John Felice Rome Center
Pre-Departure Handbook

Updated 7-2015
Table of Contents

Emergency Precautions/Procedures .................................................. Page 3

JFRC and LUC Contact Information .................................................. Page 3 – 4

Financial Information ........................................................................ Page 5

Travel Resources / Packing Guide .................................................... Page 6 – 8

Health & Safety Abroad ................................................................. Pages 9– 11

CISI Insurance Abroad ................................................................. Pages 11

Cultural Adjustment ......................................................................... Pages 12 – 14

Identifying American Values and Learning from Cultural Encounters .................................................. Pages 15 – 18

Cultural Difference and Diversity Issues .......................................... Page 18 – 22
Study Abroad Emergency Precautions & Procedures

How to best prepare for handling an emergency abroad

- Register with the U.S. State Department before you go abroad
  [https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/](https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/)  Travel registration is a free service that allows you to record information about your upcoming trip abroad that the Department of State can use to assist you in case of an emergency.
- Carry your International Health Insurance card at all times
- Know the JFRC student life team and the JFRC’s emergency procedures
  When you arrive at the JFRC become familiar with your on-site student life team along with the emergency procedures and numbers given to you at orientation. The JFRC team in Rome will be the closest to you and the most familiar with local procedures, rules and customs.
- Ask Questions
  If you are unsure about what the emergency protocol is or what services are available to you in case of an emergency while in Rome, Italy or traveling outside of Italy.

What to do in an emergency

- Contact your on-site Student Life Team immediately.
  If you are not feeling well and need to seek medical services abroad, contact your on-site Student life team immediately for assistance in getting medical attention. At least one SLA is on duty 24 hours of the day. If you are unable to get in contact with an SLA contact a member of staff before seeking emergency medical services please contact that person to make them aware of your situation as soon as physically possible.
- Contact Loyola’s Office for International Programs if additional assistance is needed
  If you are unable to get the help you need locally, contact Loyola’s 24-hour emergency contact number (773-508-6039) and you will be connected with someone in the Office for International Programs (OIP) who will assist you. If OIP is contacted regarding a student emergency abroad, we will call the two emergency contacts that the student listed on her/his study abroad application

JFRC Contact Information

John Felice Rome Center – [www.luc.edu/rome](http://www.luc.edu/rome)
Phone: (out of country dial 011 39) then the JFRC # 06.355.881
Address: Via Massimi 114/A, Roma, Italia 00136

**Cynthia Bomben – Associate Dean of Students**
Phone: (out of country dial 011 39) **06.355.883.02**
Cell Phone: (out of country dial 011 39) **333.357.4887**
E-mail: [cbomben@luc.edu](mailto:cbomben@luc.edu)

**Steven Metzmaker – Residence Life Coordinator**
Phone: (out of country dial 011 39) **06.355.881**
Cell Phone: (out of country dial 011 39) 334 3766554
Email: [amangosing@luc.edu](mailto:amangosing@luc.edu)

**Student Life Assistants –**
Email: [RomeSLA@luc.edu](mailto:RomeSLA@luc.edu)
Loyola University Chicago Contact Information
JFRC Chicago Office – Loyola Chicago’s Office for International Programs (OIP)
www.luc.edu/studyabroad and www.luc.edu/rome

During Regular Office Hours
OIP is open 8:30 – 5:00 central time Monday through Friday.
Phone: 773-508-2760 or 800-344-ROMA
e-mail: rome@luc.edu

Outside Regular Office Hours
When OIP is not open and there is an emergency, you can contact Campus Safety’s 24 hour number (773-508-6039). They handle after hours calls and can reach OIP staff if necessary. For non-emergencies, you may e-mail us at the addresses listed above.

Academic Units

Residence Life
773-508-3300
http://www.luc.edu/reslife/

Student Financial Assistance
773-508-3155
http://www.luc.edu/finaid
abroadfinaid@luc.edu

The Office of the Bursar
773-508-7705
http://www.luc.edu/sbo

Wellness Center
773-508-2530
http://www.luc.edu/wellness
Financial Information

**Loyola University Chicago Student:** For those of you who have questions about financial aid it is important that you contact the Office of Financial Assistance at abroadfinaid@luc.edu

The JFRC is a Center of Loyola and therefore the following aid is applied for Loyola Chicago students - Federal Grants and Loans and Alternative loans. Loyola Grants and Scholarships. If you have a question about whether or not an outside scholarship you currently have will count towards your semester abroad please contact abroadfinaid@luc.edu.

**Visiting Students:** For visiting students with questions about financial aid it is important that you contact your Office of Financial Assistance at your home institution. You should also talk with them about how loan money will be dispersed and how to handle these types of finances while abroad if you have any questions.

Billing: Each institution is different. Please speak to your Study Abroad office to learn how you will be billed for your semester/summer at the JFRC. You can also contact the Rome Chicago team at rome@luc.edu and a university relations coordinator may also be able to assist you.
Helpful Resources for Traveling Abroad / Packing Guide

Please bring the following to Rome to expedite required paperwork on official Move-in day

- **Three (3)** complete, legible copies of photo page and Italian visa page of your **passport**
- **Two (2)** copies plus original of the letter of enrollment (lettera d’iscrizione) from the Office for International Programs after it is stamped (notarized) by the Italian Consulate.
- **Four (4)** Passport sized photos
- **Three (3)** copies of proof of international health insurance coverage (CISI or equivalent)

**Clothing**

**Bring the basics!** You’ll likely buy some clothing while here. Plan on clothes for the season you’ll be living in Rome. November through March is cold and damp due to rainy weather. Although June, July and August are warm and humid summer months, the evenings can be cool especially May- June.

