Podcast transcript: ‘Whose Study Abroad is it Anyway?’

“Hello, it’s Leah here. Welcome to the ‘Whose Study Abroad is it Anyway?’ podcast, where I will share with you my tips and advice regarding undertaking a study abroad experience. I myself found that whilst you can always prepare and plan, surprises tend to pop up when you least expect them. However, these unforeseen challenges can be easily tackled if you are prepared to face them – sometimes you can even prevent surprises from occurring through careful attention to detail whilst planning. On that note, let’s get started.

I’m going to walk you through a study abroad trip from the very beginning. For me, going to study in the USA meant I had many issues to sort out prior to even setting foot in the country and establishing myself at my host college. Legal issues and travel tips will now abound.

1. **Visas, papers, passport:** I cannot stress the importance of having all your legal documents sorted prior to departure. Some countries, such as America, will require you to have a student visa. Speak to your college’s international team about what they will issue you, and research it to see if it has any limitations. For example, student visas, whether a J1 or a F1 in America, tend to restrict foreign students from gaining paid employment off campus.

You may also need to travel with additional papers – in America, I had a ‘i90’ which basically confirmed I was a student at my host college. I had to present it as proof of identity and status whenever I was at a‘US pre-clearance’ at Dublin Airport. I would also suggest you retain a copy of your acceptance letter from your host college and proof of payment of your legal documents, for example the visa. Always keep copies of the originals with you, and keep copies at home with your family.
PASSPORT. Never ever lose sight of your passport. If you have a visa attached to it, make sure both are kept clear of being defaced. Always keep track of the expiry date of both your passport and your visa. You don’t want to overstay your welcome and spark a diplomatic incident, right?

1. **Insurance**: buy insurance for any electronic belongings, such as laptops and phones you are bringing. If it would be the end of the world to lose it, then pay to have it covered.
If you are going abroad for an extensive period of time, health insurance is a must. Especially if you’re heading to America – you won’t find a NHS there! Research companies that specialise in student study abroad health insurance and find the quote that’s right for you. Print out copies of your policy, and again leave a copy with your family.
2. **Money**: budget for your experience, and make sure to save up before you go. Be aware of the currency you will need and the exchange rate – sometimes a day can make the difference between getting a bit more for your money or losing out. If studying abroad for more than a semester, consider setting up a bank account in your host country. I used US Bank when abroad, and my branch had experience with international students and were always helpful and approachable.
Always take care with money, especially when travelling or on nights out. Check your statements carefully each month and make sure you recognise what is listed. Inform your home bank that you will be living abroad, so they can update your contact details and keep an eye on your account for any suspicious activity. My home bank of First Trust managed to prevent a fraudster hacking into my account when I was in America because of this.
3. **Packing**: ah, nothing reminds you of your upcoming adventures like packing. A few words of advice: know the luggage restrictions for your airline, pack wisely for the seasons of your host country and remember that you can buy necessary items there. Also consider that you will undoubtedly want to bring things back home – I went away with one suitcase and came back with two. Make sure you have your name, contact details and destination address along with flight numbers written clearly on the suitcase tags.
4. **Flights**: always have copies of your itinerary, plane tickets and travel information on hand and leave copies at home. You can download apps to monitor your flights, check for weather warnings and so on. Also, always be safe when in airports. Keep ahold of your luggage, make sure you are checked in for all flights, and be prepared for immigration and border control screenings. This is especially true if travelling to America. Be prepared for a long-haul before you even settle down for a long-haul flight.
5. **Time differences**: be prepared for jet-lag and having to adapt to time-zone differences. Going to America last summer rendered me into a comatose state for around two weeks. Be sensible about getting a decent amount of sleep and taking care of yourself.
6. **Contact information**: have contact details for your international team at your host college and keep them updated when travelling to and around the country. Remember, they are there to support you, so if you are having problems settling in or have any questions, drop them a line.

