

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL BASICS

Preparing for independent travel abroad



Material adapted from the annual “Independent Travel Basics” workshop offered by Off-Campus Studies staff and returnees

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Introduction

When planning a large trip of any kind, it is always important to think about what you want from the experience and prepare for the time you will be off campus/abroad. This brochure covers both goal-setting and planning. Additional tips and links are available on the Off-Campus Studies website: go.carleton.edu/ocs.

Goal Setting

In order to set realistic and attainable goals for your independent travel experience, ask yourself the following:

Where do you want to go and why?

What additional destinations do you want to visit beyond those covered by your program? Is there a particular site or attraction you want to see or are you more interested in discovering what's there when you arrive?

Do you want to see a lot of places quickly or a few places in more depth?

Knowing why you want to travel will help you know the answer to this question as well. If language acquisition is your goal, you may want to stick to countries where your target language is spoken. If sightseeing and crossing countries off your 'bucket list' is your goal, think strategically about your access to interesting places around you.

Do you prefer to plan every little detail, travel and learn spontaneously, or something in-between?

Some travelers have very detailed and planned itineraries that keep them busy, while others prefer to leave things open. Think about what type of itinerary will meet your needs, keep you engaged, and allow you to attain your personal goals.

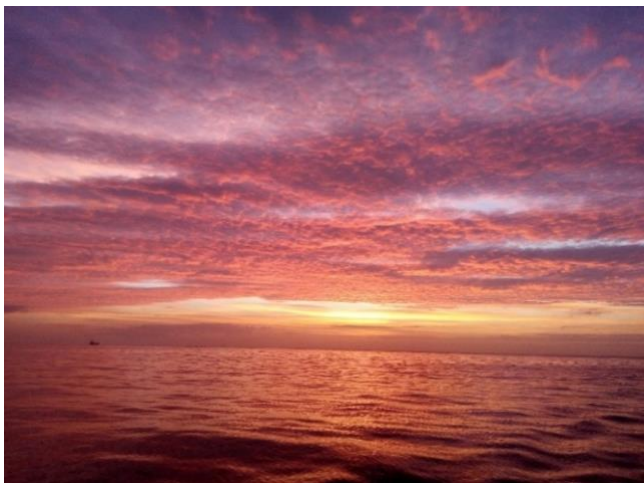


Photo: Isabel Han '15

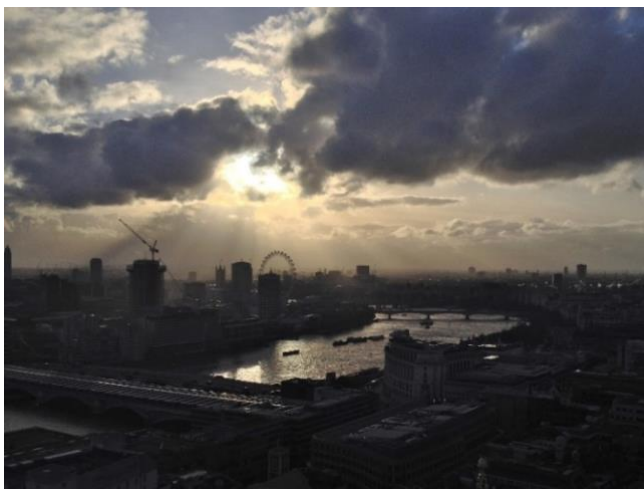


Photo: Claire Ferguson '15

Who are your travel partners and are your goals and styles compatible?

Are you interested in traveling with Carleton students or students on your program or do you prefer to strike out on your own? What types of activities do you envision doing – i.e.: night clubs, museums, cafes, cultural immersion, or a mix of everything?

What type of experience are you expecting (i.e. an easy vacation, sightseeing, a whirlwind tour, etc.)?

Remember to be honest with yourself when planning your travels and choosing your destination(s). Do not feel pressured to do too much or to go somewhere particularly challenging if what you really want is a quiet vacation. There is no shame in having a relaxed or “easy” trip – this is, after all, your time! You will get the most out of your trip if you do what you actually WANT to do.

Do you know other students or alumni who have been to the destinations you are interested in traveling to? What do they have to say?

Talk to other students, alumni, friends, family, etc. to find out as much as you can about the destinations you are interested in exploring. Keep in mind that their experiences may not necessarily be your experience – but their perspectives can be informative.

All goals are OKAY! This experience is about YOU and your interests. Be true to yourself and know what you want to get out of your travel experience.