**Bring comfortable shoes!** You’ll probably walk a great deal more than you do in the U.S. Also remember that cobblestone streets in Rome are uneven and very slippery when wet!

**Be mindful of dress codes!** Remember that more modest dress is required to enter churches. Women: cover shoulders and knees. Men: no sleeveless t-shirts, and pants are better than shorts.

**Formal clothes:** There will be a few occasions during the semester when you’ll want to sport your fancy threads, so bring a few formal options.

**Telephone Communication**

Long distance calls can be made from the floor phones in the JFRC residence halls with calling cards that we sell on campus for €5. There is a room dedicated to students using Skype for phone calls. [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com) – a program for making free calls over the internet to anyone who also has Skype. You can also buy credit from Skype to call directly to a landline.

**Cell phones:** Semester and full-year JFRC students will receive pre-paid Italian cell phones during Orientation in Rome. The basic model comes with an Italian phone number and includes a small amount of credit pre-loaded. Students may purchase additional minutes as needed throughout the semester.

*If you have questions about the phone plan or about obtaining a phone during summer sessions please email cbomben@luc.edu*

**Prescription Drugs**

If you take prescription drugs, take note of the strength of each dosage and chemical composition. European medicines are sometimes calibrated differently than medicines in the US.

**MEDICATION CANNOT BE SHIPPED FROM THE US TO YOU, SO PLAN AHEAD.**
Psychotherapeutic Medications
Psychotherapeutic medicine prescribed in the US may not be allowed in Italy because they are considered drugs. Students found with such medicine or with more than the daily-prescribed dosage could be asked to leave the country. To avoid this, students in need of psychotherapeutic medicine should check with their doctor if they can take certain medicine into Italy or other European countries they will visit. If the medicine is not allowed and the students cannot substitute it with one allowed in Italy, students should request that their doctor write a certificate specifying the reasons why they are taking that medicine, the dosage required for the length of their stay, and why they are traveling into the country with a certain amount. Psychotherapeutic medicine cannot be shipped to Italy.

Class Supplies
You can purchase supplies like notebooks, pens, and pencils at local neighborhood stores in Rome. Students studying abroad for the semester or full year can purchase your books at the JFRC campus bookstore after you arrive. Students who are studying during the summer should plan to purchase their textbooks in advance and pack them in their suitcase with the exception of Italian language textbooks.

Computers
Students should bring USB drives for storing files; they can also be bought in Rome. Please make sure that you bring a plug/power adapter for your laptop if necessary. Voltage in Italy and Europe is 220 volts.

The JFRC Information Commons, Computer Lab, Renaldo’s Café Bar, and all common areas outside of Residence Halls have wireless access. Students are encouraged to bring laptops with wireless cards installed to ensure Internet access.

Toiletries and Specialized Products
Toiletries: Bring travel sized items. You can easily buy larger sizes once you arrive. You can buy almost any toiletry you need in Rome thought the brands maybe different, but you may want to bring some over the counter medication like ibuprofen, Tylenol, and cold medication. Cosmetics and toiletries CANNOT be shipped to you in Italy. They will be stopped at customs.

Contact lens solution: Though it is available in Italy, it is usually more expensive and products vary from the U.S. Bring an extra set of contacts or glasses and your lens prescription. If you wear glasses, bring a copy of your eye glass prescription as well.

Linens and Towels:
The JFRC will provide sheets and pillows/pillow cases for your bed. There is a sheet exchange/cleaning service on campus once a week. The JFRC does provide towels.

Money
The easiest way to get cash is at an ATM (Bancomat in Italian), and there is an ATM on the campus. Contact your bank before leaving to tell them you’ll be abroad and for how long. Also ask about fees incurred for international usage.

The Business office will exchange traveler’s checks but not personal checks. They will also exchange US Dollars for Euros. You can pay with cash, credit card or traveler’s checks for books and study trips at the JFRC.

We recommend bringing about €250 with you so that you will have money when you first arrive in Rome.

**Currency Rates & Exchanges**
- www.xe.com - for up to the minute currency conversions and exchange rates
- www.x-rates.com - for currency converter and table

**Useful Websites for Family**
- www.studyabroad.com/telcodes.html - for international telephone codes
- http://travel.state.gov - for useful numbers at the Department of State in case of emergency
- http://blogs.luc.edu/studyabroad/ - for blogs of current LUC students who are abroad. If you’d like to volunteer to blog through this site next semester, please email studyabroad@luc.edu or rome@luc.edu

**Final Pieces of Advice**

- Bring a backpack for day trips. A larger, but not too large, piece of luggage is also needed for the longer weekend trips. A duffle bag rather than a bag with wheels is recommended (easier to use on cobblestones or in small towns with long flights of stairs).

- Do not have large boxes, technological or pharmaceutical products (e.g., computers, cameras, memory cards, toothpaste, deodorant, contact lens solution) shipped to you in Rome. You will be required to pay a hefty tax on them once they arrive in Italy and may even have to go claim them in person at the airport.

