

PREPARING TO STUDY ABROAD: THE MINORITY EXPERIENCE

Ar'Meishia Burrow - KIIS Spain II Alumna - mimisburrow@gmail.com



PREPARATION

1. RESEARCH RACE RELATIONS IN YOUR HOST COUNTRY

- It may be helpful to research immigration in your host country.
- What interactions do your host country have with your racial/ethnic minority in the news or international headlines?
- Researching the state of affairs in your host country will give you an idea of how you MAY be perceived or treated while studying abroad.

2. KEEP AN OPEN MIND

- When speaking to natives, be mindful of what they may or may not know about diverse American identities.
- Try to gauge the intentions of others prior to taking offense. Are they intending to offend or are simply asking questions out of curiosity?

3. BE YOURSELF

- Embrace your identity. When asked questions about your identity, use it as a teachable moment about stereotypes.
- Don't feel pressured to be the spokesperson for all who share your identity. You are one individual sharing your personal lifestyle, culture, and experiences, not the representative for your entire community.
- Be yourself and allow open dialogue with others to change preconceived notions.

4. IDENTIFY A SUPPORT GROUP

- Establish your network of support prior to studying abroad so that you have people to talk to should you encounter an unpleasant experience.
- In addition to issues abroad, your support group also is there to listen and support you through all things, even the positive. It is encouraged to share your enjoyable experiences as well and to debrief your experience abroad as a whole.
- Below are suggestions for your support group:
 - Program Adviser
 - University Faculty and Staff
 - Family and Friends back home
 - Study Abroad Alumni
 - Online Resources: Sites like **diversityabroad.org** offer Diversity Abroad Community Forums to post questions and provide Alumni Stories.

ONCE ABROAD

1. RESPONSES ABROAD

- Most countries have limited interactions with racial/ethnic minorities.
- Many of their preconceived notions are derived from stereotypes in the media.
- You may be the first ethnic minority your hosts have encountered.
- Most people are genuinely interested in your background and identity.
- Identifying as “American” often isn’t enough; be prepared for questions about your ethnic background.

2. POSSIBILITIES

- You may be confronted with offensive caricatures of your race or ethnicity in shops, restaurants, or in the media while abroad.
- People may comment on your physical appearance or wardrobe or may encroach on your personal space in wonderment. They may express the urge to touch your hair or skin or attempt to do so without asking.
- Strangers may stop and ask for pictures or you may catch someone sneaking a picture of you.
- You may encounter subtle or blatant forms of prejudice:
 - Hearing or being called a derogatory phrase
 - Lack of political correctness when attempting to identify you
 - Feeling isolated or discriminated against when you are denied access or service

3. THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Questions and responses may be off-putting at first but by sharing stories of your background, culture, and family comfortably, you begin to dismantle stereotypes and common myths, actively participating in cultural exchange.
- When you encounter uncomfortable situations, take comfort in the fact that you are not alone, others before you have encountered similar experiences. This is the time to call on your support system to help you process the experience.
- Consider the experience as an opportunity to grow and potentially educate others. Continue conversations about racism and experiences of prejudice with your host family and other students in the program to further awareness and promote tolerance and diversity.

WHAT TO DO IN A RACIAL OR DISCRIMINATORY INCIDENT

IN THE MOMENT

1. ASSESS the danger or threat in the situation

- Is the person speaking in an aggressive manner?
- Are they alone or with someone else?
- Are you alone or with someone else?

2. REACT or RESPOND

a) REACT- in danger

If you're in a crowded place move away from the person and locate a person of authority such as an employee or the police. Quickly move to the nearest well-lit location where other people are around. Knowing phrases such as "Stay Back" or "I am calling the police" in the primary language of the country can be helpful.

b) RESPOND- in a safe environment

Is this experience the opportunity to grow and educate someone? If in a safe environment, use the incident as a teachable moment for positive cultural exchange.

3. DISCUSS the incident

Share your experience with your support group to help process the incident.

Be prepared if an incident does arise, but do not go abroad expecting racism or discrimination. Don't let the *possibility* of discrimination prevent you from experiencing the life changing benefits of living and studying abroad.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- NAFSA - Association of International Education (**nafsa.org**)
 - “Exploring Education Abroad: A Guide for Racial and Ethnic Minority Participants”
- The Center for Global Education - (**allabroad.us**)
- Diversity Abroad - (**diversityabroad.org**)
 - “Diversity and Inclusion Abroad Guide” - Includes sections on women abroad, LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, adult students, and more
 - Materials for Heritage Seekers who are traveling to their home country