Dear student-about-to go-abroad, April, 2008

Congratulations on making the excellent decision to pursue an international experience as part of your Yale undergraduate education. As you know, President Levin believes that this is an essential part of a liberal education in this age of globalization. The numbers suggest that as many as 83% of the class of 07 spent significant time abroad, and we're looking for an even higher number this year. Welcome to our global community!

Getting the most out of a period spent abroad means, we believe, some preparatory work and some adjustment of expectations. We ask you to continue on your own the pre-departure orientation that we begin with you, and to deepen your experience as far as possible. The reward will be that you build skills and attitudes that will continue to serve you well long after you leave Yale.

Here are some strategies for successful experience abroad that, based on discussion with students, we think will serve you well:

**Cultivate humility**
For young Americans, humility is at present the best underpinning for tranquil travel. Frustration with current U.S. foreign policy, anxiety (and some anger, given its causes) about the global impact of the downturn in the U.S. economy, and an understanding that the balance of power among the nations of the world is shifting, together foster a climate that can be difficult for Americans abroad. Difficult encounters are easier to manage if not taken personally, but it’s smart to understand the issues before you go. In such a moment, a low key approach is often rewarded. Peace Corps supervisors, corporate bosses and faculty colleagues at universities abroad tell us that our students sometimes behave as if they believed that all the answers are to be found in the US, and that their own excellent education means that they understand what needs to be done better than local people. Even if you believe that, it’s a good idea not to act as if you did. Listening to what people have to say, and assuming that there are reasons why people do things the way they do, can go a long way towards creating good relationships across cultures.

**Be in the moment**
Highly structured lives of the kind we live seem to produce a combination of orientation towards the future (where will I be next?) combined with a fascination with our own past (Augustin Burroughs’ first memoir in five years!) which works against a satisfying relationship with the present. For people traveling abroad for extended periods there can be a sense of being trapped in a challenging moment, when nostalgia for the familiar can make the time away suddenly seem unbearably long. And so, while for a moment you may not be able to face the next six weeks, you can make it through the next hour, and the next day, and there’s something to be learned in that experience - time spent abroad is a wonderful opportunity to learn to be in the present, an ability of tremendous value. I once asked a student who had been in Cameroon for the semester what was the most useful thing she had learned, and her answer was “how to sit on the threshold of a hut.” It took me a while to understand what she meant, but I think it was a profound observation.

**Be in the place you are in**
Along with being in the present is being in the present you are actually in: multi-tasking is the enemy of observation, and it can effectively prevent what we think of as an immersion experience. The more I am on the internet, the less I am in my local community, and the more my thoughts are with people and events beyond the local, the less I understand the nuances of my immediate environment. I was most recently struck with this in Paris, a city I know very well and love to revisit with a critical and appreciative eye. This time I was conducting an evaluation
during the day – and then going back to my hotel room to do my Yale workday on my laptop, and never really being in Paris at all. It was an impoverished experience, and I recommend setting strict limits on this. The worst case of this I ever saw was a Yale student on a program in Spain who broke the language pledge each morning to talk to his girlfriend by videocam on his laptop for half an hour in a shuttered classroom. His Spanish improved at a glacial rate and he never seemed to know where he was, according to the Resident Director.

Suspend judgment
Open-mindedness has to be the best attitude for productive time abroad. One of the characteristics of moving from one culture to another is irritation with what appears to be the absurdities of local practice (from paying for coffee in an Italian airport and sorting out bus fares, all the way to dress codes and gender relations). This extends to the absurdities of host families, employers, foreign faculty, and all bureaucrats. But of course these are not absurdities, but cultural differences – to be observed, examined, understood, and ultimately even appreciated. Experience with travel doesn’t prevent the initial sense of annoyance, but it does teach that travel is happier and more productive when we suspend judgment, conscientiously and systematically. Better to wait to see the whole picture before writing things off. Students I sent to Australia and New Zealand used to complain bitterly about their peers’ refusal to use clothes dryers – now we have a much better sense of why it is good not only to save the high energy costs but also to use less energy.

Reassess your views on material poverty
For students going to a developing country for the first time, the encounter with societies that have so much less in the way of material goods than we have in the US can be hard. But poverty has many different shapes, and not all of them are miserable; and the virtues of living lightly on the planet are once again becoming apparent, as we consider the globally-warmed future. Students who return from extended periods in the developing world, particularly in Africa, find themselves deeply disturbed by what can be seen as the excess of our supermarkets and stores and even our own refrigerators. Time abroad can be a chance to rethink our own relationship with the material world: even the least-advantaged among us are extraordinarily privileged materially by global standards, and an understanding of that is very important to an understanding of attitudes towards Americans abroad.

Embrace unfamiliar opportunities
A principle that has served me, and many students with whom I’ve talked about this over the years, is that of accepting while abroad all (non-sketchy) invitations, of going to improbable events, and of making an effort to become interested in absolutely everything. Boredom comes from not having hooks on which to hang things, and hooks are constructed from experience and preparation, and the work of undertaking the unfamiliar is rewarded many times over by the growing sense of how things fit together. Street music, local team sports, family visits, religious services, fish markets, political rallies, yard work – I’ve been fascinated by all of them, to my own astonishment. It is surely a mistake to sit on the veranda while the society goes its way without your participation.

Learn to be alone
It often seems that there is a stigma attached in our contemporary society to being alone – that the ideal is always to be the center of a laughing group of age-mates. Being with others is a kind of insulation abroad, however, that makes it harder to see things. I think of the process of choosing to be alone while abroad as creative loneliness – it sharpens my senses and deepens my experience in ways I find valuable, and makes the times when I am socially engaged feel less mundane. There’s usually a lot more walking and a lot more use of public transportation involved in being abroad than there is in the US, and those are great times to observe (especially without I-
pod). I was pretty much raised on the London underground, so it’s true I have a lot of practice, but this holds true most places I’ve been (maybe not Brasilia).

**Be an ethnographer**
Cultivating the habit of observation of the ordinary is surely one of the most productive ways of changing our own behavior when abroad. Apart from anything else, it helps throw our own assumptions into relief, and helps us understand how many things we take for granted that are a part of our own local and national culture. I’ve found it extremely useful to write down a brief account of interactions or behaviors I find puzzling, and then asking someone local for help in decoding what I’ve seen – this can produce really fascinating conversations. Done in the context of journal writing, it can also form a record that can be very interesting indeed a few years into the future when the details of your experience are beginning to blur.

**Reflect on your experience and write about your reflection**
One thing all the research shows is that reflection on experience abroad is one of the most important elements in making that experience worthwhile. It is perfectly possible to spend months abroad without breaking out of a little expatriate community (listen to Sylvia Pojoli on study abroad in Florence on the NPR All Things Considered website) and to avoid having anything remotely significant happen towards the development of global competence. I hate keeping a journal, but I’ve gritted my teeth and done it abroad and I’ve been glad that I did.

It is well worth anyone’s while to take a look at the online pre-departure program, **What’s Up with Culture?**
[www3.uop.edu/sis/culture](http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture)

Travel safely and happily, and return with new perspectives and amazing stories,

Jane Edwards
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