

SUGGESTIONS FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS GOING ABROAD

Consult a variety of resources on LGBTQ life in the destinations that you will be visiting before you actually leave. Because different types of resources are useful in different ways, be creative and flexible in your searching. For example, mainstream media will provide general information on opportunities to socialize with LGBTQ people as well as tips on safety precautions. However more specialized and culturally sensitive information can be found by looking at academic literature and fiction produced by either those who hail from wherever you are going or those who do research on that location.

Look for clues as to your program staff's attitudes toward sexuality and sexual minorities as many study abroad programs wish to be sensitive to LGBTQ issues though they are not usually built into the structure of the program. If they seem open-minded, consider asking questions about how to express your sexuality and take advantage of opportunities. Perhaps a staff member has connections to a sexuality rights organization or a locally-based researcher on an area of interest.

Try to identify individuals and groups who you can be open with about your sexuality as you become more comfortable with your living environment(s). While initially you may be most comfortable with your fellow program participants, you may be able to identify comfortable spaces for expressing your sexuality. Check out the local laws, the attitudes revealed by your host family or new friends, the images of sexuality present around you, the organizations in the area. Not all of these manifestations of sexuality will be the same, and chances are that there will be opportunities for you to engage with sexuality.

Don't feel that it is necessary to "out" yourself in every or any context while abroad. While identifying yourself may be an empowering experience, it can also be uncomfortable, unsafe, or not understandable to those you are interacting with. You can find multiple ways of expressing your sexuality that do not necessarily involve "coming out," ranging from challenging your attitudes or those of others, seeking out alternative media, etc.

Seek out and get to know queer communities in your location of study as many pervasively heterosexist contexts contain highly active and resistant groups of sexual minorities. Students frequently check out local gay bars, but keep in mind that bars may not always be the best locations for getting acquainted with communities. That said, social spaces are good places to start in building a network of queer community contacts.

Remember that sexuality is embedded in power relations and social structures wherever you are studying just as it is in the U.S. Thus race, gender, class, etc. will intersect with sexuality, and you have a particular location in these structures as well. Something to think about in engaging with sexuality is how you are relating to queer communities abroad and how they perceive you.

How does your language for sexuality differ from other languages? How are identities culturally specific? Are there transnational links between sexualities?

Reflect on what you've experienced in regards to sexuality and LGBTQ issues upon returning home. How do you think differently about where you've visited? How do you conceive of your own identity? How can you remain involved with transnational issues of sexuality? What new ideas and skills can you bring to future experiences abroad?