- Do not make personal travel plans or plan to host visitors from the US during mandatory program trips. For security and liability reasons, guests cannot accompany students on JFRC-sponsored study trips.

- Please read the Orientation Schedules to see what is planned during your first weeks in ROME.
Health & Safety Abroad

Before You Leave: Things to Consider for Health

- **Health Exams**: Have a general physician exam if you have not had one recently. You should be up to date on all shots (e.g. tetanus/diphtheria, polio, measles, mumps, and rubella). Obtain the relevant booster(s). Have a dental checkup. The last thing you need is to have your wisdom teeth impacted while abroad.

- **Medical Identification**: If you are allergic to penicillin or have a condition such as diabetes or another condition that may require emergency medical care, carry some sort of identification on you to that effect.

- **Medical History**: If you will need to see a doctor on a regular basis once you arrive overseas, inform the Study Abroad Programs Office about this before you leave and then inform the program coordinator upon arrival. *Take a complete medical record to your program site, along with medical and prescription histories.*

- **Prescriptions**: If you take prescription medicine, speak to your doctor. Prescription medications vary from country to country in name, potency, and purity and may NOT be sent to you through international mail. Some medicines are even illegal in certain countries so it is best to find out beforehand. If possible, you should take sufficient medications with you to last the whole time you are abroad. Keep this medication in the original container. Also, ask your doctor for a letter to present to customs official and overseas doctors explaining what you need to take, including a generic breakdown (not just a generic name) of you medication.

- **Wearers of glasses or contacts**: bring a typed copy of your prescription and a pair of glasses or contacts with you. If you wear contacts bring at least two extra pairs with you and enough cleaning supplies to last you throughout the trip.

- **Inoculations**: Check with reliable authorities (we recommend [www.cdc.org](http://www.cdc.org)) to find out what vaccinations are currently recommended for your program site. Do not delay since you may need several shots, taken weeks apart.

Health While Abroad

- **Staying Healthy**: Eat well and get sufficient rest. If you become ill, get proper care. Don’t hesitate to tell your host family or onsite director if you are ill and don’t be afraid to visit a doctor or hospital just because you don’t speak the language fluently.

- **Continuing Medical Care**: If you will need to see a doctor on a regular basis once you arrive overseas, inform the overseas program coordinator upon arrival.

Before You Leave: Things to Consider for Safety

- **Document Photocopies**: Before leaving, make three copies of all your important documents (passport, visa, traveler’s checks, and travel itinerary). Keep these in a safe place, leaving a copy at the home in the U.S. When you don’t need your passport, carry the copy. Get a police report documenting any losses. Bring 4 extra photos in the event that you need to replace your passport or obtain visas.
• **Packing Valuables:** Never leave bags unattended, and try not to carry large amounts of cash. Take and use a lock. Take only as much luggage as you can carry and never let it out of your sight. Do not pack valuables (passports, documents, contact lenses, medications, and electrical equipment) in checked luggage.

• **Airport Security:** At airports you should be prepared for lengthy check-ins since thorough security checks can take time. Carry-on luggage will be X-rayed and possibly hand-searched. Do not accept packages from people you do not know well or carry packages for other travelers.

**Safety While Abroad**

• **Carry Your JFRC ID Card/Emergency Card:** The JFRC will provide you with a wallet-size, student ID card with your name, photo, and important emergency contact information. It is important that you carry this card with you at all times while abroad.

• **Register with the U.S. Department of State:** Registration allows you to record information about your upcoming trip abroad that the Department of State can use to assist you in case of an emergency. It is an easy, on-line process that does not cost anything. Visit [https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibr/](https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibr/).

• **Be Informed:** Read current newspapers and listen to TV or radio news; know what is going on in the world. Check with program staff before you travel regarding possible travel advisories and read up on the customs and political situation of every country you plan to visit. Talk to international students and program alumni from the places you intend to visit before you go (peer resources are listed [http://www.luc.edu/studyabroad/contact_students.shtml](http://www.luc.edu/studyabroad/contact_students.shtml)). Their insights will prove very helpful.

• **Watch and Learn from Locals:** If they do not go out after 9 p.m. without an escort, then you should not either. Ask questions of your host family, fellow dormitory residents, or your program director. If they do not make eye contact with strangers, then you shouldn’t either. Talk to hostel or hotel owners, program staff, tour guides, and fellow travelers to find out which scams are in vogue with local thieves.

• **Be Inconspicuous:** Avoid looking too “North American.” Do not speak loudly and draw attention to yourself. Learn a few basic language phrases for each country where you plan to travel. To avoid looking like an American tourist, do not wear t-shirts, sweatshirts, or baseball caps with North American logos. Do not wear your camera around your neck. Remember that your map can give you away. Especially in heavily touristed cities, look at city maps and metro guides before leaving your hotel.

• **Be Aware at all times of your surroundings.** Use the precautions that are customary in any major city in the world today. Travel with a friend. Plan your route and walk confidently. If you are being followed, feel threatened, or you are lost, go into a store, restaurant, or other public area. You know what feels comfortable and what does not. If your instincts tell you a situation is “not right,” trust them and move along.

