



glimpse study abroad acclimation guides



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PHOTO by Daphne Hollinger

culture
SHOCK



Though all the clichés associated with the study abroad experience usually end up being true—“enriching,” “exhilarating,” even “life-changing”—the experience can also be a difficult one, jarring you from the life-style and norms to which you are accustomed. Of course, culture shock manifests itself differently in different people, but research has detected general patterns of emotional highs and lows experienced by international travelers. These phases vary in duration and severity, and are not necessarily linear.

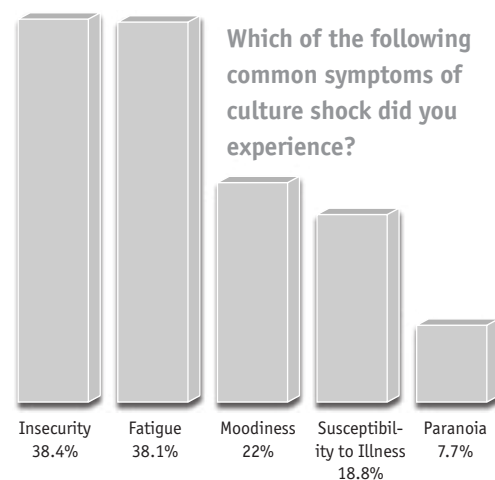
- * **EUPHORIA** – The first few hours, days or weeks abroad are often characterized by the excitement of sensory overload. Both adrenaline and expectations are running high, and everything seems new and intriguing.
- * **IRRITABILITY AND HOSTILITY** – Once the initial “honeymoon” phase subsides, dissonances between native and host cultures begin to seem more pronounced, and a sense of alienation can set in. Curiosity and enthusiasm about-face, transforming into frustration, insecurity, negativity toward local culture, glorification of home culture, exaggerated responses to minor problems, withdrawal and/or depression.
- * **GRADUAL ADJUSTMENT** – With time, you’ll begin to orient yourself to a different set of cultural practices and feel increasingly comfortable and confident in your new surroundings. Your sense of humor, which may have been lying dormant for a while, will reemerge.
- * **REENTRY OR REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK** – Upon returning home, you will be faced with integrating your abroad experience with life in the United States, where you might feel disoriented, out of place or changed by your experience in a way that makes relating to family and friends difficult.

While some degree of culture shock is virtually inevitable, there are things you can do to help yourself to effectively overcome it, even before you begin your journey. The Glimpse Foundation surveyed over 400 study abroad students from across the country to ask them about their experiences with culture shock, including what helped them cope and what they would do differently if given the chance.

The doors in my host family’s apartment have to be closed very gently or they will rattle the doorframes. I constantly forgot this, and one night, I shut the door to my room a little too hard. I started changing into my pajamas, and when I had just gotten completely undressed, my host mom walked right in and proceeded to give me a lesson on the finer points of door closing. I just stood there, totally naked and absolutely shocked. Nakedness just isn’t such a big deal in Spain, I guess.

*Jacqui Goldman
Studied in Spain*

Here’s how our respondents—80% of whom spent 3-6 months in their host countries—answered the following questions:



How long did it take you to feel comfortable in your new home abroad?

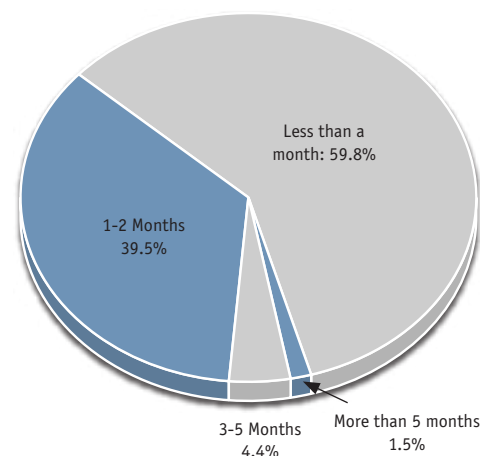


PHOTO by Christopher Quirk





On one of our first nights out in Italy, my roommate and I went out to dinner at a fairly nice restaurant. We were starving so we both ordered quickly, and as soon as the dinner arrived, we dove into our food. The people at the restaurant were extremely offended. As the waiter later explained to us, to eat at the pace we did is terribly rude and considered an insult to whoever prepared the meal.

*Erin Lauria, Lynchburg College
Studied in Italy*

“There really is only so much you can do to prepare for culture shock. However, you can learn about the culture of the country, including such things as personal space, body language, gender roles, what housing is like, how people use electricity, and the stereotypes they have of your culture versus the ones we have of theirs.”

*Jenna Tonet, Stonehill College
Studied in Italy*

“It’s one thing to read about traveling there, but it is entirely another to talk to people who are your age and your nationality who have traveled there.”

*Sarah Case, UC Boulder
Studied in Egypt*

“It’s essential to know and admit that there is going to be a period of adjustment; don’t expect everything to go smoothly all the time. You will have some sad days and feel lost a little. Those feelings are all normal and part of the experience. They are what help you grow.”

*Liz Walker, Washington State
Studied in Spain*

I. BEFORE YOU GO

- * **RESEARCH YOUR DESTINATION PRIOR TO DEPARTURE.** Read up on your host country’s history, religion, art and natural resources. Become well-versed in the country’s politics and current affairs. Know who the president is! If available, read an online newspaper from your host country regularly before departing—not only will familiarity with your host country’s politics and news give you something to talk about with locals, it will help to dispel the widespread stereotype of the “ignorant American.” Read novels and watch movies from your host country, if available—they can provide insight into nuances of humor and personal interactions, which are often strikingly different from those at home.
- * **TALK TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE STUDIED IN THE SAME REGION.** The best way to find out about the etiquette, social norms, unspoken rules and idiosyncrasies of your host culture is by talking to people who have already lived there. If you know or can locate international students on your campus who are from your host country, talk to them about the challenges they encountered in coming to the United States. This “reverse perspective” can lend you valuable insight into the cultural differences between the United States and your host country.
- * **READ THE MATERIALS PROVIDED TO YOU BY YOUR STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM.** It can be tempting to blow these off, but survey respondents stressed the importance of paying attention to such materials. Many have been painstakingly researched and prepared specifically to help you!
- * **KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** While pre-departure “research” is essential, mentally prepare yourself for surprises. No matter how much you think you know about your host country, not everything is going to match up to your expectations. Use books, newspapers, movies, study abroad materials, etc. to familiarize yourself with local issues and customs, but keep your pre-conceptions flexible!



PHOTO by Elaine Ackrill