Benefits of Studying Abroad in a Non-Traditional Location

Studying abroad provides you with a unique opportunity to learn about the world, break out of your routine, and expand your perspective. More and more students are taking advantage of this opportunity each year; according to the 2017 Open Doors report, study abroad participation among US college students has grown by over 300% in the past 20 years. Despite significant changes in the number of students going abroad each year, the top locations for study abroad have more or less stayed the same. Currently, the top five hosting countries for US study abroad students are all located in Western Europe and top tier European cities attract thousands of US students every year. While there is nothing wrong with studying in a major European city and these locations have a lot to offer, big name travel destinations are not the only options worth considering. There are many perks to picking a location that fewer American students frequent and the list below is by no means complete. Here are some reasons why you should consider studying abroad in a non-traditional location:

1. **It can help with language acquisition.** Choosing a location that is slightly off the beaten path could considerably increase your use of the local language. Generally, cities that have a booming tourism industry also have many citizens who speak English at a high level. While you will find people eager to practice their English in most parts of the world, the number of people comfortable communicating solely in English will decrease in areas that receive fewer foreign visitors. If learning a language is one of your goals, studying in a non-traditional location can give you a push to practice the language whenever you go out.
2. **You gain unique life experiences.** By studying abroad in a less common location, you are guaranteed to have a distinctly different experience from your peers who stick to more mainstream cities and countries. Not only will your day-to-day life be full of moments that stand out from your routine at home, but you will also have unique travel opportunities and extracurricular activities that would likely not be available in a major tourist destination. Nearly everyone who studies abroad will have stories of traveling on the weekends, but few will be able to say that they visited a floating village in Vietnam or experienced an elephant safari in Tanzania. Ultimately, these experiences amount to more than just bragging rights and cool pictures; they allow you to open your eyes to parts of the world that few people get to see.

3. **You can use the experience to build your resume.** Electing to study abroad in an uncommon location may benefit you in future job searches. As the concept of studying abroad becomes more commonplace among college students, simply having a semester abroad on your resume may not set you apart from other applicants in the way that it used to. A non-traditional location helps to peak the interest of job search committees and allows you to highlight skills such as flexibility, working with diverse groups, and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, choosing to study abroad in an unusual location is a way of illustrating that you are an innovative thinker and willing to take on a challenge.
4. **You will have more engaging experiences with your host community.**
   How local people perceive you will vary significantly depending on where you are in the world. If you choose to study in a location that does not receive many foreign visitors, people are going to be curious about you and will want to get to know you better. You will find plenty of people who want to share their hometown with you and who have a strong sense of appreciation that you are interested in their culture. By contrast, people living in cities that are considered major travel hubs are used to foreign visitors and may not take as much of an interest in American students. Studying in a location that receives few American students also removes the temptation to stick with what is familiar and can make you more approachable to the local people. Including members of your host community in your social circle ultimately allows you to expand your perceptions of how the world works and exposes you to new ideas.
5. **You will be able to step outside of your comfort zone and grow from the experience.** Study abroad is a great time to challenge yourself to try things that are completely out of your element. This could mean adapting to new styles of communication, contrasting perceptions of time, or completely different cultural norms. While you will likely experience some differences regardless of where you choose to study abroad, choosing a non-traditional location will truly challenge you to engage with diverse viewpoints and ways of life. Living in a place with a distinctly different culture, rather than one that strongly mirrors your own, will allow you to make the most of this exploratory time in your life and learn about yourself in the process.

Of course, deciding on a study abroad program is about a lot more than location and you may find that a more traditional setting will better suit your needs. Here are some factors worth considering when determining where to study abroad:

1. **What are your primary goals for the experience?**

Before selecting a location, it is important to reflect on what you are hoping to gain from the experience. Do you want to increase your proficiency in a foreign language? If your goal is to learn Italian, studying abroad outside of Italy may not be the best option for you. However, if you are studying a language that has a wider global reach, such as Spanish, you may find that choosing a Spanish-speaking country other than Spain will provide you with a different understanding of the language. The same advice applies if you are using your study abroad experience as a way of exploring a potential career path. Some career paths are very well suited to non-traditional locations. For instance, if you are considering a career in international development, living in a country that is actively developing will give you a more personal connection with the field and the people you are hoping to serve.
2. **Will you be appropriately challenged in this location?**

Are you choosing to study abroad in a city that you have already spent a lot of time in? If the answer is yes, you may find that you do not get as much out of your time abroad as friends who are experiencing the location for the first time. Things may be easier for you starting out, but easy is not necessarily better. Pushing yourself and stepping outside of what you are comfortable with can result in tremendous personal growth. Of course, there is a fine line between challenging yourself and overwhelming yourself. If you feel like you will be completely overwhelmed or if you have needs that could not be easily accommodated in certain environments, it makes sense to study somewhere where the culture and physical infrastructure align more with your own. It is important to note that “non-traditional” does not necessarily mean “not in Europe”. It is perfectly possible to study abroad in Europe without choosing a major tourist city and still receive all of the benefits outlined above.

3. **Are you basing your location decision around other people?**

Make sure that wherever you end up studying is a place where you truly want to go. This means not just picking a program because your friends are going there. Basing the decision around others could cause you to compromise your own goals and get less out of the experience than you could have if you had branched out on your own. Plus, sticking with people you already know could make it very difficult to make friends with the local people. Be aware that you may get some pushback when you tell the people close to you that you want to study abroad somewhere that is a bit out of the norm. This feedback may come from a fear of the unknown or concern for your safety. In general, people feel more comfortable with the idea of traveling to places that they see in the media or that their friends have already visited. This does not mean that non-traditional locations are unsafe; it just means you will have to do some research and make a thoughtful argument for why you should study abroad somewhere outside of the box.
It is important that you truly consider your options when deciding on a study abroad program. The locations that are most heavily marketed to American students may not be a great fit for you. On the other hand, you may find that a traditional study abroad location is exactly what you are looking for and helps you meet your goals. Chances are, you will have rewarding experiences wherever you go and will learn new things about the world and yourself along the way.

If you think that a non-traditional location appeals to your sense of adventure and aligns with your goals for studying abroad, take a moment to check out the program offerings (both non-traditional and more traditional) on the IPSL website. We have programs available in a diverse range of locations that are undoubtedly off the beaten path.