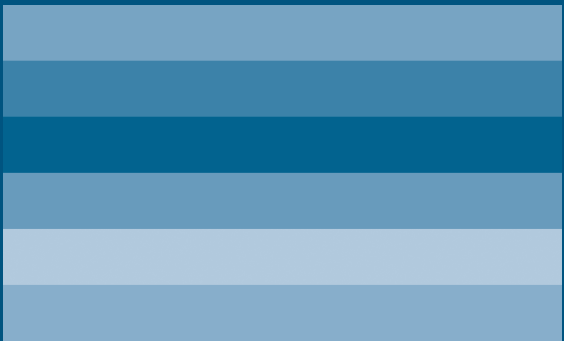




identity

sexual and gender
expression
abroad



Studying abroad is a golden opportunity to live another culture, soak up a second language, and transform yourself as a citizen and as a human being. If you're lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexed, or an ally (LGBTQIA, for short) this could include experimenting with and expressing alternate identities, both sexual and non-sexual.

Take that into account when you choose a study abroad location and program. Of course you'll want to satisfy your academic and extracurricular needs, but also evaluate the aspects of the environment that could affect how you express your sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQIA life exists almost everywhere, but the degree to which it's visible at first glance varies. As you get to know people and places more intimately, you'll usually find a plethora of welcoming institutions and hangouts. Approach expressing your sexual identity as just another cross-cultural challenge. Be positive and flexible, use sensitivity and openness in every interaction, and your time abroad will be the most satisfying of your life.

<< tips for telling your own story

Before we talk about how your sexual identity fits into your study abroad experience, let's make sure we're all using terms in the same way—a challenge even within the U.S., never mind outside it. It's important to distinguish gender identity, the sense that a person is male or female, from sexual orientation, the sense that a person claims a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual identity. Gender identity is a person's sense of being masculine, feminine, in-between, or androgynous—a sense that is independent from biological sex and usually manifests itself by the age of three or four. Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, physical, and/or sexual attraction and the expression of that attraction—which does not manifest itself until much later in life, usually after puberty and often not until adulthood. And gender expression—the way you communicate your gender to others—is independent as well. Many equate being gay with looking or acting effeminate and being lesbian with looking or acting mannish—or even think gay men want to be women and lesbians want to be men—but the spectrum of gender expression is more complex than that.

A list of definitions for these and many other words used in this brochure can be found at www.ciee.org/program_resources/knowledge.aspx.

cultural mores from place to place

While studying abroad, you'll be constantly comparing your host culture to what you're accustomed to at home, and that goes for everything from what you eat to who you meet to where and how you live. Here in the U.S., many hurdles to full acceptance and legal recognition still exist, but young people are finding the strength, resources, and acceptance to live their true sexual identities at a younger age than ever before. This doesn't mean heterosexism (the belief that all people are or should be heterosexual) or homophobia (the irrational fear of homosexuality or behaviors or beliefs that don't conform to traditional sex roles) have been eradicated. Problems still exist in the U.S. on personal, social, institutional, and societal levels, and there's no question that some LGBTQIs still live lives of silence, invisibility, and even violence—but there's also no question that gays and lesbians are more visible in U.S. culture and society than ever before. As you travel and study overseas, you'll find that local laws and customs afford you fewer freedoms than you've come to expect in some places and more in others.

Part of living and studying abroad is adapting to the customs—and of course complying with the laws—of your host country and its predominant culture or cultures. In some societies, LGBTQIA culture is more clandestine than it is in the U.S. For example, in China, same-sex public affection is much more common than opposite-sex public affection, so most Chinese LGBTQIs remain cleverly disguised and somewhat closeted. To the discerning eye, two men or two women holding hands and smiling at each other in a certain way are most definitely lovers, but to the typical Chinese eye, they are nothing more than friends. In other societies, like the Dutch, a wide range of gender identities and expressions is visible and accepted.

an opportunity for expression

Abroad, you'll find a new way of seeing your place in the world, and that might include new freedom to express your identity. You may have the opportunity to self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.—or you may feel sent back into the closet because the environment or host culture is not conducive to outward expression of your sexuality or gender. Depending on where you study, you could encounter attitudes ranging from full acceptance of all forms of identity and expression to severe homophobia or transphobia. Striking a balance between sincere expression of your sexuality and gender and local norms can be a challenge, particularly in cultures where little tolerance exists. On the other hand, in some places where the broader cultural milieu is conservative, liberal laws may exist to protect people with differing sexual identities.

to come out or not to come out

There isn't a single, overarching rule for how to express your true self while abroad. As in any cross-cultural situation, it pays to observe, be sensitive to local customs, and express yourself appropriately and respectfully. If you come to the experience with your own sexual politics and a desire to actively challenge local cultural norms, that could complicate your interactions with people both inside and outside the classroom. Be true to yourself, but stay open to every learning opportunity.

