

17 Making the most of your time off

Being an international student shouldn't just be about study. Make the most of your time by seeing more of your host country during your time off. You could even leave your host country and travel to one of the countries close by. Here are some tips on how to have affordable, enjoyable, and safe time off.

General things to consider

Timing

When planning the timing of your vacation/holiday, think about the following:

- What are your study commitments? Professors/Lecturers often give students assignments to do which are due shortly after the spring or fall/autumn break. Make sure you leave enough time before or after your travels to work on these.
- What are your work commitments? If you have a job, is your boss happy to give you time off? How long can you afford to take off work?
- Who are your travel companions and what are their commitments? Find a time that suits everyone.
- What do you want to do and how long will you need to do it? If you want to go hiking, you may only need a weekend. If you want to go to a festival in another city, or travel up the coast, you may need a week or more.
- What will the weather be like? Some activities and attractions may be closed or less enjoyable at certain times of year. Check what time of year is best for the activities you plan. If you're planning on traveling in

your host country, get advice from local people. They'll be able to recommend things for you to do.

Legal issues

If you're traveling to another country, e.g. from the US to Canada or Mexico, or the UK to elsewhere in Europe, make sure that your visa allows for this. You'll also need a letter from your college/university, to show when you come back into the country. Check with your college's/university's International Office well before you plan to travel.

Where to go

Research possible destinations, and make a list of activities and attractions that sound interesting.

- How much money can you and your travel companions afford to spend? See the section "Not much money?" for ideas on traveling cheaply.
- What are the terms of your health insurance? If you plan to leave your host country, make sure your insurance covers you in your destination. Some policies don't cover you for activities they consider dangerous, such as skydiving, scuba diving, rock climbing, and skiing. This is especially important in the US.
- Can you still use your cell phone/mobile phone? If you plan to leave your host country, contact your carrier/provider to ask about access and costs in your destination country. Remember that outside cities and large towns, you may not always have good reception.

Transportation

How will you travel to your vacation/holiday destination? Check your options and how much they cost before you book.

- Airplane is usually (if not always) the most expensive way to travel. There are several websites that help you compare the cost of different airlines. Try www.kayak.com or

www.getgoing.com in the US. Outside the US, try www.skyscanner.net or www.webjet.com and STA Travel (which focuses on students). The flight itself is fast when you travel by plane, but once you add in the time to get to the airport and the fact that you usually have to check in 1–2 hours before the flight and wait in lines/queues, it isn't always the quickest way to get somewhere.

- Trains often arrive in a more convenient location than the local airport. They may not take much longer than a flight, and can be more comfortable. Check the fares because sometimes you can get a discount if you book well in advance. In the US, trains are most convenient on the East Coast. If you're traveling across the country, they'll take a long time. In the UK, booking a ticket before you travel is usually the cheapest option. Check the conditions carefully, as sometimes you can only travel on certain companies' trains and/or at certain times.
- Buses are cheap, but can be uncomfortable, especially for long distances. Sometimes they're the only way to get to your destination without your own transportation and the price can be really attractive. If a bus is described as a "coach," it's usually more comfortable.
- Driving is usually a direct and convenient way to travel. Having a car also makes it easier to get around after you arrive. If you plan to drive, check the parking situation at your destination: driving is much less convenient in towns where parking is hard to find and/or very expensive. Also, you'll need to look into whether you need an international driver's licence or not. If you're in North America or Australia, renting or buying a reliable car is very important. You'll often have very long distances to drive and might be in very remote areas where it might be dangerous to break down. In the UK, you may prefer to take public transportation, and you certainly won't need a car to get around London.

- Cycling is healthy and cheap. You should be able to pick up a cheap bike second-hand if you need one. Buy a good lock for your bicycle and check laws about lights, helmets, and where you're allowed to ride. You may be able to bring your bicycle with you on other forms of transportation: check with your airline or bus, rail, or ferry company.
- Hitchhiking can be dangerous. We don't recommend it.
- Ride shares are often available on campuses in North America. Students who are going in the same direction can plan to travel together, and share the costs of gas/petrol and the burden of driving.

Where to stay

What sort of accommodation is available at your destination?