Research Your Destination

There are countless websites and publications where you can learn about the regions, countries, and cities you hope to visit. You should review several sources including government publications like the CIA Fact - book, the CDC travel section, and State Department pages by country, reputable guidebooks like Lonely Planet or Let's Go, lodging review sites, sites with advice specifically for students, and (if possible) country-specific information through your travel assistance provider such as CISI/AXA Assist (for Carleton programs). In addition, there are many world travelers at Carleton who would be happy to sit down and share their experience and expertise with you. Email them or invite them to coffee to start a conversation--you are guaranteed to pick up tips that aren't published on any website!

General Travel Resources

- US State Department - <http://studentsabroad.state.gov/>
- U.S. Dept. of State / Bureau of Consular Affairs - www.travel.state.gov
- Centers for Disease Control - <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>
- Learning Abroad Center - <http://umabroad.umn.edu/>
- European Travel Advice and Information – <https://www.ricksteves.com/>
- Lonely Planet Guides (or other guide books)
- Fellow travelers, other students, program directors or on-site staff

Photo: Sam Ihlenfeldt '14



Your Identity

When planning and picking destinations, it is important to do some research. You will want to reflect upon and have a better understanding about the following (next page):

How will you/your social identities be treated and/or perceived (i.e. as a woman, LGBTQA+, person of color, etc.)?

When considering how you may be perceived or treated based on your identities, be thoughtful of the local culture, laws, and attitudes toward certain identities. For example, if you are a woman – would catcalling on the street be overwhelming and stressful for you? If you identify as LGBTQA+, does your chosen destination(s) have laws against homosexuality? If you are person of color – would it bother/annoy you if locals or other travelers continuously asked to take your picture? These examples, among other scenarios, should inform your decision. You should think about the answers to these questions BEFORE you go, so that you can pick the right location or destination for you and then plan accordingly.

Even if the answer to these questions is ‘yes,’ it does not mean you should avoid a destination. You will need to weigh your options and decide based on your research and gut feelings.

For a list of resources on diverse identities, traveling as a woman, student of color, or LGBTQA+ student, check out the OCS website for resources, located under Advising Start-to-Finish: “OCS and Diversity.” Also, for specific information on the rights of LGBTQA+ individuals in countries around the world, take a look at the International, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersexual Association’s website.



Photo: Anna Persmark '15

Resources specific to women, LGBTQA+, students with disabilities, and people of color

- Diversity Abroad- <http://diversityabroad.com/>
- Journey Woman Magazine: journeywoman.com/
- Rainbow Special Interest Group - <http://www.rainbowsig.org/>
- Mobility International USA - <http://www.miusa.org/>

Passports and Visas

Your passport should be valid for at least six months after your return date. Before leaving, you should research whether or not a visa is necessary for any of the countries you intend to visit and how to obtain one. Most often, visas are handled through the mail, but sometimes they can be purchased at the airport upon arrival, and other times you must travel to the issuing consulate (usually Chicago or New York) in person before leaving. Also, research whether or not it is advisable to use a visa service for help with your application.

Budgeting

Each location and person is different when it comes to budget. You can, however, calculate an approximate daily budget to help you better understand what type of budget to set. When calculating this budget, include amounts for the following:

- Transportation (local and between destinations). Make sure to include planes, trains, taxis, etc. (See more about these options below.)
- Food and Drink
- Lodging (See more about these options below.)
- Entertainment (night club covers, movies, etc.)
- Museum and/or other site entrance fees
- Miscellaneous expenses (tips, taxes, incidentals, souvenirs, etc.)

Money

Make sure you have at least two ways to access your money while traveling. This will ensure you have money (or at least access to it) in the event of theft, credit/debit cards not working, etc. Occasionally, ATM/debit cards may not work for a variety of reasons (broken magnetic strips, low on funds, incompatible machine, non-operable on a certain day, etc.), so it is always wise to have a backup plan.

Consider traveling with the following – choose the options that meet your needs and make sense for your travel destination(s).

- US Dollars/Euros
(Crisp US \$20s or higher denominations will normally be accepted for exchange)
- Local Currency
 - Tip: see if you can “buy some” at a fair rate off of someone who has recently traveled to your destination.
- Credit Card (make sure to inform your card company ahead of time, and be aware of international transaction fees)
- Debit Card (make sure to inform your bank ahead of time, have a 4 digit PIN, and be aware of international transaction and withdrawal fees).

Also be sure you have a chip and PIN cards (used extensively in Europe) many US banks now offer them and they offer additional security.