Most students find their study experience is what they make of it. At first, you may be apprehensive about coming out, but if your situation is typical, once you do, you'll have a positive experience filled with friends, fun, and understanding.

Your program staff is there for support, so ask them for advice about the local culture as you consider taking the plunge—a plunge similar to the decision to study abroad in the first place.

Actually, you may be surprised or disappointed to find that your sexual identity can be overshadowed by your nationality in the eyes of your host culture. Quite often, LGBTQI Americans who speak in English overseas are seen simply as Americans, without regard to their sexual identity or gender expression. Remember that your sexual identity is just one part of the complete identity that makes you who you are.

tips from those before you

choose wisely and plan

As you choose a program, take the location's entire environment into consideration in addition to whether or not your academic needs are being met. Be as open and honest as you can with your study abroad advisor and program staff so they can tell you about any culture-specific sexuality or gender issues you need to keep in mind as you choose. Ask how the host culture interprets and handles different sexual identities and gender expressions. What laws exist that affect LGBTQIs? What resources does each program have to deal with issues that could arise and affect your housing, health, safety, or support services?

adapt to your new environment

While abroad, you'll be a guest of your host country. To engage fully, you must be willing to balance your own cultural values with those of your hosts. By actively listening to locals, you'll become sensitive to subtle cues that indicate what is considered acceptable behavior. Hopefully, you won't need to hide aspects of your true identity, but you might need to be more careful of your behavior.

observe local manners

Understand when it's appropriate to discuss your sexual identity or gender expression with fellow students or hosts. What is commonplace discussion in public and private settings in the U.S. may not be considered polite conversation in your host culture. Same-sex marriage, gay adoption, same-sex partner benefits, and gays in the military may not be subjects of open debate overseas. Are all forms of sexual or gender expression, including kissing or holding hands (whether gay or straight) considered a private

matter? Is any sexual topic a social taboo? Consider what can or should be discussed publicly in the classroom, in your housing situation, at social events, and in interactions with the local community. Don't take omissions or silences as intolerance, though. Be flexible, trust your instincts, and ask your on-site program director if you have questions.

stay healthy

Doing what you can to stay in good health is essential whether you're at home or abroad. Eat well, sleep enough, exercise regularly, and practice responsible sexual behavior to guard yourself against sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, and undesirable social consequences. The incidence of HIV/AIDS is much higher in some parts of the world than it is in the U.S., and it knows no boundaries of country, color, or sexuality. So know your HIV status, learn safe sex practices, and communicate openly with sexual partners. If you need health care overseas, choose a provider who is sensitive to sexual and gender issues if that could be relevant to your needs. If you're transgender, research options for continuing treatments while abroad and restrictions on traveling with certain prescription medications.

be safe

Local laws and practices differ greatly, and the reality is that how you express your sexuality and gender could pose safety concerns while abroad. Make sure you know the laws relating to sexuality and gender expression; if you're transgender, note legal issues related to travel and immigration. Homosexuality remains illegal in some countries, and even in countries without legal barriers, cultural norms may prohibit outward expression of your sexual identity. In some places, even the perception of being gay or lesbian could put you at additional risk. These risks may include outward hostility from locals or harassment from even law enforcement officials. The good news is that if you come to your study abroad experience with good planning and keen understanding of the issues, your time abroad should be as healthy, safe, and meaningful as any student's.

More tips to keep you healthy and safe are available at www.ciee.org/health_safety.aspx and in our *health and safety Knowledge* brochures.

groups that can help

Rainbow SIG (a Special Interest Group of NAFSA) counsels and supports international and study abroad students and international education professionals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Resources for students and advisors alike can be found at www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay.

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission protects and advances the human rights of all people and communities subject to discrimination or abuse on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status. A U.S.-based non-profit organization, IGLHRC responds to human rights violations around the world through documentation, advocacy, coalition building, public education, and technical assistance. Learn more at www.iglhrc.org.

The International Lesbian and Gay Association is a worldwide federation of national and local groups dedicated to achieving equal rights for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people everywhere. ILGA focuses public and government attention on cases of discrimination by supporting programs and protest actions, asserting diplomatic pressure, providing information, and working with international organizations and media. More is online at www.ilga.org.

Knowledge is a series of informational brochures for students, parents, and advisors brought to you by CIEE. As the leading U.S. non-governmental international education organization, CIEE develops and provides programs that allow students and educators to study and teach abroad. We believe that there is no better way to increase international understanding and establish trust between nations. Whether you choose one of our 97 programs or another provider's, we're thrilled that you're embarking on this transforming, enduring experience.

Special thanks to the members of NAFSA's Rainbow SIG for their contributions to this *Knowledge* brochure.

Additional copies and displays are available upon request.