• **Use Common Sense.** Use your common sense and your street skills. If you would not camp out in a city park at home, then do not consider doing this abroad. Avoid walking alone at night. Stay in well-populated, well-trafficked areas. Be especially cautious if you have been drinking. Avoid arguments. Be streetwise and you’ll encourage thieves to pick another target.

• **Guard Personal Belongings:** Pickpockets can be extremely adept. Do not carry your passport or money in a hip pocket, open purse, or outside pocket on your backpack. Pickpockets mingle widely in tourist crowds, especially at airports, travel agencies, and
American Express offices. A money belt or neck pouch is a good idea. If you need to sleep while in transit, use your pack as your pillow. On crowded city subways, always carry your daypack in front of you. Always have a hand or foot in a loop or strap of your luggage when you set it down to avoid having it snatched away while you’re not looking.

- **Organize Your Funds.** Organize your funds into two separate packs each consisting of a credit card and currency. When in-country one of these packs should usually be left at your residence as a back-up. Keep the cash you are using separate from the rest of your money. Try to avoid reaching into your money belt in public places.

- **Traffic and the Road:** According to the Association for Safe International Road Travel (ASIRT), statistics indicate that the single greatest cause of death and accidents. These far exceed the number of deaths resulting from disease, violence or terrorism. Avoid car or bus travel at night. Use a seatbelt. We strongly recommend that you not own or operate a motor vehicle of any kind during your time abroad. Driving regulations and habits in many countries are different from those in the U.S. and driving overseas can be potentially dangerous. Your family’s liability insurance may not be valid abroad. Pedestrians are also at risk, so be especially careful in crossing the street. Never assume that you have the right of way.

- **Avoid Demonstrations,** especially in politically volatile countries. What appears to be a peaceful situation could suddenly become dangerous and you could become caught in the middle.

- **Leave You Travel Itinerary With Friends and Program Staff.** Provide your travel itinerary to your family back home and to friends while traveling. Always tell someone where you are going. Draft a list of important telephone numbers and addresses of the locations you are to visit and the telephone number of your nearest embassy or consulate. Leave a copy with your contact person.

**How to Utilize Your CISI Insurance Abroad**

All **Loyola Chicago students** studying abroad are **required** to have the Loyola CISI health and emergency services plan prior to going abroad. You will be automatically enrolled and an email with the insurance card will be sent to you.

All **Visiting students** are also **required** to have Loyola CISI health and emergency services plan unless your university required a different international insurance that meets the waiver process. Unless a waiver process is completed you will be automatically enrolled in CISI and an email with the insurance card will be sent to you.

**What should I do if I need assistance while abroad?**

The CISI Team Assist plan is designed by CISI in conjunction with the assistance company to provide travelers with worldwide, 24-hour emergency telephone assistance service. Multilingual help and advice can be furnished for the insured person in the event of an emergency.

If you require Team Assist assistance, your ID number is your policy number: **GLM N04849590**.

That policy number, along with important contact information, can be found on your CISI insurance ID card, under –Emergency Contact Info– on the Participant Portal, and on the claim form (which is part of the LUC insurance coverage brochure).
To reach Team Assist from within the US, call 877-577-9504. From outside the US, you can place a collect call to 240-330-1520. You can also email OPS@europassistance-usa.com.

It is very important to carry your ID card with you at all times and to make sure you follow LUC’s suggested emergency protocols that are outlined during study abroad orientation. Proper communication is the backbone to successful care during emergency situations. Remember: CISI can’t help if they are unaware of the situation! In order to ensure that you are taken care of, please note the following:

**Cultural Adjustment**

Most foreigners living in a new country experience a period of adjustment where they get used to living in a new environment. Generally cultural adjustment is processed in stages, so unlike a step-by-step operation, the stages can overlap or recur throughout the period abroad. Some of the adjustment stages include:

1) **Pre-Departure Stage:** – I just can’t wait to see Rome, but I’m also a bit nervous about the language.

In this stage, you are preparing for departure, packing and planning. You may sense the awareness of the potential cultural shift, feeling excitement and anticipation, yet concern about leaving family, friends and a familiar environment.

2) **“Honeymoon”/Spectator Stage:** – This place is so amazing!

This is where you may experience euphoria at the newness of your environment. Your sense of adventure leads you to explore sites and shops. You may display an outward curiosity about host nationals and a “tourist-like” involvement with the host culture.

3) **Increasing Irritation Stage – “Culture Shock”:** – This place sucks! I hate it here. These people are so stupid.

If you experience this period, you may begin to feel incompetent in the new culture and experience difficulty in adjusting to foreign aspects in everyday life. Your focus shifts from similarities between the new place and home to the differences. Lots of things may seem to be going wrong – you may feel disenchantment, irritation, anger, homesickness or depression. Small differences and inconveniences could feel like major catastrophes. Physically, your sleeping or eating routines may change or you may not feel well. You might find yourself during this stage avoiding people from your host country and searching for more familiar things – American friends, English-language books, etc. If you experience this stage, it generally means you have immersed yourself enough in the culture to let it deeply affect you. This is where real self-change occurs.

4) **Adaptation Stage:** – As long as I’m here, I’d better make the most of it.

This stage is characterized by recovery from culture shock and more enjoyment of your host culture. Your new environment feels more familiar, and you may begin to feel more comfortable with the surroundings and language and feel a sense of belonging in the host country. Host national friends
may ask you to join them for activities. Your sense of humor may return and you may be able to see things from the perspective of the locals.

