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Embracing the Motherland
By Alexandra Vreeman ’16
ACTR St Petersburg, Russia

The ink on my passport stamp was hardly dry when Russia announced its food import sanctions against America and the European Union. Another obstacle to any sort of reconciliation between the US and Russia, a relationship crippled by the events in Ukraine. I nervously watched food prices rise and grocery store shelves empty, praying that President Putin wouldn’t do the unforgivable and ban coffee imports. Such an action would have certainly resulted in my detainment at the Russian border with Intelligentsia coffee beans sewn into my sweater. But it wouldn’t be the Russia I love without black-market brie and the threat of coffee deprivation.

This is my third time in Russia and fifth time abroad. There are so many reasons, historical, linguistic, and cultural, to fall in love with this place: daily kasha (porridge of oats, semolina, corn, barley, peas, buckwheat, or whatever cereal my host mom finds in the recesses of the cupboards) to keep me full until the Second Coming; Communist Party buses roaming the streets of St. Petersburg, blasting anthems of a bygone Soviet era to drum up nostalgia and support; a deepened appreciation of sunshine that makes the rare bright day feel magical.

At times infuriating, deeply satisfying, seemingly purposeless, and unspeakably meaningful, my Russian career has changed the course of my life and given me an appreciation for a country and people that don’t get a lot of love from America these days.

At the beginning of the semester I embarked on a journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow with my group, by way of boat, train, and avtobus. Moscow struck me as an entirely different Russia than St. Petersburg, at once foreign and utterly familiar. We streamed out of the Metro station in a mass of humanity, as if exhaled by the underground behemoth of the Metro. I tried to get my bearings; in front of me, the Bolshoi Theatre, behind me, the Duma building, on my right, the Kremlin and Red Square.
Standing in Red Square was the realization of more than two years of Russian study. At times infuriating, deeply satisfying, seemingly purposeless, and unspeakably meaningful, my Russian career has changed the course of my life and given me an appreciation for a country and people that don’t get a lot of love from America these days. I tried to reconcile how a place so vibrant, the air laced with laughter, could be the epicenter of irreconcilable geopolitical conflict. How a country that’s given me so much, including the name Sasha and an absurd love of root vegetables, could have endured generations of hardship and prevailed.

The unavoidable question of “why Russia” always arises. Russian nationals have the hardest time comprehending why I would take any interest in their country when most young Russians aspire to study or live in Europe. What I can never articulate is that I love Russia precisely because life here requires grit. Often when I turn on the shower after a grueling and drizzly day, cold water is the only option. My first traditional sauna experience saw me flat on my back after a cartoon-style slip on the pool deck, covered in birch leaves. My bed for the semester is a stiff pleather couch a foot too short for me. But there’s a flip-side to every Kopeck. Cold showers are followed by hot tea and fresh honey. Falling in the banya just meant a bit of unconventional exfoliation. And frequently camping on thin inflatable sleeping pads makes my couch seem positively palatial.

Living in Russia has given me the greatest gift: laughter. Rather than accumulating misconstrued notions of how individual, independent, or rugged I may be for studying in the shadow of the North Pole, Russia has rebuked me at every turn. My life in St. Petersburg is a string of grave grammatical mistakes, spontaneous marriage proposals, and mystery meats. It’s hard, and I can’t do it without a community. I need a network of people to support me and allow me to indulge in the enduring Russian tradition of open emotion: anger and passion, humor and tears. Russia has shown me the beauty in laughter – laughter over my mistakes, my progress, and the humor in the everyday.
To See, and Be Seen
By Kevin Garske ‘16
CIEE Taipei, Taiwan

I never had a solid reason for choosing to study Chinese or head to Taiwan for my Study Abroad experience; at least, not a conventional one. I studied Spanish in High School, had no prior interest in East Asian Politics, and have no family connections to the region. I grew up in the Bay Area, and the closest interaction I ever had to experiencing East Asian culture was walking through Chinatown with my parents at the age of 8, peering into the shop windows, in search of smoke bombs, cheap toys and ‘foreign’ art.

The best reasoning that I can offer is that after 20 solid years of western socialization, I wanted to leave behind the cultural structures that taught me how to think and who to be. I wanted to challenge my brain to think differently, to appreciate the vastness of the world, and to break the monotony of spending my entire life in the U.S., (and no more than a month in total outside of California).

Dear Reader: The monotony has undoubtedly been broken.

