

# How to win friends studying abroad

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“How long are you going to be in Tokyo for?”

“For a year.”

“A year?! What kind of person goes for a year?”

That person would be me, fleeing the purple mountain majesties for a futuristic Asian metropolis, 6760 miles across the hemisphere. I was nonchalant about missing the customary things that I will no longer be able to indulge in, such as: the daily interactions with family and friends, the comforting presence of Starbucks on every corner, and the ubiquity of American products like Kraft Easy Mac.

But at some point, even my travel-hardened senses will give in to the reality that I am traveling to a non-English-speaking country knowing nary a familiar face. So my priority was to establish a network of people that I can explore the city with, copy class notes from, practice my accented conversational skills on, and eventually, whose couches I can surf in the future.



## Step One:

What every study abroad student fears is being friendless and socially ostracized, which you can capitalize on by using this simple technique. Sidle up to the potential friend of your choice and utter one weighty syllable, “Hi.” There may be a delay in seconds, as they are thrown by this display of courage at personal risk and scrambling to find a reply, but once they do, you're in. One of my friends cleverly refers to this as, “Deep Ocean trawling,” a tactic adapted from the bars and now introduced to study abroad pow-wows.

It may be tempting to stick to people that are of your cultural background, but the point is to interact with natives from the country itself, and students from places outside of your geographical sphere. Talking to as many people as possible will increase your opportunity of finding the Robin to your Batman, the Palin to your McCain.

### **Step Two:**

Once you throw a few hundred people together from around the world, the group mind tends to be more open to new experiences. While people back at home may be more ingrained in a daily ritual, most people are studying abroad because of their insatiable exploratory and intellectual curiosity. Within the first week, I had pulled my first all-nighter, singing my heart out for five hours at one of those karaoke bars in Shinjuku, before making my way to a sushi breakfast at the Tsukiji fish market, by catching the first train at five in the morning alongside a sea of monochromatic, bleary-eyed salary men. Having that new experience happened all because I couldn't refuse the pleading faces of my new Finnish friends. When abroad, within reason, "yes" will be the best word in your vocabulary.

### **Step Three** (or, the emergency exit plan):

Unfortunately, not all people fall within the category of people that you can say "yes" to, which brings me to using "no" firmly, and weeding out these creepers. Study abroad students are less aware of unusual behavior because they are desperate for friends and often don't know the cultural cues of "weirdness" in their host country.

Ever the optimist about humanity, I give most people the benefit of the doubt, but there's an exception when that person is clearly trying to trick their way into your pants. How should you respond when you have had deep, meaningful, heart to heart conversation with a person, indoctrinated them as your new best friend, only to have them turn on you and drop this bomb, "Oh. You're so smart and wonderful. I haven't gotten laid since this summer. Can we?"

"No."

"I have never masturbated before. Will you show me how?"

"NO!"

It's always heart-breaking when circumstances dictate that you must backtrack from steps one and two, burning the bridges of your potential friend, and rejecting a proposal for a spontaneous activity, but step three, knowing when to deny someone, will save your time and dignity for worthier things.

### **Step Four:**

If you have managed to avoid the dreaded step three with your person, you can start solidifying this friendship by discovering new things in the city together. Sharing the excitement

and exchanging perspectives should not be viewed as a one-sided forfeiture of your secret hole-in-the-wall joint, but it can be mutually beneficial in that you are also privy to their secret spots.

The best scenario is when you and your new friend have a fantastic synergy that extends beyond domestic adventures to traveling outside of your study abroad country. Which leads me to....

### **Step Five:**

Often, people study abroad in a region that is entirely different from their home country and the temptation is to travel every weekend to a different exotic locale. But unfortunately, too much travel will detract from getting familiarized with your local surroundings, especially if you are only there for a few short months.

This issue can be mitigated by walking everywhere. You will discover fascinating things that would be overlooked if you had been in a car or other vehicles that go faster than your brain's ability to visually process detail.

As is the nature of studying abroad, there will be many opportunities to act on these five steps. Like all guidelines, sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, and sometimes they're completely irrelevant. But regardless, there will be great stories that come out of it, like those very true scenarios I had just fondly recounted.