5) **Return Anxiety Stage:** — No one understands what I experienced.

This stage covers the period before you leave and after you return home. If you experience this stage, the anxiety comes from not wanting to return home and feeling sad about it. You may be saying goodbyes to local and American friends, finishing courses, and possibly making final travel plans. Once home, you may feel disconnected, disoriented, or homesick for your host country/friends. You could feel like you changed but no one at home did. You might begin criticizing the U.S. or —home— in general and show a deeper interest in foreign affairs.

6) **Biculturalism Stage:** — I think in the U.S., it’s good that things are ____________________________, but in (host country), I like the way they ____________________________.

People who reach this stage feel completely functional within the —new culture, and it no longer feels foreign —life in the new country is a normal routine and fluency in the language is gained. They feel a sense of belonging to two or more cultures, and can appreciate both good and bad aspects of the home culture and the foreign one.

**Adjusting to a Foreign Environment**

While adjusting to life in a foreign culture is exciting, it can often be stressful to have to deal with difference in daily life on such a regular basis. Stress is often triggered when our expectations go awry. For example, you are having difficulty understanding the language, even though you’ve been studying it for years. Or your host family keeps serving you food that you absolutely hate! Try to remember that stress is a common response to spending an extended period of time abroad. Furthermore, experiencing stress is generally a good sign because it means that you are really immersing yourself in a different culture rather than moving about in an American —bubble—. We have all heard the expression —no pain, no gain— or —growing pains—. It applies to learning a new culture, too!

Of course, even though stress may be a sign of study abroad success, you will probably be eager to minimize it. Remember that difficulties while abroad are a normal occurrence, but that you can be proactive in the way you deal with the adjustment.

**Here are some tips to help you deal with the stress:**

- Before you leave, learn about your destination: customs, geography, politics, social issues, and history (you can use the fifty questions handout to begin on this).
- Expect change and difference and ambiguity. These are learning opportunities, rather than problems to overcome.

- Keep in mind that during a good amount of time while you are abroad, especially at the beginning, you will not completely understand how things work or what they mean. Learn to be comfortable at failing at some tasks, feeling stupid or silly (like a 5 year old), and asking people for help. Don’t be afraid to make a mistake (especially with regards to speaking a foreign language).

- Accept that different cultures may have different concepts of time and punctuality- not inferior, just different.

- Keep in touch with family and friends back home. Share events as they happen.

- Get out and experience the culture! Make friends (and not just American)! Seek out friends and groups that share your interests. Host national language partners are a great way to meet people your own age if you are going to a non-English speaking country.

- Do not forget to take care of yourself physically-eat healthy, exercise, and get plenty of rest.

- Keeping a journal serves as an excellent way to keep track of what you have done and what you want to do. It gives you a place to record your observations and personal reflections.

- Expect some inconveniences, like long commutes! Your goal is to live like a local- and generally, the locals do not live in the center of town, especially when in a big city.

- If you have problems/concerns, contact local staff first; they are the people who will most likely be able to help you figure out what to do. Trust your program. They have been working with study abroad students for a long time, and they generally know what students need. Thus, for example, if they require that you attend an orientation, trust that they are telling you things that will be helpful to you as you begin your stay abroad and pay attention, even if the information seems repetitious or like common sense.

- If you have any recurring medical concerns, make sure to tell program staff about them as soon as possible (preferably before you leave the U.S.) so that they can be prepared to help you.

- Plan small tasks each day that will help you meet people and accomplish something- like preparing a new food, talking to someone new, accepting an invitation to go somewhere, etc.
Identifying American Values and Learning from Cultural Encounters

Since many of you who are going abroad have lived within American culture for most of your lives, this list is to help you begin to think about the values that Americans prize (below is a list of what Dr. L. Robert Kohls, a Cultural Historian, believes to be the most prominent ones). Identifying aspects of American culture will help you to realize that the society you are about to enter might not follow the same rules, patterns, or systems. You will be distancing yourself from a societal structure that you have lived within your whole life, and everything will be very different. It will be up to you during your time abroad to begin to figure out what the core values and beliefs of the culture you are entering into are. You will begin to understand a new viewpoint and societal approach through experiencing life on a daily basis within the foreign environment. It will be up to you to pick up on these differences. It will be a fascinating discovery!

Why Do Americans Act Like That?
A guide to understanding U.S. culture and its values

Dr. L. Robert Kohls, Director of International Programs at San Francisco State University

This is the kind of advice Dr. L. Robert Kohls gives first time visitors to the United States. Kohls, Director of International Programs at San Francisco State University, has developed a list of 13 commonly held values which help explain why Americans act as they do. He is careful and cautions visitors also, to avoid labeling these values positive or negative. His aim: "I simply want to help you understand the Americans with whom you will be relating-from their own value system rather than from yours". Whether one agrees with Kohls or not - or is willing to accept as valid any generalizations about Americans - his observations are thought-provoking.

1. PERSONAL CONTROL OVER THE ENVIRONMENT / RESPONSIBILITY

Americans do not believe in the power of fate, and they look at people who do as being backward, primitive, or naive. In the American context, to be "fatalistic" is to be superstitious, lazy, or unwilling to take initiative. Everyone should have control over whatever in the environment might potentially affect him or her. The problems of one's life are not seen as having resulted from bad luck as much as having come from one's laziness and unwillingness to take responsibility in pursuing a better life.