- Charles Schwab and Capital One360 have no fees abroad.

One piece of advice many avid travelers recommend is to have three credit/debit cards available, including one Visa and one MasterCard; leave one locked in your hotel room/home and carry two with you (American Express and Discover are not as widely accepted as the others).

Be careful of where you use ATMs. Avoid freestanding ATMs as they may attract more counterfeit or tampering operations. Choose ATMs that are in or attached to banks or post offices. These tend to be fully stocked and are at less risk for scams.

If parents or friends want to get money to you, the easiest way is to deposit it into your bank account. Other options include:

- Western Union (may have high fees, but can be used in emergencies)
- Transferwise (much cheaper than WU or banks)
- Xoom (good for on-line wire transfers in Latin America)



Insurance

Well-prepared travelers plan for the unexpected and make sure their insurance needs are met. Consider the following types of insurance: health & accident, emergency assistance/evacuation, personal property & flight cancellation. Your (or your parents') existing policies may already cover some of these areas, but it never hurts to be certain and to understand the steps you would need to take to file a claim. First check into your current health and property (homeowner's) insurance and any insurance offered by your credit card to learn what they cover/do not cover abroad.

Can you extend any policies you may get with your program for travel time before and after the program? Would they cover you in other countries/locations you may travel to while abroad?

Then, note the gaps. For example, is there a high deductible or is everything considered 'out of network'? Does your parents' homeowner's insurance cover electronics? Does your credit card company offer lost baggage insurance for tickets purchased with that card?

Finally, determine if you want or need to purchase any supplemental policies such as airline cancellation, additional travel assistance, or international-only health insurance, etc.

**Note: Companies the OCS Office recommends
For health insurance: CISI, GeoBlue & iNext.
For travel insurance: TravelGuard
For personal articles: State Farm or Travelers

While you are abroad, remember to document expenses as much as possible. Save receipts or make notes of losses or expenses incurred. Insurance companies need PROOF when they process your claims. This will also help you to know what out of pocket costs you may need to cover.

Lodging

You have a variety of choices in lodging! Where you stay will depend on your budget and standards.

Hotel

- Wide variation in quality and price, look at "stars" to get a sense of quality
- 2 stars is usually adequate
- Great if you're traveling with a friend

Bed & Breakfast, Pension, Airbnb, etc.

- Can be more home-like than hotels, sometimes not as flexible (advanced booking is necessary, cancellations can be difficult)

Hostel

- Usually have dorms (including all-female, all-male), and singles, doubles, triples
- Sometimes have perks like breakfast, bikes
- Very good way to meet/interact with other travelers
- Always lock up your valuables

Couchsurfing

- Free places to stay while travelling
- Couchsurfing is an online community of people offering their couches or spare beds to people who are travelling
 - Usually important to show interest in and spend time with your host (not a free hotel)
 - Can be a great way to understand local culture

WITH ALL OF THESE: Do your homework! For hostels, Airbnb's, and budget hotels, the following are great for both reading reviews and booking: tripadvisor, hostelbookers.com, hostelworld.com, and airbnb.com. TripAdvisor is good for more "up-scale" options (and restaurants!), but also has reviews for some hostels. Pay attention to the location of your lodging—will you be in a safe part of town, close to public transportation, sites you want to visit, the airport or train station, etc.

Transportation

There are, of course, a variety of ways to get around, and your choices will depend on where you are traveling and factors such as safety, timing, comfort and cost.

Planes

- Usually the fastest, but you see the least as far as countryside, etc.
- Airports (especially ones from which budget airlines fly) are not usually centrally located, so you may need to factor in transportation costs from the airport to the city center
- Cheap flights have lots of restrictions and extra little costs that may add up fast
- Good websites for finding flights:
 - momondo.com
 - Google flights
 - studentuniverse.com
 - skyscanner.com (for comparisons)
- Research the budget airlines in your country/region.

Trains

- Safe, convenient, stations usually centrally located in towns; can be very efficient
- Will allow you to see a lot of the country side and other sites in between destinations
- Overnight train rides can save you money for lodging, too!
- EuRail passes must be purchased in the US, so plan ahead if you are considering a pass. Research your options at RailEurope.com

Buses

- Often cheaper than trains, but may take longer or make more stops
- Also a good way to save a night's lodging
- In some countries, sleeper busses are the height of luxury (South America, Turkey)
- Slow, but you see a lot

Taxis, Rickshaws, etc.