Initially, the effect of leaving my comfort zone behind was akin to putting life through an amplifier—one that unabashedly howls feedback and crackles at all the wrong times. Life was much, much louder. Every little win was day-making, every failure or slip was earth-splitting, and even the lulls between seemed duller than ever. My host university held seminars and handed out pamphlets on culture shock and what to expect, but the symptoms will vary and all you can do is be patient with yourself. In retrospect, I would have preferred a pamphlet on “Being 6 feet tall and Black in Taiwan” (Note: I may end up writing this pamphlet at some point), but perhaps it is for the best that I did not. There is only so much you can be told about living in a new cultural context, and expectations can be just as harmful as they can be beneficial.

I know that the experience of inescapable conspicuousness is fairly common for the student abroad, but the fear and discomfort my presence creates is more prevalent and pronounced than curiosity. There are certain facets of Taiwanese culture that contribute to this (and it’s not like I haven’t felt this in my home country as well), but it has added another layer of difficulty in communicating with the people of my host country.
Every successful interaction builds my confidence, and I am beginning to overcome the stress of having to anticipate and dissuade the fears of my peers. A smile has the amazing potential to abate uneasiness into simple curiosity. The shield of privacy and nonintervention must not be mistaken for hostility—and I am learning to not take personal offense. With that being said: I am still getting the hang of it. Therefore, my outlier status has characterized more of my abroad experience than has my can-do 外國人 (foreigner) attitude.

The result of this is that rather than feeling more comfortable in my environment and in this new culture, I have become more comfortable with myself. I have been drawn inwards and discovered more about who I am. To be sure, I have made demonstrative efforts to explore the city, try all kinds of food, and immerse myself in the lifestyle of my host country’s people. However, the principal form of edification that this environment has granted me has been my own reflections on personal habits, goals, and challenges. My host family is constantly busy or too exhausted for prolonged interaction, and the other students on my program are bogged down with language-intensive classes that are well above my proficiency. This has left me time and again with a question that the familiar structure of CMC tends to preclude the necessity of asking: What am I going to do today?

This comes hand in hand with the frightening reality that many human beings, myself included, are herded by routine and coddled by the agreeable decision-making of others. We don't make conscious decisions about where our days are headed, and we take them for granted in that way. We prefer to live by the clock and the determinations of others, rather than be true to ourselves and our needs. This is not to suggest that there is a superior lifestyle between “going with the flow” or meticulous scheduling—whether regimented or flexible, the value of a day or a minute or a lifetime can come down to whether or not it was spent with mindfulness of self, in all aspects. The mindful one is ready to make adjustments at all times, open to new suggestions from others, but measures the possibilities
against the ruler of personal need and preference, rather than arriving at cheap, momentary rationalizations.

I came to Taipei with the preconception that study abroad was all about traveling to new, amazing places and collecting these resounding “WOW” moments like pictures in a photo album. I was prepared to be handed this on a silver platter, because that is what studying abroad seemed to entail. Although these moments have been in no short supply, the discoveries I have made while abroad exist in an internal sphere:

I have begun to grapple with my identity as a biracial student of color, outwardly identified as African American but internally identified as a conglomeration of cultures with no tradition to speak of. I have placed a new value on organization and rediscovered the long-lost work ethic that propelled me through high school, despite my misgivings about the value of a Grade Point Average. I have picked up playing the guitar, begun regular exercise, changed my diet, budgeted my money to the last NT$, and even applied to internships and summer programs early. As a singer, I had always lamented my inability to read music and the difficulty of learning by memorization—now I study music theory three to four days a week, practice singing in Chinese with the Taiwanese choir I joined, and can perform basic sight-singing. In my spare time, I read the novels I used to want to read, write the stories I used to wish I could write, study Chinese, and rest as much as possible.

The message of my letter home is simple: I came to a foreign land seeking the truth about the vastness of the world, and was instead remunerated with truth about the potential within myself. Perhaps it is the result of my early struggles in grappling with the adjustments to a new environment, or it may simply speak to who I am as a person and how I interpret things. Either way, I think that leaving the United States was exactly what my mind, body, and soul needed—and although the rewards were unexpected, my Study Abroad experience has been a privilege.
Let the city reveal itself to you

By Jessica Jin ‘16
CIEE Prague, Czech Republic

After replacing Washington rain for California sunshine, I never anticipated an extended return to the cold. The plan, as it was, treated the quiet streets of Claremont as hallowed ground lined with palm trees, scattered with fountains, and cursed with stubbornly pleasant weather. It was intended to be a four-year visit to the sacred gates of academia. Only upon graduation would I then brace myself to be thrust back into the real world where things such as fog, sleet, and bone-chilling dampness exist. However, two years in, I somehow found the plan at fault. Suddenly, I craved the rain.

