



women

Well, women, there's no shortage of you studying abroad; you are 65% of U.S. students abroad, and number over 100,000 a year. As an American woman, studying abroad is just one of the many opportunities you have to experience life and transform yourself into the person you'd like to be. But as you travel, remember that women are perceived and treated differently from culture to culture—and may not have the same day-to-day lives that you do.

Living abroad, your close encounters with a new culture may challenge your most deeply-held beliefs—your sense of good and bad, right and wrong—which is a big part of the learning experience. Be open-minded, learn to adapt to the society around you, and behave in ways that will keep you safe. And don't worry too much: women study abroad all the time without facing serious issues. You, like the women before you, will become part of defining how people abroad perceive American women...and the wider world will become part of defining who you are.

<< the extra facts you need

get really informed

How can you put this advice into context and find out what it will be like where you study? Before you go, ask your study abroad advisor or program provider any questions you have. Once you arrive, you'll meet people—new American friends, locals, your program's on-site resident director—who can give you information more specific to your location. Think about asking some of these questions:

- what do I need to know about birth control, STD prevention, and safer sex at my study location in particular?
- what medical resources are available at my site?
- when and where is it appropriate to be alone?
- what, if any, signal do I give a man by being alone with him?
- what types of clothes should I wear in different situations?
- how should I respond to unwanted attention?
- what should I know about traveling in the university's city and elsewhere in the country?
- what should I be aware of when out at bars, clubs, and other nightspots?

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ISP03/06-K01 50K

what you need to know abroad



differing gender roles

You know the reality: different people have different ideas about what it means to be a woman. Most American women think of gender as only one of a number of factors that define personal identity. In our society, gender is usually less important to a person's identity than things like educational level, socioeconomic standing, professional accomplishments, spiritual beliefs, and creativity. The principle of equality between the sexes is almost universally accepted, and U.S. women expect that just societies will ensure equal opportunity for women.

So, it's important to recognize that some cultures rely on gender as a primary way to define identity, though how that manifests itself in attitudes and behavior varies widely. In some cultures, attitudes toward women are similar to U.S. attitudes. But others deny the equality of men and women in one aspect or another. For example, some traditional cultures enshrine motherhood while restricting women from participating in the wide range of activities they do in the U.S.

If you study in one of these more restrictive societies, you might be surprised at the extent your gender can shape the opportunities you have. In the most extreme cases, there might be certain places you simply can't go and things you simply can't do. Even U.S. women comfortable with traditional family roles can find it challenging to live and study in such a society, so be ready to learn, analyze, and adapt.

unwanted attention

Get set to learn first-hand how widely standards of behavior can vary from culture to culture. What might be considered acceptable or even friendly in one place might be socially inappropriate or even illegal in another. So be prepared to encounter behavior that might surprise you, and be sure not to judge people's actions from only an American point of view. In some places, open staring at women is common, and comments directed at women on the street can range from the sexually suggestive to the explicit. Men in some countries may go so far as to touch or grab a woman in public. This behavior may be frowned on to some extent—local women especially may be offended—but it persists.

So, how do you respond? There's no simple answer. Men can be forceful, and the word "no" doesn't always carry the same weight it does in the U.S. Don't be frustrated if you try respond in several different ways that would be considered appropriate in the U.S.—glaring, shouting, ignoring—and none have the desired effect. Cultures differ, and there is no one response that would be effective in all of them.

A good rule is to put your personal safety first. If you're unsure about what is culturally appropriate—or lack a sure command of the local language—you could easily act more passively than you normally would. Ask on-site program staff and local women what sorts of behavior provoke unwanted attention and observe how local women deflect that attention. Avoid the common problem of placing yourself in escalating romantic situations because you're concerned about offending the other person. It's honorable to be culturally appropriate, but it's better to risk upsetting another person than to risk physical or emotional harm.

the "easy" stereotype

You may not think of yourself as easy, but many other cultures have the impression that U.S. women are loose and looking for sexual adventure. Where does that impression come from? First, both female and male U.S. students abroad are more active sexually, and more likely to be open about their sexual practices, than local people in their host countries. Then, there is the portrayal of American women in movies and television programs that are distributed worldwide. Finally, there is what people themselves observe. According to a recent survey, female American students are more likely to be sexually active while abroad than their male counterparts—and the behavior of some study abroad participants, especially at popular destinations, has done its part to contribute to the stereotype of the easy American woman.

It's important to realize that a number of non-sexual behaviors common in the U.S. may, abroad, suggest that you're "available." In the U.S., when you look a man in the eye while he's talking, it shows you're listening. In certain places abroad, if you look a man in the eye while he's talking, it's a signal that you want to have sex with him. Commonly misinterpreted behavior includes looking directly at people, whether in bars or on the street, smiling openly at strangers, and visiting nightspots without being accompanied by a man.

dressing the part

You can avoid some unwanted attention by dressing as local women do. The informal warm-weather dress you wear at home—tank tops and shorts, sundresses—may be culturally inappropriate and attract the sort of unwanted sexual attention you're working to discourage. That casual dress is much less common abroad; you'll find that women in many places dress formally in social situations that commonly allow casual dress in the U.S. In certain places, you'll see this cultural difference in the extreme: women dress extremely modestly by Western standards and are never addressed by strangers.

getting close, staying safe

Despite the need to be careful, it's not necessary to hold everyone you meet abroad at arm's length. Part of immersing yourself may be dating a local man or woman. Post-sexual revolution, it's practically impossible to generalize about dating and sex—even when you're talking about people of the same culture. Once you add the complexity of different cultures coming together, there are really no consistent behaviors or universal responses, but this advice may help if you get romantically involved with someone of another culture:

• observe local women

- how they and their romantic interests act, and the consequences of their actions
- how their behavior changes from one social situation to another

• be aware of cultural clues

- a woman's willingness to be alone with a man can signal a willingness to have sex
- "no means no" will not necessarily slow sexual advances; in some cultures, "no" is what "nice girls" are taught to say prior to surrendering to advances
- learn what behaviors are associated with prostitution and avoid them
- local people may ostracize a woman who has sex outside marriage—starting with the man she sleeps with
- asking to be "just friends" with someone whose romantic advances have been refused may be met with incomprehension rather than acceptance
- local females may resent foreign women because they believe their men are chasing after them

• seek advice

- befriend an older—or younger—woman and ask her honest advice about your interests in other men or women
- if you have a bad experience, let the resident staff of your program know; they can help with any physical or psychological support you need

• control your own behavior

- listen to your instincts—which may mean saying "no" and leaving
- promise yourself you're not going to have too much to drink, and stick to the promise; negotiating inter-cultural romance is complicated enough without losing control because of alcohol
- agree with a small number of reliable friends that none of you will leave a social event without the others
- don't act in ways you wouldn't at home because you won't see these people once you return