

Confessions of a student abroad

▶ Former students reveal their true thoughts and most eye-opening experiences. ▶ You don't always have to go to class to learn something.

● CRISTINA VELOCCI



AN AUSTRALIAN IN SWEDEN

JAMES BENNETT, 28, BROADCAST JOURNALIST, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA; STUDIED ABROAD IN UPPSALA, SWEDEN THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN 2004

Why Sweden?

I wanted to go as far away from home as possible. For a beach kid, it was as different as I could find. I'd never seen snow before! Also, the girls had a pretty good reputation.

Was there anything about the local culture that surprised you?

Strange foodstuffs, like fermented herring, and the Swedes' propensity for riding bicycles in absurd

"I wanted to go as far away from home as possible. I'd never seen snow before! Also, the girls had a pretty good reputation." BENNETT, SECOND FROM LEFT IN PHOTO

weather. I was also quite surprised about the level of inherent trust Swedes have in their government, but I guess that's what a cradle-to-grave welfare system does.

And the biggest challenge?

Budgeting! I'd saved heaps of coin before going, had grants from my university and had a bar job in Sweden, but when there's more travel and drinking opportunities than hot dinners, restraint is tough to

come by. But I learned resourcefulness: There's always a way around a cancelled flight, an assignment deadline or a can't-do attitude. Also, learning enough Swedish to work and chat in a bar was great fun and a fantastic way to meet people.

Did you ever run into any trouble?

One night in early winter, we stayed out in a lakeside cabin. It seemed like a good idea to cut a hole in

the ice and go swimming at midnight, but it was not. It took four weeks to get full feeling back in my toes. Not my finest hour.

Give us the dirty details of your most memorable night out.

The countless nights at Uppsala's nations, or student society bars that are all located within 15th-century buildings, are too difficult to single out. But if I had to pick one: It would be lying in the snow in northern Sweden staring up at a breathtaking northern lights display after having consumed a significant amount of moonshine vodka. I was happy just to see, let alone see nature at its finest!

"I LIVED IN A TRAILER"

DAN HOWARD, 40, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR MONTAGE DEER VALLEY, PARK CITY, UTAH; STUDIED ABROAD IN ST. HYACINTHE, QUEBEC, CANADA THROUGH AFS INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMS IN 1982

So...Canada? Why so close to home?

As a high school sophomore, I was inspired to apply for AFS in hopes of being sent to Sri Lanka or Iceland, where living amidst a profoundly alien landscape and culture would truly challenge my American experience. I was genuinely disappointed when I was assigned to the program to have my foreign exchange study experience in Canada. As luck would have it, the province I was sent to was Quebec—at the height of its separatist movement. Truthfully, nothing could have been more foreign.

What was your living situation like?

I lived with a host family who lived in a trailer—and both parents were unemployed, even though they



had a six-year-old daughter. I soon moved.

Was there anything about the that surprised you?

I had not been around a poorly educated population before, so it was a learning experience. My host family did not eat on plates—only placemats—and their diets were very unhealthy. Yet confronting the issue of economic disparity from around the world is a very important thing for Americans to do.

PARTYING IN BANGKOK

BETH CARTER, 40, FREELANCE WRITER, NAPERVILLE, ILLINOIS; STUDIED ABROAD IN KOBE, JAPAN, THROUGH MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY IN 1992

Did you live with a Japanese family?

I lived with a host family and, truth be told, it was both wonderful and really hard. My family had three young boys, and they were just like kids are here in the States: sometimes they're great and just the sweetest, and then sometimes they don't behave and you want to kill them. But on the whole, my family was incredible.

Any surprises?

I was amazed at how hard the school kids study and how little the college kids study. Also, the vending machines that sold beer and whiskey, and businessmen reading pornographic comic books on the train in plain view were pretty surprising.



What was the best trip you took while abroad?

Two girl friends and I took a weeklong trip to Bangkok, Thailand. We met a bunch of Thai bellhops at our hotel and we ended up staying in Bangkok the whole time to hang out with them. They took us all over the city to the clubs and restaurants ... Looking back, we were crazy and it's a miracle we didn't get robbed or worse.

A DRIVE THROUGH OMAN

LEXI SHERESHEWSKY, 23, ASSISTANT MEDIA PLANNER, NEW YORK CITY; STUDIED ABROAD IN CAIRO, EGYPT THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON IN 2007



How did you decide to study in Egypt?

I had randomly taken an Islamic History class my freshman year of college and always wanted to study a second language. As I got more into my studies in the U.S., it made sense to study Arabic and Cairo was the best place to do it. I had very little expectations; I really didn't know anything about what life would be like.

Did you have any concerns?

My mom definitely did. People have a lot of preconceived notions about what it's like in the Middle East, and they are mostly negative. These are, as one learns, almost always wrong and it is actually incredibly safe, especially for a woman! At the moment, maybe not so safe, but at the time it was.

And you lived with a Muslim family?

The first semester, I lived in a two-star hotel in a decent neighborhood with about 100 other American students. It was university housing. The second semester, I moved to an old apartment downtown next to Tahrir Square with two friends. It is difficult in Muslim countries to live with a host family. Especially for an American woman, I wanted my independence and that would have been hard with a family. That being said, I had a very close relationship with an Egyptian friend of mine and his family. I spent holidays with him and slept over with his sister.

What was the craziest trip you took while you were abroad?

I went to Oman for two weeks with three of my friends. We rented a car in Muscat and drove down the coast to Salalah, near Yemen. We brought tents and camped out on the most amazing beaches you'll ever see. Sometimes we drove on paved roads, sometimes dirt, and at one point we paid a Bedouin to help guide us across the sand dunes when there wasn't any road left. It was so untouched and there was so little tourism. A man we met actually said to us, "Oh, there was an American here in 1997, his name was Steve. Do you know him?"

IN AFRICA, AND CUBA, AND JAIL

LEIGH NANNINI RIVAS, 29, COMMUNITY RELATIONS MANAGER, CORNWALL, NEW YORK; STUDIED ABROAD THROUGH SEMESTER AT SEA IN 2002



How did you decide to do a Semester at Sea rather than study in one country?

I was going for exotic. The program takes 600-plus students, puts them on a ship and sails them to 10 different countries. We were at each port for two to four days and set sail from Vancouver, traveling to Japan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Malaysia, India, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil and Cuba.

What was your living situation like?

It was that of a college dorm, except on a constantly swaying ship. Beds, dressers and desks were nailed down and unable to be moved. My bed practically touched my roommate's. On the television, movies like "Titanic" and "The Perfect Storm" played on repeat throughout the trip.

What was the most challenging part of studying abroad for you?

The poverty we saw. It was overwhelming and heartbreaking. In South Africa, while on a day trip to the townships outside of Cape Town, I witnessed a terrible beating. Someone from our Semester at Sea group had given a little boy a banana as a token of affection. When the older teenage boys of the town got wind of this, they beat the little boy up, forcing him to surrender the fruit. It was cruel and brutal.

What was your most memorable night out?

On the last night in Japan—a night originally intended for karaoke—a

friend and I ended up in jail. It's a very long and awkward story, but it goes something like this: A friend and I got into a cab, the driver wrote on a piece of paper \$99. We understood this to mean that the price to take us from Osaka to our port would be \$99. However, after a lengthy cell phone conversation, the driver crossed out the \$99 and wrote \$999. We didn't agree to pay, so he hauled us into the station, screaming. It was quite daunting—I was hysterical, my friend was totally blasé. Only when the interpreter began calling us criminals did my friend realize this was not the situation we wanted to be in.