

## Study Abroad While Black: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

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*Who is the intended audience(s) for your Perspective Piece?: Students studying abroad for the first time and Black American student*

I never wanted to study abroad. In fact, when my study abroad advisor at Claremont McKenna College casually suggested studying internationally, I dismissed the idea entirely. After completing my first year with the intent of pursuing a dual degree and a minor, I concluded that there was not enough time for me to study abroad and graduate on time.

However, by the end of the first semester of my sophomore year, I was prepared to embark on my first international experience in Thessaloniki, Greece where I studied media at the American College of Thessaloniki. A few months later, I interned abroad in Manila, Philippines knowing that my next semester would be spent in Prague.

Living abroad for an entire year has been the most rewarding choice of my life, especially as a gay, African American man. Meeting other black students and travelers from America, Africa, and Europe as well as other LGBTQ+ members has helped me develop a stronger relationship with and understanding of my blackness and queer identity. Going abroad allowed me to step outside of my home, analyze it, and compare my life abroad to how I lived and felt in the United States. As a black man, I often felt more welcomed in European cities than I did in America due to the prevalent racism and occasional homophobia. Of course, racism still exists within Europe, but it is more rooted in nationality or ethnicity rather than skin color. For example, Parisians might treat you differently if you cannot speak their language, not solely because you have a different skin complexion. This is not the case in America where racism continues to participate in the disenfranchisement of minority groups.

For me, this type of prejudice was refreshing because, for once, it felt like people were judging me based on something other than the color of my skin. Over time, I fell in love with Europe, which is why I stayed for an extended period of time.

In one year, I traveled to two continents, lived in three cities, and visited over twenty countries. Before departing for Greece, I was extremely nervous about being a study abroad student because it marked my first international experience. Many thoughts filled my head. I wondered about the challenges of existing as a black man in a homogenous, predominantly white, European country. I stressed about the possible language barrier between myself, fellow students, and other foreigners. Thankfully, there was nothing to worry about because most people spoke English and happily welcomed American students. In Prague, the reception was less warm but still inviting. I never felt unwelcomed in any space.

Overall, the most positive experience I had during my time abroad was creating my final exhibition for the Prague Photography Program. I wanted to leave the program with a new set of skills in photography

and graphic design, and I definitely succeeded.

For students who feel uncertain about committing to an abroad program, I say think about how stepping outside of your comfort zone could impact your professional development. If you stay in one spot forever, you might miss opportunities that could shape your future path.