Half a year later, I found myself on Zborovská street, knowing little to nothing about the Czech Republic other than the somewhat disjointed connection that I had read some Kafka in high school. I had no interest in lying to myself; I didn’t choose Prague because of a longtime fixation with Czech culture or a ravenous desire to eat gulaš every day. What had sent me to the Czech Republic was a rumor of its beauty and a desire to avoid Western Europe, which to me felt all too familiar. I craved adventure and mystery. I dreamed of little, cobble-stoned alleyways where I could lose all sense of direction before somehow meandering home, chilled but content. I envisioned lazy weekends sipping coffee, working on Tuesday’s New York Times Crossword Puzzle, and ordering “the usual” at my favorite café. The Prague I imagined was a caricature—a hodgepodge of scenes from movies and TV shows, blending together eras and countries. In reality, Prague is nothing like I’d imagined. This is the part where I’m supposed to say, it’s more than I imagined. But, that would be a lie. Studying abroad will not fulfill your fantasy vacation in Europe. That vision is an ideal that a genuine, tangible city will never offer. Idyllic café mornings are intended for glamorous yet short-lived weekend trips or unsuspecting Mondays at a local haunt—not for four month transplants in foreign cities. Instead,
brace yourself. No matter the destination, there undoubtedly will be some idea of what that city will offer. Understanding the history and cultural context of a place is extremely important. Mapping out major destinations and sights is fine. However, don’t force a city to match a vision you’ve created in your mind’s eye. Don’t let a friend’s experience cast a shadow or an unfair bias on your own ability to appreciate the true nature of a city. Let the city reveal itself to you.

In Prague, the Americans tend to stick together. At times, it is as if I’ve extended my summer stay in San Francisco to include the fall as well. Admittedly, it is all too easy to only speak English, to only interact with people from California, to hole up in my room watching Netflix. And while there’s nothing wrong with any of those things, it’s certainly hard to learn the character of a place that way. Don’t fear solitude. You only have four months to truly experience it. Solitude is not isolation, loneliness, or depression. Instead, it is your greatest weapon, your handiest tool when traveling. It frees you from obligation and concern, from guilt and remorse. It is the easiest ticket to meeting new friends, fellow stragglers on the road: Slovenians sailing Europe before their university begins, a Tufts graduate searching for love in Spain, an Italian starting his own business, a Toronto woman considering a career change. But most importantly, it reveals the kindness that too often we overlook. On a chilly day in Copenhagen, down the steps and through an open door, a pastry chef proffers a cellphone after I realize my own phone’s SIM card has yet to be activated. In an airport in Barcelona, on a balmy night, an elderly couple chatters in frantic Spanish as they escort me part of the way to
my hostel. Yes, there are times when you may desire a familiar face, but ultimately your experience is your own. Your connection to the familiar—that urge to pull out your cellphone in a moment of solitude to act as if you have important people to talk to and important places to be—is a handicap. There are moments to be savored and you are the best primary source.

So, in Prague, where tourist-filled streets give way to quaint shops and quiet corners, there is much room for solitude. In the early morning or late at night, when the streets are cleared and you are alone, save for the Cathedral’s glow from the Castle complex in the distance, that is when you can breathe. The air is empty and brisk. It is yours to fill with thoughts, ideas, and musings. There need not be a journey or some grand vision. In fact, avoid the planning. For once, clamp down on that imaginative dream of what could be. If you’re looking for the rain, let it find you.
People Please, Ebola isn’t Synonymous with Africa

By Isabel Wade ‘16
CIEE Dakar, Senegal

I remember the day Ebola came to Senegal. My host sister was too scared to visit her older sister because she lived so close to the Fann hospital, where the victim was being held. Hand sanitizer started coming out of the woodwork, and I was constantly reminded by my much younger siblings to wash my hands. I remember the day Ebola came to Senegal vividly: the fear I would have to leave and the fear of being in a country with the disease at all. More importantly, however, I remember the day Senegal got rid of the Ebola case – something the rest of the world often seems to forget.

I have always encountered large generalizations when saying that I study abroad in Senegal. To Westerners, I generally have to clarify that Senegal is in West Africa. This usually evokes the response that studying abroad in “Africa” will give me major cred. Now, however, this generalization has taken on a different theme: “You’re studying abroad in Africa! What about Ebola?”