- Can be very cheap, but also “sketchy” in some locations!
- Know what’s “normal” (metered, non-metered, etc.), and trust your gut (and GET OUT) if a situation feels off

Car Rental

- You may need to be 25 or older to rent; often need insurance (added cost)
- Driving in unfamiliar places can be dangerous
- Driving laws/regulations may be different than the ones you are used to in the US
- Most have manual transmissions



Packing

Pack carefully, and your back and body will thank you. Consider where you are traveling and pack appropriately. If you will be mostly in urban areas, with sidewalks, elevators, and smooth streets – a roller board suitcase (one on wheels) or a duffel bag may be the easiest – but make sure you can lift it overhead/maneuver around without too much trouble. Often weight is a larger concern than space in suitcases. Try to select a bag that is lightweight and has room to expand so that you have room for everything you acquire during your travels (souvenirs, books, clothes, etc.). If you anticipate a lot of cobbled streets, quick travel, and stairs – a backpack may be the best option. When choosing a backpack, make sure it has an internal frame that is lightweight and fits your body well. Practice walking with it/carrying it before you leave. Additionally, make sure you do not let it exceed a weight that you are comfortable carrying and maneuvering on your own.

You will also want to have a separate smaller bag for day or overnight adventures. This smaller bag will allow you to sightsee and travel around with all your necessary supplies, but avoid having to haul everything with you. Try to be discreet with this bag – nothing that seems “too expensive,” “American,” or “touristy”.

There are a lot of security-enhanced features on travel bags that come in a variety of sizes; including RFID blockers, extra secure latches tans slash proof, etc. One company that sells many of these products is PacSafe (<http://www.pacsafe.com/>).

They can be expensive, but may be a more comforting product for some travelers. Users claim that they really help discourage pickpockets, who generally look for the easiest targets for a quick scam. Inside your bag, you will want to have an organizational system that works for you. There are many ways to stay organized – you just need to find the best option for your travel style. One option is the “Ziploc” method. Use gallon-size bags for clothing, paper, etc., quart size bags for toiletries, and smaller bags for smaller items. They can also double as “dirty laundry” bags once you have gone through some of your outfits, keeping everything else clean in the process. Using this method allows you to pack and stay organized in a variety of ways. For example, you can keep shirts together or whole outfits. When looking for an item or outfit, you will know exactly what bag to grab! Packing cubes use a similar process and are readily available from luggage and outdoor stores.

Other Packing Tips

- Rolling your clothes is a more efficient way to pack than folding them
- Rain covers for packs can be clutch
- Keep dirty clothes separate from clean ones
- Use a system that protects important paper from getting stolen, lost, or wet
- Make sure you follow all TSA guidelines (no prohibited items!)
- Use a combo lock or intertwining key rings to keep zipper areas locked, together, and safe
- Use a money belt or neck pouch to store important documents (passports, emergency numbers, etc.) and extra cash or cards
- Carry a “robbery” wallet with a small amount of cash that you can easily hand over in case of emergency

Remember to Pack

- Prescription medication to last the duration of your trip (including extra contacts)

- Favorite brands of toiletry items – you may not be able to find these items in certain countries (especially feminine hygiene products and toothpaste)
- Weather appropriate items (raincoat, winter clothes, etc.)
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Travel documents, plus one copy (passport, visa, etc.) – make sure you also leave one copy with a family member or friend or saved in the Cloud in case of emergencies
- Travel information you may need after arriving from the airport (number for lodging, etc.)
- Outlet converter/adaptor (know which you’ll need) and chargers for any electronics
- Travel entertainment (books, deck of cards, journal, electronic device, etc.) for long travel

Resources

- **Transportation Security Administration Traveler Info**
866-289-9673
www.tsa.gov/traveler-information

Health

Safety: Being Vigilant Without Being Paranoid

It can be easy to let your guard down when you are in a place that feels safe, but when an unsafe situation arises, it is also easy to feel scared or violated. This is completely normal. Unfortunately, bad stuff can and does happen while students are abroad, we just want to make sure you are prepared and protect yourself as best you can.

You should never leave your purse or luggage unattended in a public place (including restaurants, bars, train stations, hotel/hostel lobbies, buses, etc.). Put your hands over wallets/purses in crowded places or on public transportation, especially when you get off and on, as this is when people are most vulnerable to theft. Pickpockets choose targets that are easy, or at least easily distracted. They also use a lot of different ruses or scams to distract people – especially those that look like tourists with money.

Try to refrain from being too distracted. If you have to look at a map or your phone, be discreet or stop in a shop or café to plot your next move. Try not to look lost, as this can make you look like an easy target.

