INDEPENDENT TRAVEL BASICS

Preparing for an independent travel experience abroad

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Material adapted from annual “Independent Travel Basics” workshop offered by Off-Campus Studies staff and returnees
**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 some 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 in 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. Think about what type of experience will help you attain your specific goals.

**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.

**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 Factbook, 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) or International SOS.
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!

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 LGBTQ student, check out the OCS website for resources, located under the “OCS and Diversity” side-tab. Also, for specific information on the rights of LGBTQ individuals in countries around the world, take a look at the International, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersexual Association’s website.

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:

How will you/your social identities be treated and/or perceived (i.e. as a woman, LGBT, 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 tall, blond, woman – would catcalling on the street be overwhelming and stressful for you? If you identify as LGBT, 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.

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

- Diversity Abroad - http://diversityabroad.com/
- Rainbow Special Interest Group - http://www.rainbowsig.org/
- Mobility International USA - http://www.miusa.org/
Passports and Visas

All your passports should be valid for at least six months after 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 or three ways to access your money while traveling. This will ensure you have money (or at least access to it) in the event of loss, credit/debit cards not working, etc. Occasionally, ATM/debit cards may not work for a variety of reasons (broken magnetic strips, low on funds, 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
- 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 check into chip and PIN cards (used extensively in Europe)- many US banks now offer them and they offer additive security. Capital One 360 & Charles Schwab Checking offer low to 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 free-standing 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)
- 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 are: CISI, HTH Worldwide & 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

**Bed & Breakfast, Pension, Air BNB etc.**
- Can be more home-like than hotels, sometimes not as flexible

**Hostel**
- Usually have dorms, and singles, doubles, triples
- Check location, sometimes outside city center
- Very good way to meet/interact with other travelers

**Dorm**
- Sometimes universities or religious convents/monasteries rent out dorm rooms during the summer
- Must call ahead

**Couch Surfing, WWOOF**
- Free place to stay while travelling with no or little trade (farm work, etc.) needed
- Couch Surfing is an online community of people offering their couches or spare beds to people who are travelling
- WWOOF is World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, an opportunity that links volunteers and organic farms/growers together

WITH ALL OF THESE: Do your homework! For hostels, B&Bs, and budget hotels, the following are great for both reading reviews and booking: hostels.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 are not usually centrally located, which means 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
  * Kayak.com
  * Studentuniverse.com—best for one-way tickets
  * Fly.com—check out their fare calendars
  * Skyscanner.com—consolidator site

Trains
- Safe, convenient, usually centrally located in towns; can be very efficient
- Will allow you to see a lot of the countryside and other sites in between destinations
- Overnight train rides can save you money for lodging, too!
- EurRail 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
- Slow, but you see a lot

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

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

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 rollerboard 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 back 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 “Zip-lock” 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! Additionally, there are items like packing cubes you can invest in that use a similar process.

**Other Packing Tips**

- Rolling your clothes is a more efficient way to pack than folding them
- 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 (http://www.tsa.gov/traveler-information/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 (rain coat, jacket, etc.)
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Travel documents, plus one copy (passport, visa, etc.) – make sure you also leave on copy with a family member or friend in case of emergencies
- Travel information you may need (train schedules, lodging info, 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 train/plane travel

**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 (approximately) 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

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. As with anything, it is best to do your research and prepare ahead of time for what your travel experience may be like. Checking with your medical provider is also a great way to ensure that you can stay healthy while abroad, as well as get any medical documentation that you may need to take with you printed and ready to go (prescriptions, medical history, etc.).

Some Basic Tips for Staying Healthy

- Eat well – know your diet and what limitations it may have
- Get adequate sleep
- Be careful drinking tap water and eating raw foods
- Take your medications on a regular schedule
- Wear comfortable walking shoes
- Make sure you are getting enough exercise
- Do not feel like you have to do EVERYTHING – journaling, looking through photos, and resting can be just as meaningful and important as visiting another site or museum

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 Travellers**
  716-754-4883
  www.iamat.org
- **International Society of Travel Medicine**
  404-373-8282
  www.istm.org

Photo: Jamie Haas ’10
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 may change. This will help your family and friends worry less if you miss a check in or phone call.

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 – international plans, purchasing a cell phone abroad, etc.
- Video Chatting- Skype, Google Hangout, FaceTime
- Magic Jack
- Viber or other internet-based calling programs
- SMS, Viber, WhatsApp for texting
- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, 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. 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. This is a great way to be present in the moment!

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. This is another way to focus on being there and enjoying the experience, while still having it in pictures to remind you later. These also make great souvenirs to share with friends and family!

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://culturosity.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 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.