them in their original bottles or packaging. You could end up in serious trouble if law enforcement are unable to clearly identify the medications.

Bring a round of antibiotics and pepto-like meds in case of stomach or other illnesses. Most doctors' offices and healthcare centers will offer this to you if you tell them you'll be traveling. Probiotics are also a good idea to pack with you because they can be very helpful in recovery after a bout with intestinal illness.

First-Aid Basics - Bring bandaids, moleskin for blisters, antibiotic cream, etc. You will be walking a lot. Take care of blisters promptly.

Technology

Logging in to important accounts - If you purchase a travel computer or electronic device make sure to log into all email accounts, bank accounts, bill payers, etc. before you leave the country. Many of these sites now register each device you sign on from and using a new device will require confirmation in the form of a code sent to an email account or phone number, which can be difficult, complicated, or downright impossible when you're out of the country. You don't want to end up locked out of your bank account!

Be sure to install the Texas A&M University Virtual Private Network (VPN) program onto your electronic devices that you use to connect to the internet. The link to download the program is <https://hdc.tamu.edu/Connecting/VPN/>. If your internet connection is strong enough, you will be able to access your private information securely. In addition, if you have video streaming that is regionally blocked such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, it will allow you to access these programs from anywhere because the VPN will give you a United States IP address. This is a handy tool, but be aware, it doesn't work everywhere.

Important apps to have on your phone:

- Duolingo
- Viber
- Whatsapp
- Googletranslate
- Googlemaps

Staying in touch with home

It is getting easier and easier to access Wi-Fi while traveling, even in the third world. While we used to have to hunt down cyber cafes, or the one dingy sloooow computer in the back of a shop in small towns, and exercise extreme patience with slow connections, half-working keyboards, and expensive rates (usually charged by the hour, but sometimes by the minute!), you can now tap into wifi with your own device in most places.

One of the best tricks we've found is to download apps that allow texting, phone use and video, such as Skype, Whatsapp or Viber before you leave, then suspend cell service for the trip and connect to wifi to use the apps in order to communicate with family and friends back home. Just call your phone company or go online and tell them you want to temporarily suspend service. With your service suspended there is no chance of racking up charges for receiving international texts, etc, and your phone will still connect to wifi when it's available. Other communication tools include Facebook video chat, Facetime, Google Hangouts, etc.

Photography

If you are taking a camera on your trip, be sure to take multiple memory cards. You never want to be stuck in a situation where you have to delete pictures to take more. When you can, be sure to save the pictures you have taken to your computer or to an online backup. For those that like to use more expensive DSLR cameras, be careful! Depending on where you are traveling to and the time of day that you are out, your camera can make you a target for a mugging. Especially at night, be sure to put your camera into a backpack or other inconspicuous bag, or sleep with it.

Money/currency

Try to get some currency of the country you are planning to go. Also try to identify less expensive places for currency exchange. Airport kiosks and hotels often add an additional fee or points to the exchange rate.

Check to see if your credit card charges a fee for international transactions. These can add up. Some cards have eliminated their international transaction fee. Discover cards do not have any international transaction fees, but they are accepted in very few places abroad. The Capital One Venture card is an excellent international transaction fee free card that is more widely accepted as it is issued through Visa.

If you do not like to use credit cards or you do not have one, debit cards can be used in foreign ATMs to withdraw money. **Always** let your card company know the dates you will be traveling and where. This will ensure that your bank will not block your card. Also, if you are going on a long term trip, be sure that

your debit card will not be expiring before you return back home. Depending on the bank, charges can apply. An excellent choice in College Station is Aggieland Credit Union as they only charge a 1% transaction fee. Depending on the family of cards, you will see various emblems on the back of your card (see below). When looking for an ATM, look for an ATM that matches the emblem on the back of your card. This will often save you additional service charges.



Beware of ATMs that are in train stations and airports. They may charge additional convenience fees that you can avoid by waiting until you exit those areas.

No matter where you go, there will be homeless and disadvantaged people that you will see asking for money. Beware of giving these people money. If you just cannot help yourself from giving money, pull money out of your wallet away from the person so that they cannot see how much money you are carrying. It is not unheard of for someone to give a person money, and then the person mugs them for everything that they have on them.

It's a good practice not to have too much money on your person at any one time. Or, if you feel more comfortable keeping everything with you, keep just a small amount in your wallet and put the rest somewhere like a small pocket in your backpack or purse. This keeps you from awkward moments when you pull your wallet out in front of people who have very little. \$50 US might not seem like a whole lot to you, but that can represent more than a week's worth of labor in some countries.

Airports

Showers - Large international airports often have showers available for a fee. If you are on a really long trip, you might want to consider this during a layover. You'll arrive feeling a lot fresher.

Wi-Fi

Proximity to a city - Sometimes you end up with a long layover somewhere interesting and want to make use of the opportunity. Some airports are close enough to the city or a site that you can leave, see something, and be back within a couple of hours. Schiphol Airport in The Netherlands is an example of this. Schiphol is on the regular train routes so it is easy to take a train just 25 minutes to the heart of Amsterdam. Schiphol and many other large international airports also have luggage lockers where you can leave belongings for several hours, eliminating the problem of what to do with your luggage while you sight-see.

On the Plane

- Pillow
- Snacks and water (airlines can be rather miserly with handing out water)
- Entertainment



- Moisturizer and lip balm. The air in planes tends to be very dry and therefore dehydrating.
- Toothbrush, hairbrush, makeup, change of clothes, washcloth, dry shampoo

Mind-Set

Go as an explorer. Although many things may be similar to home, many won't be. Enjoy discovering the differences whether it be smells, food, architecture, wildlife or the proper place to put your hands at a dinner table. Some things you may like, some you may not, but experiencing both will teach you about yourself and home as well as about the country you're visiting.

Taste of Home

When most of what you see is new and different, it can be overwhelming. To give yourself a little bit of home and normal, take a favorite food, book, music, video, hobby, etc. A favorite hobby that is easily portable can have the added benefit of giving you a way to meet people in the host country with similar interests if you need to shop for supplies.

We hope this helps you prepare for your journey and please do not hesitate to contact us at coals-studyabroad@ag.tamu.edu with any further questions you may have or to suggest additional topics for this document.