Travel in groups as much as possible. Groups ranging from two to four people are ideal. Most restaurant/café tables outside of the United States cannot accommodate more than four people. Four is also a good number if someone needs medical attention or if something happens – this way two people can stay in a location, while two go for help. Let someone at your home base know where you will be each day. When traveling independently, leave your valuables at home – but ALWAYS bring your ID or passport with you (some countries require travelers to have their passports on them at all times).

Other Safety Tips

- Be aware of your surroundings at all times
- Pay attention to your instincts – or your gut feelings
- Lock up your belongings in shared living situations
- Always lock the door when sleeping (if it does not lock, place a door stopper, chair, or bottles in front of the door – something that will prevent people from opening it or wake you up if someone tries to enter)
- Keep your money, credit cards, passport, and tickets with you at all times OR locked in your hotel safe

Digital Safety Abroad

- Password-protect your phone and turn on its “find” feature
- Back up your data before you leave for your trip and as much as possible during your trip
- Be careful using public Wi-Fi hotspots. Hackers can steal your personal information while you are connected
- Turn off Wi-Fi and Bluetooth when you aren’t using them. It saves battery life and helps to stop hackers from locating your phone.



Staying Healthy

Staying healthy can be country or region specific – make sure you check guidebooks and online resources for up to date information on your specific travel destination. Check with your medical provider to get specific tips on staying healthy while abroad, as well as to obtain any medical documentation that you may need to take with you (prescriptions, medical history, etc.).

Health Resources

- **AXA Assistance**

855-327-1411

medassist-usa@axa-assistance.us

Carleton College Policy # for CISI/AXA is NO6566339

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

Travelers’ Health

800-232-4636

www.cdc.gov/travel

- **Int’l Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers**

716-754-4883

www.iamat.org

- **International Society of Travel Medicine**

404-373-8282

Communicating with Friends & Family

Before you leave, figure out what your family and friends (particularly significant others) are expecting from you communication-wise (frequency, duration, etc.). If you know that you do not want to be tied to your email, phone, or Skype, set some ground-rules with your loved ones back home. Once you create a communication plan or set expectations – make sure you stick to them! If you cannot stick to your set plan, let your family or friends know in advance if your plans change.

To make your life easier and your experience more enjoyable, particularly if something goes wrong, be sure to let someone know – program director, on-site supervisor, family, friends, etc. – where you are staying and traveling.

As you travel, it is also important to remember not to reveal too much on the internet about where you are and what you are doing. Sharing too much information could put you at unnecessary risk, regardless of where you are in the world. Along those same lines, make sure you review the blog code of ethics on the OCS website for guidelines on responsible, respectful, and safe blogging.

Cell Phone Advice: There are many different types of plans. You will want to do your research and decide what plan makes the most sense for you and your travel plans. Your current provider may or may not have the best option, so make sure you do your research!

Communication Options Abroad

- Cell phones – get an international plan or buy a cell phone abroad
- Video Chatting- Skype, Google Hangout, FaceTime
- Viber or other internet-based calling programs
- SMS, iMessage, WhatsApp for texting
- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat, etc. for updating your status to friends and family

Taking Photos While Abroad

When taking pictures abroad, you want to make sure that you are being culturally appropriate. Some events, however “cool”, should not be photographed (funerals, for instance). You should always ASK before taking pictures of a person, personal property, event, etc. If you plan to post pictures on social media sites, be sure to have their permission, as well.

Consider sharing photos with friends during your travels. This way, on any given day you have one “photographer” capturing the fun moments, and others can leave their cameras at home and simply enjoy the scenery and/or experience. If you do not want to be tied to your camera, consider investing in a

good photography book or post cards to remind you of the area or experience.

Make sure you are thoughtful about bringing the right technology for you and your travel style. Do you really NEED the fanciest camera? What other items will you need to bring with you – cords, adapters, memory cards, batteries, etc.? Think about the experience you want to have/capture and pack accordingly.

Photo Resources

• **Photograph Guides & Other Fun Stuff –**

<http://culturocity.com/>

What If Something Goes Wrong?

Do not panic! Try to stay calm and think rationally. You will want to take care of the most important problem first – what is most pressing or what will get you to safety first? If you are traveling independently and something goes wrong, try to ask for help from locals or those around you, if you can. If you are close to your home base or have access to a phone, ask your program director or local host for help and be sure to follow-up with them once the situation is resolved. Once the problem has been resolved, take it easy for a bit to regain your confidence before moving on.



