

## Get Out and Experience the World

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, December 8, 2004

Sometimes the best gifts don't fit under a tree. In fact, they're halfway around the world. With holidays approaching, college students across the country will be heading home to visit their families and snuggle into the familiarity of worn and warm traditions. But a small, lucky group will be heading home to say hi and goodbye, then leave for a life-changing semester abroad.

The current administration's policies have made it increasingly difficult for many foreign students to get visas to come to the United States. That's why it's so important that more than 160,000 Americans study overseas annually, and even more are packing their bags every semester. In fact, according to the Institute of International Education that number has better than doubled in the past 12 years. Some campuses send more than 80 percent of their students to foreign countries. Learning abroad has become so popular that the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program Commission was created to look at overseas opportunities for US colleges. Its goal is to establish fellowships allowing half a million young people per year to take their studies abroad.

Such experiences aren't limited to college students. Many organizations offer summer study adventures for high schoolers. Putney Student Travel, a family-run organization with alumni in 50 states and abroad, sends kids to all corners of the world on trips ranging from cultural exploration to language learning and community service.

Happily, many of the programs have scholarship funds. But it's easy to find reasons not to leave. Students get scared and homesick. They worry they're missing out on extra-curricular or athletic activities with their friends. Still, it's easier to find compelling reasons to go abroad. The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) surveyed alumni from their programs of the past 50 years. Almost all said their experience increased self-confidence, helped them better understand their own cultural values and biases, and had a lasting impact on their worldviews.

Time abroad is a dramatic and defining period in a young person's life. First-hand accounts say it best: "It was so interesting talking to Spaniards and hearing their stories, whether a family member from my home stay, a Spanish friend, someone working in a shop, or even the students in our group. I gained a

wider perspective on people from around the world,” describes Molly Schaffner. Eliza Leavitt, another Putney alumna, offers, “Looking back on this summer I have an overwhelming number of happy memories. The people of Dominica gave me the gift of their island. I gained a higher confidence as a person. I have been forever affected by their beliefs and lifestyles, and I will always consider Dominica a part of who I am.”

When exploring various programs, it’s smart to look into home stays, or at least apartments or dormitories with local students instead of Americans. Data from IES show that twice as many students who lived with a family still use that language today, compared to those who stayed in apartments with other Americans. The same holds for preparation. A high schooler going to France this summer would do well to spend a few minutes each day surfing the Internet—with delectable and classy keywords like “foie gras” or “impressionism.” A few hours at home, sipping Diet Coke and munching Oreos, will translate to days of enjoyment roaming through the Tuileries with a warm crepe in hand.

An increasing number of college and high school students studying abroad means an increasing number of Americans with a global outlook. Given the arrogance of our go-it-alone foreign policy, we need to cultivate our sense of being citizens of the world. Diplomacy for the next few decades begins with our current young people. It’s not enough to read about a clash of civilizations, and how life is different across continents and cultures. Living abroad fosters a true respect for others. With it comes a whole new way of thinking—and an understanding of how one decision ripples throughout the entire world.

Here’s my advice for a new year: Get out of your comfort zone. Fall in love with the arts. Savor nuances of a different culture. Struggle with grammar of a new language. Stay awake all night after an eye-opening experience. Go abroad. Come home a better American.