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# Comment: Your first two months will define your study abroad



Photo: Courtesy of Alex Berger

Alex Berger with fellow exchange students on the beach

## Leave your comfort zone behind! Words of advice from a former exchange student, Alex Berger

by Alex Berger

I remember the surreal exhilaration as I took that first step onto Danish soil. Even as a veteran traveler I still couldn't help but feel a bit like Neil Armstrong as he stepped out from the Lunar Lander into the unknown. For me, it was the start of a two-year full degree program at the University of Copenhagen and a radical change from my lifestyle over the previous three years spent working 9-5 in the mergers and acquisitions industry.

I was incredibly excited but also positively terrified. Living it at the time was a bit overwhelming but, as I look back, it was one of the best experiences of my life. It was also a major learning lesson where I made mis-steps and could have done some things better. Overall though, I made a lot of great decisions and have relatively few regrets.

Over the past few years I've worked with a lot of international students who have been engaged in a variety of different programs which range from semester exchanges to multi-year full degree programs. In so doing I've noticed a couple of trends which are deeply ingrained in human behavior which can do a lot to shape how much you get out of your international study experience. Chief among these is tied to your behavior during the early-arrival period and how you form your daily routines.

### Routines and new routines

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Simply put, if you want to get a lot out of your study abroad experience there are a few basic things you have to do during the first two months. The students that really dive in and make themselves do these things have an experience with few regrets and a much richer sense of fulfillment than those who don't.

Even the most spontaneous of us is still a creature of habit. Some studies have shown that our

daily activities can be predicted with 93 per cent certainty and that we typically don't travel beyond a six-mile radius except on special occasions. These routines are very rarely disrupted but when they are, it usually doesn't take long for us to establish new routines.

Your re-location from your home country to your new study destination is one of the most extreme and unusual breaks in your daily routine you'll ever experience in your life. This is part of what makes the experience so scary but, it is also an incredible opportunity, particularly if you go into it aware that within a relatively short period of time you'll have re-established your routine and be back on a normal schedule.

## So disrupt them...

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One of the biggest regrets from students at the end of their study abroad period is that they didn't see and do more. Almost without fail they express disbelief that they didn't make it to key sights, discover favourite locations, or participate fully in a lot of rewarding activities until the very end of their experience when things were rushed and the impending weight of their return home inescapable. While this is almost unavoidable, that departure remorse is much worse for people who failed to push themselves during their first two months.

Upon arrival you will be overwhelmed. It is stressful and exhausting making new friends, learning a new culture, exploring a new city, and attempting to satisfy your academic requirements at the same time. It's very easy during this period to seek out things that are familiar and comfortable. For many, the belief is that they'll spend the first month or two getting established and then once they've built that comfortable base they'll set out to explore the city, its events, and venues more completely.

Unfortunately, at that point it almost never happens and is often too late. Once you've established that comfortable routine breaking free of it becomes nearly impossible. Not because you won't want to or know you need to, but excuses will always come up and the day-to-day needs of a regular lifestyle will become all consuming.

## Force yourself to explore

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As hard as it is, this means that even when you're exhausted, when you're feeling a little homesick, and even if you haven't made a friend yet to explore with – during that first two-month period you need to spend every moment and every opportunity you have trying new things and new places.

Make a deal with yourself – for every time you visit a coffee shop or eat a meal at a place you've been to before, find and visit two new places. Thinking you'll wait until visitors come to visit the tourist stuff around the city? Don't. It has a habit of not happening and when visitors arrive you'll take them to places you know, not places you haven't been to.

Force yourself to explore, to wander, and to visit the tourist sights and attractions in your first couple of weeks because after that two-month mark hits you will start to form habits and settle in. Which is fine, one of the best parts of living abroad is the feeling of truly being settled in and starting to integrate into where you live. BUT, if you haven't done your research and haven't explored and experienced a wide selection of what's available before settling into that routine

you've effectively gone to a large buffet for lunch, tried the first food that was conveniently available from the buffet, decided it tasted reasonably good, and then eaten that exclusively for the remainder of your meal.

## Embrace uncertainty

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If you follow this advice and hit the ground running while really pushing yourself to get out there, you're going to have a better feel for the city. You're also going to meet more people, be exposed to more events, and have much better opportunities than an individual who doesn't. It is a simple thing, but it is also one of the things you can do that will radically improve your study abroad experience.

I cannot stress enough how important this is at the beginning for each and every one of you. There are no exceptions. Enjoy and embrace the uncertainty, make it your own, discover it, and tackle it head on. You'll never forgive yourself if you don't. I just wish I was in your shoes and could do it all again. Not because I'm not happy with how I did it but, because in retrospect, that rush, that sense of discovery, that conquest of the unknown, and that control over re-shaping my daily life was an incredible experience.

This article was originally published [here](#).

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