

A Parents Guide to Study Abroad: Safety and Security

By William Hoffa

Overseas study programs recognize their responsibility to do their utmost to provide a secure and unthreatening environment, in which your daughter or son can live and learn. Responsible campuses and programs consult regularly with colleagues around the country who are involved in the administration of study abroad programs; with resident program directors of programs; with responsible officials of foreign host universities; with contacts in the U.S. Department of State, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and with other experts, including faculty who are well informed on issues and events. It is in no one's interest to risk student safety and well being.

The ability to communicate almost instantaneously worldwide via fax machines and electronic mail enables campuses (and parents) to obtain and share information quickly and accurately in the event of an overseas emergency that may have repercussions for study abroad programs and students. In short, most campuses and programs have in place an effective system of consultation and consensus building in order to make proactive and reactive decisions concerning the safe operation of their programs.

Few countries have as much street crime and the potential for stranger-upon-stranger violence as the United States, so in this sense, U.S. students may be statistically "safer" in foreign cities and towns than they are at home. Many U.S. students report when they return from a period abroad that they had never felt safer in their lives. This does not mean that there is no crime elsewhere, or that a daughter's or son's personal safety is ever completely assured. Minor street crime (especially pick pocketing) is a fact of life in many countries, especially in crowded cities that receive regular influxes of foreign visitors.

Further, students living or traveling in counties that are internally unstable or at odds with their neighbors can certainly be put in harm's way. Carrying a passport is no guarantee of safety or absolute security. In certain places and at certain times, it is very possible to get caught in the midst of forms of political strife that may not be directed at foreigners generally or Americans in particular, but nevertheless can be very dangerous. Usually risks are knowable well in advance, so precautions can be taken. On the other hand, there are no documented instances in the history of study abroad when it has been apparent that American students have been the specific targets of political violence. In those few locations where even remote danger might occasionally exist, program directors work with local police, consular personnel, and local university officials in setting up whatever practical security measures are deemed prudent. In such places, students will be briefed during orientation programs and reminded at times of heightened political tension about being security conscious in their daily activities. Terrorism is a twentieth-century reality and is not likely to diminish (or increase) significantly. To succumb to the threat by reacting in fear may well be the objective that terrorists seek to achieve.

Students and parents should develop a family communication plan for regular telephone or e-mail contact, with contingencies for emergency situations. With this in place, in times of heightened political tension, natural disaster, or other difficulty, interested parties will be able to communicate with each other directly about safety and well being.

The U.S. government monitors daily the political conditions in every country of the world. Parents with concerns about crime and security threats in a given country are urged to take advantage of U.S. State Department Travel Advisories, which are available to the public free of charge. Travel Warnings are issued when the State Department decides based on all relevant information, to recommend that Americans avoid travel to a certain country. Consular Information Sheets are available for every country of the world, and include such information as location of the U.S.

Embassy or Consulate, unusual immigration practices, health conditions, minor political disturbances, unusual currency and entry regulations, crime and security information, and drug penalties. If an unstable situation exists which is not severe enough to warrant a travel warning, this is duly noted. Public announcements contain information about terrorist threats and other relatively short-term and transnational conditions posing significant risks to the security of American travelers.

About the Author

William Hoffa is the Principal Consultant of Academic Consultants International, where he works with colleges and universities to globalize their campuses. He is an active member of NAFSA and is well-known as an expert in education abroad with numerous publications, such as "NAFSA'S Guide to Education Abroad: For Advisers and Administrators," "Study Abroad: A Guide for Parents," and the forthcoming "Crisis Management in a Cross Cultural Setting." He is currently working on the "History of American Study Abroad." Dr. Hoffa also teaches in the International and Intercultural Management Masters Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. He has held positions as Professor of English and American Studies at Vanderbilt University, Kirkland College, and Hamilton College, was Senior Fulbright Lecturer to the University of Jyvaskyla, Finland (1974-75), and was National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, University of New Mexico (1978-79). He has served as Executive Director of Scandinavian Seminar (Inc.) and Field Director of Academic Programs for the Council on International Educational Exchange. Dr. Hoffa holds academic degrees from Michigan, Harvard, and Wisconsin.

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