

Going Abroad: Your Personal and Academic Goals



Why Travel? Attitudes, motivations, and approaches

The following is adapted from a talk by Michael Cooke, Former Executive Director of Canadian Crossroads International, held at Queen's University in 1989:

Attitudes

As you think about crossing borders, it is very important to be aware of what you know and don't know and what biases and cultural baggage you're carrying. Here are some questions you need to ask yourself:

- Am I interested in meeting people from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds?
- When have I actually interacted with other cultures?
- Do I like to eat new kinds of food?
- How do I feel when I can't understand the language being spoken?
- Do I like to ask questions or give answers?
- How do I cope with uncertainty regarding travel plans and accommodation?
- Am I a risk-taker?

When asking yourself these questions, it's important to **answer honestly**. If you don't have any concrete experience to date, then the first step in preparing to cross borders is to **get some first hand cross-cultural experience and test yourself through it**. One way might be to volunteer with a local international organization.



Motivations

- entering a new history, geography, and gastronomy
- communicating in one or more new languages,
- living with new cultural codes,
- operating in a new and radically different political, economic and social context,
- being aware of, and sensitive to, a new religious experience,
- leaving behind your cultural security blankets—regular conversations with friends and family, a late night pizza with friends, a drug store on every corner, a ball game on TV, etc.
- becoming dependent on other people for information and for the interpretation of information.

This list indicates that you have to cope with an enormous amount of change within a very short time frame. So before you do it, you should understand the challenges and the real dangers of crossing borders.



Consider your reasons for travel and the pitfalls of each:

1. To See and Experience Another Culture

Good, but how can you do this in an authentic way? Be ready for the emotional and physical ups and downs of culture shock.

2. To Study in Another Academic Environment

This is an excellent way to gain at both an academic and personal level. However, think carefully. Are you willing to delay your graduation if courses are not available? Will you succeed in adjusting to a new culture and learning environment at the same time? Will you be comfortable with the style of teaching and evaluation at the host institute?

3. To Help People in Need

Take a hard look at what you have to offer. Be realistic about what you might actually accomplish given the obstacles of crossing borders and the time you'll be in this new place.

4. To Travel

Be careful that you are not looking for a free ride. If you simply want to travel, maybe you should be a tourist, not a student on an academic program.

5. To Learn more about the World and People.

Learning is a mutual exercise that requires listening, observing, practicing, analyzing, and evaluating. Are you ready for these demands?

Approaches - So what does it take to cross borders?

- Clear objectives; define where you want to go and why. Be humble about what you will actually learn and accomplish.
- Information and some analysis about where you're going.
- A capacity to consider and understand your host's feelings and perspective. How will you be perceived? How have visitors before you acted? What does your host think about you ("you" includes your race, your country, your politics, your ancestors, your religion, and more)? How might your actions jeopardize or enhance the opportunities of those who will come after you?
- A willingness to take a risk. You are going into uncharted waters.
- Knowledge of your baggage: expectations, cultural bias, history and of course, material stuff. Establish a comprehensive list of what you need. (It's usually a lot less than more.)
- A return plan: It's a lot easier to go than to come home again. Canada and your context will look radically different when you get back. The re-entry may be rocky and confusing. Figure out where you can go for support and guidance.

For the Experience of Your Life

Crossing borders is exciting. It is essential that we cross borders in order to meet one another, to understand one another, to build relationships of solidarity and partnerships for the development of our world, but it is also very challenging. It demands the very best of you if you expect the very best from it.

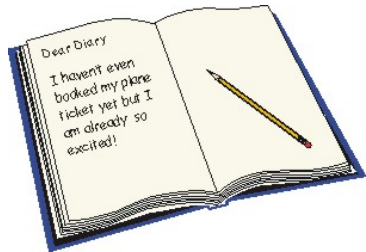
It is O.K. not to go!!!

Remind yourself that it is all right to conclude that this may not be the time for you to sojourn abroad. You may wish to acquire additional skills before leaving

for a year abroad. You may need to take care of personal business. You may identify opportunities at home that make more sense at this time in your life. Whatever the reason, it is important that you acknowledge your own needs and desires. You might also want to look at other overseas programs which may be more suited to your needs. Check with your international office to see what other travel opportunities may be available to you. Remember, being at ease with your decision is critical to your success abroad.

Keeping a journal

You are about to embark on a significant journey both academically and personally. Recording your thoughts in a journal is a great way to keep track of the many emotions, experiences and memories you will have during your travels. Start a journal now, before you leave, and continue to write for several months after your return. Regard your experience as a process of learning that begins well before you get on the plane, and extends beyond your return. Few people regret keeping a journal, and many wish they had.



"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train."Oscar Wilde

Keep a journal to:

- record your goals and personal agenda
- note your reflections during research process
- enter feelings about your pending journey
- describe initial reactions towards any new destination
- record your experiences, study assignments, field trips and routines
- think creatively through observation, reflection and analysis
- assist in the cultural adaptation process, (ie: learn new words)
- write any new feelings about family and personal relationships at home
- list addresses and contacts
- jot down ideas for your return, and epiphanies into the meaning of life
- record your feelings upon and after re-entry
- Make your journal interesting and fun to read. Be creative and take a personal approach:
- Write as you would in a letter to a close friend.
- Provide context for the stories and descriptions you relate.
- Provide specific names of things you see; include local idioms and translations to local words.
- Use adjectives and adverbs to increase the descriptive quality of your writing.
- Tell stories and use quotes from the people you meet.
- Sketch, draw or paste in souvenirs such as ticket stubs, newspaper articles of events which were occurring in your host country while you were abroad.

Consider the following alternative journal styles:

- scrapbook, with photographs, local flyers, tickets, drawing, poetry, creative prose
- audio or videotape journals
- web page journal, to keep friends and family around the world up to date

Your journal will hopefully be with you forever. Chances are you will have more time for journal writing during this experience than at any other time in the near future. Take advantage of it!

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Academic Nuts and Bolts