2. CHANGE SEEN AS NATURAL AND POSITIVE

In the American mind, change is seen as indisputably good, leading to development, improvement, progress. Many older, more traditional cultures consider change disruptive and destructive; they value stability, continuity, tradition, and ancient heritage - none of which are considered very important in the United States.

3. TIME AND ITS CONTROL

Time is of utmost importance to most Americans. It is something to be on, kept, filled, saved, used, spent, wasted, lost, gained, planned, given, and even killed. Americans are more concerned with getting things accomplished on time than they are with developing interpersonal relations. Their lives seem controlled by the little machines they wear on their wrists, cutting their discussions off abruptly to make their next
appointment on time. This philosophy has enabled Americans to be extremely productive, and productivity is highly valued in their country.

4. EQUALITY / FAIRNESS

Equality is so cherished in the U.S. that it is seen as having a religious basis. Americans believe that all people are created equal and that all should have an equal opportunity to succeed. This concept of equality is strange to seven-eighths of the world which views status and authority as desirable, even if they happen to be near the bottom of the social order. Since Americans like to treat foreigners "Just like anybody else", newcomers to the U.S. should realize that no insult or personal indignity is intended if they are treated in a less than-deferential manner by waiters in restaurants, clerks in stores and hotels, taxi drivers, and other service personnel.

5. INDIVIDUALISM / INDEPENDENCE

Americans view themselves as highly individualistic in their thoughts and actions. They resist being thought of as representatives of any homogeneous group. When they do join groups, they believe they are special; just a little different from other members of the same group. In the U.S. you will find people freely expressing a variety of opinions anywhere and anytime. Yet, in spite of this independence, almost all Americans end up voting for one of their two major political parties. Individualism leads to privacy, which Americans see as desirable. The word privacy does not exist in many non-Western languages. If it does, it is likely to have a negative connotation, suggesting loneliness or forced isolation. It is not uncommon for Americans to say, and almost to believe: "If I don't have half an hour a day to myself, I go stark-raving mad!"

6. SELF-HELP INITIATIVE

Americans take credit only for what they accomplish as individuals. They get no credit for having been born into a rich family but pride themselves in having climbed the ladder of success, to whatever level, all by themselves. In an English-language dictionary, there are more than 100 composite words that have the word "self" as a prefix: self-aware, self-confident, self-conscious, self-contented, self-control, self-criticism, self-deception, self-defeating, self-denial. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. It is an indicator of how highly Americans regard the self-made man or woman.

7. COMPETITION

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual and in any system. This value is reflected in the American economic system of free enterprise, and it is applied in the U.S. in all areas - medicine, the arts, education, sports.

8. FUTURE ORIENTATION

Americans value the culture and the improvements the future will surely bring. They devalue the past and are, to a large extent, unconscious of the present. Even a happy present goes largely unnoticed because Americans are hopeful that the future will bring even greater happiness. Since Americans believe that humans, not fate, can and should control the environment, they are good at planning short-term projects. This ability has caused Americans to be invited to all corners of the Earth to plan, and often achieve, the miracles which their goal setting methods can produce.
9. ACTION / WORK ORIENTATION

"Don't just stand there," says a typical bit of American advice, "do something!" This expression, though normally used in a crisis situation, in a sense describes most Americans' waking life, where action - any action - is seen as superior to inaction. Americans routinely schedule an extremely active day. Any relaxation must be limited in time and aimed at "recreating" so that they can work harder once their "recreation" is over. Such a "no-nonsense" attitude toward life has created a class of people known as "workaholics" - people addicted to, and often wholly identified with, their job or profession. The first question people often ask when they meet each other in the U.S. is related to work: "What do you do?" "Where do you work?" or "Who (what company) are you with?" The United States may be one of the few countries in the world where people speak about the dignity of human labor - meaning hard physical labor. Even corporation presidents will engage in physical labor from time to time and, in doing so, gain rather than lose respect from others.

10. INFORMALITY

Americans are even more informal and casual than their close relatives - the Western Europeans. For example, American bosses often urge their employees to call them by their first names and feel uncomfortable with the title "Mr." or "Ms.". Dress is another area where American informality is most noticeable, perhaps even shocking. For example, one can go to a symphony performance in any large American city and find people dressed in blue jeans. Informality is also apparent in Americans' greetings. The more formal "How are you?" has largely been replaced with an informal "Hi". This is as likely to be used with one's superior as with one's best friend.

11. DIRECTNESS / OPENNESS / HONESTY

Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing others of unpleasant information. Americans prefer the direct approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluations, and to consider anything other than the most direct and open approach to be "dishonest" and "insincere". Anyone in the U.S. who uses an intermediary to deliver the message will also be considered "manipulative" and "untrustworthy". If you come from a country where saving face is important, be assured that Americans are not trying to make you lose face with their directness.

