



# risks

We're not the first to say it: if you want to feel at home, stay at home. Studying abroad will put you in unfamiliar situations that have the power to transform you as a student, as a citizen of the world, and as a person. If you want to learn and experience as much as you can, you'll need to put your skills and yourself on the line. You'll have to take risks.

But don't confuse these good risks with bad ones that can endanger the health, safety, and well-being of yourself and others. Using illegal drugs, abusing alcohol, engaging in unsafe sex, or even walking alone in certain circumstances can put you and everything you hope to experience in jeopardy—and those aren't the right kind of risks. How can you tell the difference? With sound judgment, good common sense, and a little restraint, you can control much of your own destiny while abroad. Think before you act, consider your own safety, and return home after experiencing everything you hoped and then some.

## risk right

- set goals for what you want to learn and experience
- be courageous when the situation demands it
- keep sex and substances in perspective
- be more careful than you are at home, not less
- consider how you're being perceived by local people
- ask on-site program staff and host country friends for advice

## the good, the bad, and how to tell the difference

*Knowledge* is a series of informational brochures for students, parents, and advisors brought to you by CIEE. As the leading U.S. non-governmental international education organization, CIEE develops and provides programs that allow students and educators to study and teach abroad. We believe that there is no better way to increase international understanding and establish trust between nations. Whether you choose one of our 80 programs or another provider's, we're thrilled that you're embarking on this transforming, enduring experience.

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## the good

The world admires good risk-takers. They step outside their comfort zones to do, feel, and learn more. They take chances, even if doing so might embarrass them a little. They speak the local language even though they know they're going to make mistakes. They enroll in courses they find intriguing, even though taking classes in a second language—and within an unfamiliar academic system—will require them to work harder than they do at home. They walk up to students they've seen in class and introduce themselves, putting themselves on the road to making a new set of friends in their new home.

The best way for you to shape your own experience is to think about what you want to learn while abroad—and then find the courage to take the calculated risks that help you meet those goals. What do you want to get out of your experience? Do you want to speak your second language better? Make lifelong friends abroad? Learn about things—in your major or outside it—that you can't at your home university? You can—if you realize that making mistakes is not as terrible as returning home without experiencing what you came for.

## the can-be-bad

### sex

We'd be surprised if you'd reached this point in your life without learning the risks of unsafe sex: disease, unintended pregnancy, social and emotional consequences. Those risks don't diminish when you go abroad; in fact, many increase. For example, the incidence of HIV/AIDS is much higher in some parts of the world than in the U.S.; in some nations, well over 25% of adults are HIV-positive, and nowhere are you completely free of the risk of contracting HIV. There is also harsher judgment of those who engage in pre-marital sex in some cultures: people may shun the sexually active—especially if they're women.

All this might make you think that students would be even more sexually responsible when abroad. Unfortunately, that's not usually the case. Some students have sex with someone of another race to prove that they aren't racist. Others do because they think what happens between them and local people isn't important since they won't see them after they return home. We're sure these reasons sound less than sensible in retrospect—but once you've risked your health or social standing, they can't always be recovered.

### substances

There are many reasons—some obvious, some less so—why it's foolish to buy, sell, take, or smuggle illegal drugs while abroad. First, there are the legal ramifications. Much of what you see in movies and read in the news about foreign jails is true: circumstances there range from the seriously unpleasant to the outright dangerous. Another frightening fact you may have heard is also true: the U.S. government can do absolutely nothing to get a U.S. citizen out of jail overseas when he or she has been convicted of a drug offense. Prescription drugs are not exempt; selling them can risk a jail sentence abroad. Even in countries where simple possession of a drug such as marijuana is either legal, a minor crime, or rarely prosecuted, you can still get into trouble. Police in those countries have been known to arrest students for possessing a legal quantity of drugs, hoping that once arrested they will be willing to bribe themselves out of jail.

Then, there are the health and safety risks. As at home, illegal drugs can be tainted or contain substances other than those advertised; taking them can lead to an overdose or worse.

Buyers can be caught up in extortion schemes designed to prey on naïve foreigners. Local police can be corrupt and in collusion with dealers, swooping in to arrest students once a sale has been made. Criminals posing as tour agents sell visits to locations notorious for the high quality of drugs grown or processed there; during tours, students can be waylaid and robbed, or even worse. Misuse or abuse of prescription drugs can also be dangerous. Don't respond to the stresses of adjusting to a new culture by taking more than the prescribed dosage of your anti-anxiety medication—or drugs prescribed to another student.

And don't forget about the social and cultural consequences. One of the most persistent stereotypes people of other cultures have is that young Americans frequently abuse alcohol and drugs. Alcohol has a different place in most cultures than it does in ours, and binge drinking and public drunkenness carry far greater stigmas abroad than in the U.S. You may see what you do as harmless fun, but realize how boorish behavior may be perceived—and think about whether that's how you want to be seen by prospective new friends.

## judgment calls

Be careful: you may be justifying risky behavior with the argument that you're only doing what the local people do. The problem with this argument is that locals—who truly understand their own culture—are in a much better position to judge the situations they find themselves in than you are. As a visiting student, you may misread cultural signals—those verbal, non-verbal, and situational clues you interpret instinctively in your own American culture. Think twice before you take these common risks:

### risky things you'd never do at home

At home, we're guessing you rarely get in cars with strangers, visit apartments of people you've just met, or swallow something given by a stranger just because he or she tells you it's harmless. Though you want to expand your horizons while abroad, you've got to think in the same appropriately savvy and skeptical way that you do at home. Experience all you can, but realize that doing something like peering over a cliff without a guardrail is probably not a good idea.

### walking alone at night

This may not seem like a big deal, but students—male and female—are attacked or robbed quite often while walking alone at night. Students who would never walk alone in certain neighborhoods or situations will do so abroad, thinking wrongly that they can read the danger signals in the same way that locals can. Realize that even when you see other people walking alone, they probably don't offer as inviting a target to thieves or violent criminals as you would as a lone foreigner. Drinking to excess can make you an even easier target. The good old buddy system is as useful as ever.

### attending political demonstrations

You may want to attend or even participate in a political demonstration abroad for any number of reasons: the desire to make a political statement, the prospect of taking part in something that may turn out to be historic, the novelty of experiencing an exciting event first-hand. Whatever your motive, realize that you may be putting yourself at risk, again by inaccurately gauging situations. How will you know whether demonstrators or police will become violent, whether you risk being caught up in the violence, or whether that violence is specifically directed against yourself and other foreigners?