And lastly:

1. **Laws and regulations**: be aware that there will be differences in the laws of your host country. For example, in America, the legal drinking age is 21, compared to 18 in many European countries. Adhere to the laws and regulations of your host country; ignorance of the law is not an acceptable excuse!

Well, you have sorted all of that out and are now in your host college. But what’s this? Why is everything different and strange? Roll on the tips for college life.

1. **Safety first**: you will find that you will be invited to a lot of parties and nights out. Always make sure you know where you are, and who you’re with. Never leave any drinks unattended, do not wander about in a strange place without company and check in with friends via text and messenger. Again, remember local laws and don’t feel pressured to try illicit substances to ‘fit in’. Know the numbers of the security team and your residential RA on campus if studying at a residential campus. If renting an apartment, save the number of your landlord/lady. Make sure you lock everything up at night, keep any keys on your person and never leave money lying around.
2. **Socialise**! Studying abroad isn’t just about academics. Put yourself out there and meet new people and make new friends. You can join clubs on campus with shared interests, or go crazy and sign up for a new hobby. People will want to get to know you as you will stand out from the crowd as a foreign student, so simply engage in conversations, smile and answer all those interested questions: you will have fun and make new friends in the process.
3. **Prep work**: read up on your host college, get to know the campus and buildings so you can find your way around and make a point to see your international and academic advisors. Plan your classes accordingly and make a schedule to help you get your assignments completed and find time for fun and socialising.
4. **Confusion**: oh well -teaching methods and assessment may be different than what you are used to. If you are having difficulty, speak to your professors, international advisors and you will be surprised at how accommodating and understanding they will be.
5. **With a little help from my friends**: cultural shock, classes, college life… it can be stressful. But remember: your new friends are there to support and help you. Whether with understanding a cultural difference, collective study sessions or even just to have coffee, and relax over Netflix together, your friends will get you through it.
6. **Media maelstrom**: stay on top of news and current affairs in both your host and home country. It not only helps you engage in conversation, make new friends and with your classes, but it gives you a heads up if there are travel warnings. When I was in America, there was an initial flurry of media panic over the presence of Ebola in Texas and travel restrictions were temporarily implemented across several states.
7. **Cultural differences**: social interactions, language, expressions, food, brands… Prepare for a whole new world. Your new friends and international advisors can help you out here.
8. **Homesickness**: this is inevitable. You will miss home, you will miss family and friends. But remember that you are undertaking the adventure of a lifetime. You want to make the most of it, and your family and friends will want you to be happy. Don’t huddle under the duvet in your room – go out and through yourself into student life. Go to student organisations, have lunch and coffee dates with friends, have a trip to the local cinema, have a tourist trip around a city… This will help combat homesickness, believe me. And always remember that thanks to the wonders of modern technology, your family and friends are a click away on Skype, FaceTime and Facebook. Consider apps such as Viber and WhatsApp too for free messaging and phone calls home – just make sure you are connected to the wifi beforehand!
9. **Who you gonna call**?: we are all a step away from having our smartphones surgically attached to our hands, but heads up: mobile companies love charging those wandering abroad. You could end up with a nasty shock when you receive your monthly statement from your mobile company. What I did in America was use my iPhone from home for everything but calls and texts home, using the social media apps to contact home. I invested in a basic mobile from AT&T to call and text my American folks, paying $25 a month for this. Alternatively, you can always buy a SIM card from a company in your host country for your own mobile – compare prices for the contract most suitable for you.
10. **Soak up the life**: consider an internship, volunteering, going for road trips and staying with your friends’ families if possible: you will get more than a glimpse of a new way of life in your host country through such adventures, and you make a lot of memories in doing so.

Finally:

1. **Relationships**: the dating scene can be very different in your host country, with different customs and culture. Just always take care of yourself and stay safe. Ask your new friends about it; you would be amazed at the amount of times I had to ask my roomies in America about different things.

Well, hopefully all the above tips and advice can help you tackle surprises and challenges, but also get the best out of your study abroad experience. To students preparing to travel: All the best, take care and enjoy! Thanks for listening, this is Leah signing off.