I would love to say that this response has been limited to a few token cases, but it has unfortunately been across the board, and not just to me personally. Watching the Western world, and specifically the American media, tackle Ebola while living and learning in Senegal has really been an experience like no other. I have never before had an experience that has given me such a unique perspective on the manipulative tactics of American media and politics. I can honestly say that I will never again look at a news story, specifically a news story about “Africa,” in the same way.

What sticks in my mind the most is the assumption by many Americans and American institutions that people in Africa don’t even have the basic ideas of how to prevent getting a disease like Ebola. When Ebola first came to Senegal, the CIEE office in Maine
– despite complaints from the office in Dakar – instituted intense regulations, including that we were not allowed to eat around the bowl* with our families. I remember the day that email was sent to our families like it was yesterday. While I like to believe the office in Maine did not realize the negative impact of such a rule, I could see the way that message was received. Beneath it all was the assumption that our Senegalese host families could not, or would not, give enough attention to sanitary meal preparation to be acceptable for their American exchange students.

While this rule may have seemed minor to the American office, it carried a huge weight of assumptions and prejudices that we fail to recognize exist. These assumptions have carried into the events surrounding Ebola in the United States. They appear in the beating of the two Senegalese boys at a New York school because other kids thought the boys had Ebola. They show when American politicians say we need to close all borders to “West Africa.” For me personally, I am constantly reminded of them when I think of returning to the US.

When I recently mentioned to a good friend that I was planning to create my own little piece of Senegal in North Quad this spring, he joked that I should be careful or people would falsely accuse me of having Ebola. The fact is, however, that countless members of the African and African-American communities in the US will be accused of carrying Ebola, despite the fact that they have not visited the region in years or maybe even ever. I, on the other hand, will likely only get a few insensitive Ebola jokes thrown my way. And that, America, is a problem.

*In Senegalese households, everyone eats around the same large platter of food in a communal style without individual plates.
People frequently ask me why I decided to study abroad in Istanbul. For some reason, no one understands why a female American student would want to spend time in such an ISIS prone, anti-feminist, and uncivilized part of the world, as portrayed by American media. I feel rather silly when I respond to this question, because, in all honesty, I don’t really have an answer. This is by no means because I agree with the accusations about Turkey, but mainly because the real reason, “Well, why not?” just doesn’t do my decision justice.

During the summer of 2014 I participated in a summer study abroad program in Rome, Italy for seven weeks. That initial experience of forcing myself outside of my safe, little, comfort zones both in Denver, CO and in Claremont, CA sparked somewhat of a “travel high” and made me thirsty for more. The way I see it, Rome was a baby step. I’ve traveled all my life, but until Rome, I had always had some sort of guidance. My parents planned the itinerary, booked the flights, found the hotels, managed the languages, everything! Last summer, however, I had to make my own itinerary, book my own flight, manage the language all by myself, and even make decisions without any authoritative figure distinguishing “right” from “wrong.” All of that aside, Rome was relatively easy. I had already visited Rome in middle school, I speak Italian, and it was only for the duration of seven weeks. This time, in Istanbul, I am truly taking this whole “stepping outside of my comfort zone” high to an extreme. I have chosen to travel to a country I have never been to before, knew very little about upon arrival, speaks a wholly unfamiliar language and embodies a culture that American media has trained me to fear, all for the duration of four and a half months.

Scary, right? Well I thought so, too, before I arrived.
After living in Istanbul, it seems impossible to accurately express through words how differently I feel about this country; most of the time I even forget that I’m in such a foreign place. Before coming to Istanbul, I assumed that the cultural differences would impact my daily life tremendously, but now I hardly even notice them. Every once in a while, when I hear the call to prayer sound throughout the city, I snap back into reality and realize what an unfamiliar situation I’ve actually put myself in. It’s utterly thrilling.