12. PRACTICALITY / EFFICIENCY

Americans have a reputation for being realistic, practical, and efficient. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making any important decision. Americans pride themselves in not being very philosophically or theoretically oriented. If Americans would even admit to having a philosophy, it would probably be that of pragmatism. Will it make money? What is the bottom line? What can I gain from this activity? These are the kinds of questions Americans are likely to ask, rather than: is it aesthetically pleasing? Will it be enjoyable? Will it advance the cause of knowledge? This pragmatic orientation has caused Americans to contribute more inventions to the world than any other country in human history. The love of "practicality" has also caused Americans to view some professions more favorably than others. Management and economics are much more popular in the United States than
philosophy or anthropology, and law and medicine more valued than the arts. Americans belittle "emotional" and "subjective" evaluations in favor of "rational" and "objective" assessments. Americans try to avoid being "too sentimental" in making their decisions. They judge every situation "on its own merits".

13. MATERIALISM / ACQUISITIVENESS

Foreigners generally consider Americans much more materialistic than Americans are likely to consider themselves. Americans would like to think that their material objects are just the "natural benefits" that result from hard work and serious intent - a reward, they think, which all people could enjoy were they as industrious and hard-working as Americans. But by any standard, Americans are materialistic. They give a higher priority to obtaining, maintaining, and protecting material objects than they do in developing and enjoying relationships with people. Since Americans value newness and innovation, they sell or throw away their possessions frequently and replace them with newer ones. A car may be kept for only two or three years, a house for five or six before buying a new one.

Critical Incidents: Learning from Cultural Encounters

Critical incidents often revolve around a misunderstanding, a dispute, a linguistic error, or some other kind of cultural faux pas. They are the sorts of events that highlight different cultural assumptions and values. They are about attitudes and behaviors that might be interpreted in different ways by different people, particularly when people from different cultural backgrounds interact. Thus, they help illustrate why you need to be aware of multiple cultural contexts in order to make sense of what happens between people when something goes wrong cross-culturally. Often what we consider "common sense" is seen in other cultures as neither common nor making much sense!

Some of the incidents are very funny and some of them were decidedly not amusing at the time they happened. But they are all instructive. They represent concrete examples of what can occur when study abroad students, operating with the best of intentions, find out that cultures can indeed be very different and that different rules often apply overseas.

The following examples might help to expand upon Kohl’s list of American values. You will begin to notice that as Americans, or individuals who have lived in the U.S. for extended periods of time, we are cultural beings (that is, American culture beings), who might find some situations abroad baffling or odd because we are bringing certain assumptions to the table that might not be applicable to foreign environments.

Issues of Cultural Difference and Diversity Abroad

Regardless of your background, encountering cultural differences while abroad will pose many unique challenges and opportunities. The success of your experience depends on the effort you put into learning to navigate a new culture. Planning ahead for the high points and the not-so-high points will go a long way in easing your transition abroad.

Culture and diversity encompasses more than race, ethnicity, and nationality—it also includes multiple backgrounds, perspectives, communication styles, abilities, religions, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Studying abroad provides an amazing opportunity to gain a new perspective on culture and
diversity and consider how they relate to your own identity, your home country, your peers, and your host country.

To maximize your experience, we encourage you to learn more about your host country’s values, customs, and perceptions of difference. The Brown University *Diversity Issues in Study Abroad* booklet (see the Culture and Diversity Resources page) is a great place for all students to start. It provides first-hand testimonials of various students’ experiences crossing cultures and studying in different regions. If you can, try to talk to someone who has been to your host country to find out more information, but keep in mind that each individual’s experience may vary. The resources we provide here are only a starting point. If you want to talk more about these topics before, during, or after you study abroad, feel free to contact OIP or one of your program representatives.

**Being an American Abroad**

One benefit of living in another country is being able to consider your home culture from a new perspective. When you go abroad, you may be treated differently because you are an American. In some countries, being an American sparks intrigue and curiosity. It’s possible that you may encounter “Ugly American” stereotypes, which may be frustrating. These are some examples of positive and negative qualities that are sometimes associated with the “typical American”: wealthy, promiscuous, generous, hardworking, racially prejudiced, loud, extravagant, politically naïve, outgoing.

Keep in mind that it is just as easy for people of other cultures to stereotype and criticize Americans as it is for Americans to stereotype people of other cultures. While stereotypes can reflect positive or negative images, we should avoid categorizing or making broad generalizations about specific groups. It may be difficult, but try to be patient. In your interactions, try to keep an open mind and be conscious of the perceptions of individuals in your host culture, but at the same time let your true self shine through.

**Revisiting your Cultural History**

Many students go abroad to learn more about their cultural heritage. Your goals might be to live in the country where your parents or grandparents were born or learn to speak their language. You may also be excited to be part of the racial or ethnic majority for the first time in your life. Studying abroad in a country where your family has roots is a great opportunity to learn more about your culture and examine your identity. When you arrive there, you may feel like you’re at a “home away from home,” but locals may still perceive you as a “foreigner.” Despite your familiarity with the culture, you may struggle to connect with locals or speak the language. To get adjusted, you will need to determine how to integrate your American identity with your ethnic and cultural identity and this process often takes time.

**Students of Color Abroad**

As a student of color studying abroad, you may be anxious about being able to adjust and be accepted in a new country. You may also be concerned about encountering possible racial prejudice. At the same time, you might be looking forward to being a part of the racial majority or learning more about your cultural history. Many students of color assume that racism abroad may be so overwhelming that it is safer to stay home. However, many students are pleasantly surprised to have a positive experience abroad. Often, students of color find that in their host countries they are perceived as Americans first and as students of color second.
Although you may have difficulty adapting to a new culture and you may face awkward or uncomfortable situations because of your racial or ethnic identity, you will find that your overall experience abroad is a valuable learning experience. Before you leave, research your destination and consider all facets of the culture, including how discrimination may affect you. Being aware of these factors will help you be more prepared to address problems if they arise. See our Culture and Diversity Resources page or talk to a study abroad advisor to find specific information about your destination.