- **Hotels:** These range from basic to luxurious with lots of services and facilities. Most hotels will have a rating depending on what they provide. A basic hotel is usually 1–2 stars, and a huge and luxurious one with many services and facilities is usually classified as 4–5 stars. You may be able to find cheap deals on good hotels on websites such as www.hotwire.com or www.kayak.com. In Australia and the UK try www.wotif.com and www.lastminute.com. You can read what other people thought of their hotel on sites such as www.tripadvisor.com.
- **Youth hostels:** These provide cheap dormitory-style accommodation with 2–8 people per room. You may need to share your room with other travelers. Youth hostels can be fun places to stay and meet people, but can be noisy. Some hostels have restrictions about what time you return at night, and expect you to take part in chores, such as washing dishes, sweeping the floor, and so on.
- **Student residences:** These often rent out rooms cheaply during the breaks, when many of their residents are away.

- **Vacation/holiday apartments:** These are self-contained, furnished apartments with cooking facilities, fridges, and washing machines.
- **Camping:** Tents can be bought or rented cheaply from camping stores. Check where you're allowed to pitch a tent where you plan to go camping.
- **Trailer/caravan parks:** In Australia, the UK, and New Zealand trailer/caravan parks are mostly used by budget travelers, especially those in tourist areas, and are popular with families. In North America, recreational vehicles (RVs) and trailers often have spaces set aside for them at state and national parks. This can be more comfortable than camping, but less expensive than hotels.

Not much money?

Here are some ways to save money on your trip.

- **Research events, activities, and attractions in the town** where you're studying instead of going away.
- **Student discounts.** You may be able to get student discounts on entry fees, transportation, accommodation, and so on. In the UK, buying a NUS (National Union of Students) card is likely to be worth it for the savings you'll make.
- **Eating out for every meal is expensive.** Buy food at supermarkets and cater for yourself when you're traveling. If you prefer hot meals and you're traveling within your host country, buy a little travel stove (e.g. a Trangia) so that you can cook.
- **Avoid shopping, concerts, and other expensive activities.** Often there are lots of fun things you can do for free, such as walking and hiking, going to the beach, free galleries and exhibitions, picnics, and so on. Did you know that all the public galleries and museums in London are free?

Staying safe while you travel

Travel is a lot of fun, but it does have risks. Here are some tips to help you return home safely.

- Make sure someone knows roughly where you are during your travels. Make a list of the transportation you've booked (flight numbers, bus times, etc.), the places you plan to stay at, and roughly what you plan to do (e.g. "Sightseeing in Chicago"), and give copies to a couple of people who aren't coming with you. These could be a staff member at your student residence, someone in your host family, even a trusted professor/lecturer. In North American, Scottish, and Australian state and national parks, where you may camp or hike miles into the wilderness, telling someone exactly where you're going can save your life if you have problems.
- Research where you plan to go. Talk to other travelers who've been there, in person or on online forums (e.g. The Thorn Tree on the Lonely Planet website, or in the US, www.discoveramerica.com). They should be able to inform you about anything to be careful of at your destination.
- Be careful about theft. Don't carry your wallet in your back pocket or in an open bag. Don't leave your luggage unattended. If you need to leave your luggage in the place where you're staying, ask if there's a hotel safe where you can lock your valuables.
- If you plan to drive to your destination, make sure you have a plan if anything goes wrong with your car. This should include bringing along extra gasoline/petrol for long distances in North America and Australia. If you're based in the UK, but drive to mainland Europe, search online to find out which items you need to have with you in other countries, e.g. France wants you to have a high visibility jacket in your car in case you break down.

- Bring a basic first-aid kit with you. This should contain any prescription medicine you are taking, your optical prescription if you have one, acetaminophen/paracetamol for pain, anti-histamines for allergies, Band-Aids, antiseptic cream, and anything else you might need.

What about my stuff?

If you're going away for more than a few days, you might be able to save money on where you rent by putting your belongings into storage. But look into this carefully as you need to make sure the place is available for you to come back to when you get back.

Suggestions:

- You could pay to put your things in storage. Look for storage companies in your area that offer secure, short-term storage and find out how much they charge.
- Leave your things at a friend's or relative's place. Make sure they're somewhere secure.
- Student residences often have a place where they store students' belongings for free during breaks. Be sure to ask if you live in one of these.
- Whether or not you take your computer with you, make sure you back up the hard drive on a USB or external hard drive that you keep in a different place.