I love the calming Bosphorus separating the two continents. I marvel at the flavorful food every time I eat. But, most of all, I truly find joy in the Turkish habit of unwinding. Life in Istanbul seems just a few steps slower than life in the States. Turkish people tend to advance through their days at a more leisurely pace than the majority of the population in Los Angeles, New York, or most other large cities in America. I used to crack jokes at this cultural difference, but after spending some time doing the same, I realize just how beneficial this habit truly is. I think one of the main lessons that Istanbul has taught me is that occasionally taking one step back, looking at the surrounding world, and putting life into context, isn’t as impractical as many people make it out to be. In fact, Istanbul has taught me that self-reflection throughout the day is actually a fundamental tool in measuring my own success and happiness. In Turkey, happiness comes from within, and to me, the majority of the people here seem truly happy.
The Turkish people that I have encountered are some of the friendliest people I have ever met. Instinctively, I tend to question people’s motives when they approach me. It’s a habit I’ve formed while traveling previously in my life. Here, I truly don’t see a reason to question so often. Turkish people are quite simply some of the warmest, most loving, and most hospitable people I have ever been exposed to, and, because of that, I feel compelled to respond with slightly more trust than I normally would. Here, shopkeepers hassle their stores not necessarily to enforce a scam, but simply to meet a new person or to practice their English. They’re curious, not aggressive. This goes against everything I have ever been taught while traveling, and the change is extremely refreshing.

I used to consider myself a “good traveler”. I’ve maneuvered a number of countries by myself and returned in one piece, so why wouldn’t I be? My experience in Istanbul, however, is completely changing my whole perspective on this label. I’m starting to realize that part of being a “good traveler” requires breaking down walls and exposing oneself as vulnerable to a new culture. I think, for the first time in all of my explorations, I’m finally beginning to break down these solidly built walls of mine and expose my vulnerability to the Turkish culture. This vital understanding will unquestionably impact the way I view traveling far into my future.

Turns out, my “Well, why not?” study abroad experience has impacted me in ways that I just can’t bring justice to with words alone. I am, and always will be, unconditionally appreciative to Turkey for shaping me into a more self-reflective and confident person.
From Studying to Living Abroad...
the Story Continues
By Alex Rivera ‘14

I had the life-changing and transformative study abroad experience that some people refer to as cliché. Although I missed my family and CMC, I knew that removing myself from the Claremont bubble was the only way to get the most out of my semester abroad in Salamanca, Spain. In the end, I exceeded my own expectations of what I could accomplish by integrating myself into the culture, the language, and the Spanish way of life. Salamanca quickly became home. Within weeks, I had mastered the city map from one end to the other. Within a couple months, I had made friends with locals who were mesmerized with the fact that I lived in California, even though the real fascination came from my end. I took part in cultural activities, watched my first Spanish bullfight, became a connoisseur of Spanish food, took classes at the local university, witnessed protests that took place over the Plaza Mayor, attended Mass at the Cathedral with my host mother, watched the Real Madrid game with enthusiastic locals at a bar, ate churros con chocolate on rainy days, made lifelong friends with people in my program, and, most importantly, found a place where I could come back and always feel at home.

For someone who had never really traveled, I realized during my semester abroad that stepping out of my comfort zone was what allowed me to have the world at my fingertips. Ibn Battuta said, “Traveling—it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller.” Five countries and thirteen cities later, I discovered my passion for traveling and for stepping into the unknown and learning about other’s stories. I learned that feeling lost and being the outsider isn’t so bad. As a matter of fact, those were the times that became the most memorable and the most enlightening.

Five countries and thirteen cities later, I discovered my passion for traveling and for stepping into the unknown and learning about other’s stories.
After studying abroad in Spain, I realized how much more the world has to offer. Four months was simply not enough. I’ve returned to Spain to continue what I started and to embrace Spain from a completely new perspective. Even though I’m in a new town, surrounded by different people, embracing a different lifestyle, I can’t help but feel like a part of me is home again. That’s what study abroad did for me. It opened up a world of possibilities and it gave me the courage to step out of my comfort zone, and to leave my home and my family, yet again, to pursue the unknown.

After being in Jumilla, Spain for two months as an English teacher, I can honestly say that this experience is nothing like studying abroad as a student. New challenges arise when working and living in a foreign country for an extended period of time, especially when dealing with very different systems in schools, hospitals, governmental offices, banks, supermarkets, and even restaurants. But at the same time, I only keep discovering new things about myself and the place I am calling home for the next year. I’m surprised at how well I’ve managed to adjust to a completely new job and to the small town living. I’m thankful for all the people, especially the teachers and students in Jumilla, that have helped me adjust and who have welcomed me with open arms. It’s all been a learning experience, and I’m looking forward to 6 more months of sharing my world with those I encounter, and more importantly, to keep expanding my own world in the process.
I would like to thank the students (and alumna!) who contributed to the *Globetrotter* publication. I greatly enjoyed learning about their study abroad experiences. I hope that their stories can serve as reminders of what a wonderful and challenging experience studying abroad can be.

Additionally, I would like to thank the OCS office, in particular Mary Beth for her assistance during the editing process.

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