**Religion**

There are numerous religious traditions that exist throughout the world. Your personal religious views and those that you may encounter while abroad may affect your experience in different ways. You may be studying in a country where religion plays an important and very visible role in society. If this is the case, you may need to be more conscious of how to adjust your words and actions to compliment cultural norms. In contrast, you may be in a country where religion does not play a central role in everyday life.

If continuing your own religion practices while abroad is very important to you, research your host country to see if there is a local religious community you can connect with. Also, find out more about how your religious tradition fits into the host culture. For example, even if the majority of a country’s population identifies as Catholic or Muslim, the religious tradition may manifest itself in different ways. It may be worthwhile to find out if religion has been a point of tension in your host country. Again, being aware of these factors will help you to transition to life abroad and handle problems if they arise.

**Adjustments for Men and Women**

While you are abroad, you may need to adjust your communication style as a man or woman. It’s best to research this before you arrive at your destination, talk to others who have visited this part of the world, and observe how people interact when you arrive at your host country. Observing interpersonal interactions in your host country can help you choose how best to communicate with others in your host country. Men and women need to be aware of how each gender identity is perceived and what typical communication styles and interactions consist of in the host country. For example, eye contact and the concept of personal space can vary greatly from country to country.

Specifically, women may have a difficult time adjusting to attitudes they encounter abroad. Some men may openly comment on women in ways that many women find offensive. In some cultures, it may not be uncommon to be honked at, stared at, verbally and loudly approved of, and, in general, to be actively noticed simply for being a woman, and in particular, an American woman. Sometimes the attention can be flattering. It may become very annoying and potentially even angering or dangerous. Local women, who often experience the same sort of treatment, have learned through their culture how to respond to the attention. If you can, try to observe how local women address these situations.

If you ever feel overwhelmed, uncomfortable, or in danger, contact a program representative or your study abroad advisor for guidance.

**LGBTQ Students**

As mentioned above, you will want to learn more about your destination, but as an LGBTQ student you may want to consider other factors as well. You may want to research how the LGBTQ lifestyle is expressed and perceived in the host culture. Before you leave, try to talk to other LGBTQ and allied
people about their experiences in the specific region you will be visiting. There are also many LGBTQ travel resources in print and online. For example, *Lonely Planet* guidebooks often address LGBTQ concerns.

You will need to balance your knowledge of your host country’s culture as it relates to homosexuality with your own needs to create the most positive experience for yourself while studying abroad. It may be helpful to consider:

- How open you will be about your sexual orientation with your peers, roommates, host family, and teachers?
- What are the local attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals?
- What resources and communities are available for LGBTQ individuals in my host country? How will I find them?
- Are there local laws that I need to be aware of, and what is the police attitude towards LGBTQ individuals?

While this information may seem daunting at first, it may help ease your transition into your host culture. If you would like to discuss these topics further before, during, or after your time abroad, please contact a program representative or a study abroad advisor.

References


**Culture and Diversity Resources**

To maximize your experience, we encourage you to learn more about your host country’s values, customs, and perceptions of difference. The resources we provide here are only a starting point, and many sites provide information that is useful for all students. If you want to talk more about these topics before, during, or after you study abroad, feel free to contact OIP or one of your program representatives.

**General**

**Brown University Diversity Issues in Study Abroad Booklet**

[www.brown.edu/Administration/OIP/pdf_docs/diversity_st_abroad01.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/OIP/pdf_docs/diversity_st_abroad01.pdf)

The *Diversity Issues in Study Abroad* booklet was created by Brown University, and it is a great resource for students of all backgrounds going abroad. From White male students in South Africa to Asian American women studying in Europe, the booklet contains first-hand testimonials from diverse students studying all over the world.

**Multicultural Students**

[All Abroad](http://allabroad.us/)
All Abroad is a resource for students, faculty, staff, and parents interested in study abroad. It provides many resources addressing issues of diversity abroad. Students can also contact mentors of various cultural backgrounds to receive advice on all aspects of studying abroad.

**Diversity Abroad** ([http://www.diversityabroad.com/](http://www.diversityabroad.com/))

Diversity Abroad is an online study abroad resource that includes information about studying abroad and scholarships. It also includes testimonials and provides ways to connect with other students who have studied abroad.

**LGBTQ Students**

**NAFSA Rainbow SIG** ([http://www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay/student.htm](http://www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay/student.htm))

Organized by the national professional organization for international education, the site provides information and resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered study abroad students.

**The Gay Guide** ([http://www.gayguide.net](http://www.gayguide.net))

The Global Gay Guide Network provides travel guides on various countries prepared by and for the gay community.

**International Lesbian and Gay Association** ([http://www.ilga.org/index.asp](http://www.ilga.org/index.asp))

The ILGA is an international network of national and local groups to support LGBT individuals. The site includes important travel information specific to the LGBT community and a world map of LGBT legislation.