

Chapter Five

Coming Home





When your journey is over, it may take you some time to understand how your travels have changed you, and to integrate those changes into your life. After you arrive home, gently allow yourself the time to rest and reflect, and even more time go through the reverse culture shock that may effect returning travelers. This was the experience of Shanda Grubb, who has cerebral palsy, when she returned to the United States from Russia after serving as a volunteer with Wheels for the World. “I needed time to readjust to the American way of life,” she recalls. “My body and mind craved space to recover and process all that had happened, not to mention overcoming jet lag!”

Will it all be worth it? After you’ve envisioned, chosen, planned and finally made your trip, how will your life be different? How will you integrate your international experiences into the rest of your life?

If other travelers’ experiences are any indication, chances are you will learn important lessons, both large and small, that will help you map your future course—your personal interests and career goals—based partly on the new perspectives you gain.

Forging Bonds Across Cultures: Alliances and Friendships

Some of the strongest, most treasured memories shared by these disabled travelers revolve around relationships with people they met while working or studying abroad. Marta Lukjan, who as an undergraduate studied for nine months at the University of Queensland in Australia, fondly recalls the friends she made at the Women's College where she lived. "Nine years later I still get invitations to their weddings!" Lukjan says. Such lifelong connections have enriched Lukjan's life, and so has the inspiration she took from these strong young women, whom Lukjan describes as "extraordinary young people with a knack for growing. They taught me about strength, about knowing when you are equal to others and proving it." These students became Lukjan's role models and dear friends. "I learned through living in Women's College what a support network can do," she says.

Solidarity seems to be a common theme for travelers abroad, especially those who participate in exchange programs that focus on social change issues. Many people gain a new appreciation of their place in the global community, their connections to people throughout the world and their obligations to their fellow human beings. This awareness may come about through education about social issues, or through personal connections—or both. Jessica Aaron, who uses a wheelchair, has traveled to Latin America several times during college and graduate school. "As my awareness of cultural and disability issues grew, so did my understanding of myself and of disability matters in the United States. I learned that people with disabilities all over the world share common challenges. [Working together] we make widespread, lasting changes."

Relationships and conversations are a rich source of education for travelers abroad. When people come together around common interests and issues, lively discussions emerge. These discussions may last for an hour or for decades. In either case, they can deepen and broaden a traveler's worldview or problem-solving strategies, suggest new career choices, shape ideas and convictions, and encourage action upon return.

Exchange participants' connections with their counterparts in other countries can become a powerful motivating force and opportunity for expanding knowledge. Gerardo Nigenda, a former intern at a non-profit agency in the United States who is blind, has participated in several international exchanges. He says the lengthy, lively discussions he's enjoyed with Palestinians, Danes, Japanese, Slovaks and others "have enriched my life and my work with ideas, thoughts, ways of confronting problems, and expanded my knowledge. Each of these experiences has renewed my confidence in the power of people to come together to resolve problems and remove physical, political, attitudinal and economic barriers."



Just as you enjoyed contacts with other travelers while you were abroad, upon your return you will find other people who have returned from overseas and want to keep on sharing experiences. Don't put your experiences on a shelf and forget about them. You can keep expanding your circle of friends with international interests. You will find new connections with people simply because you share a common experience of being an international traveler.



For Rachael Abbott, a young visually impaired woman who traveled to Costa Rica, personal connections became the focus of her activities during her trip, and from this she gained important self-knowledge. “One thing I’ve learned is that everybody has different interests and talents,” says Abbott. “There were people on my trip who were really good at knowing legislative issues and knowing how to make things better.” In contrast, Abbott found that she was much more in tune with individuals’ personal feelings and experiences. “When I was in Costa Rica, I learned about disability rights and disability access,” she recalls, “but at the same time, I was concerned with their personal lives. I was concerned with their everyday issues, their friendships, things like that, and how they struggle with their disability.” This realization led Abbott to major in psychology in college, and she intends to make a career of counseling disabled people, helping them with personal adjustment and other issues. “I want to get my Master’s degree in family therapy,” she says, “because I realize there are not a lot of specialists in disability.”

Some disabled travelers gain a new sense of themselves and their place in their community, in their culture, or even in their family. Sharon Nguyen, who has cerebral palsy, had always wanted to visit Vietnam, where her parents and grandparents came from. Having grown up in the United States, she also wanted to make cross-cultural connections around the subject of disability. She began forging bonds both with people working for disability organizations and with relatives from both sides of her family. “People in Vietnam greeted me with open arms,” Nguyen says, “often coming up to talk to me as if we knew each other. I hope to visit my homeland again to help improve accessibility and build leadership for people with disabilities.”

Revelations on the Road: Travelers Gain Self-knowledge

Rachel Abbott's experience in Costa Rica—her discovery of her own talents and her resulting career choice—is but one example of travelers learning about themselves by traveling to another country. Perhaps the dramatic change of venue, the removal from one's accustomed context, allows a new light to shine into places usually shaded by habit or complacency. Traveling overseas, as we've seen throughout this book, forces a person to view things from a different perspective, adapt to situations and perhaps solve problems that would likely never arise in his or her hometown. Succeeding in gaining new perspectives and meeting challenges can bring out strengths and skills you never imagined you had.

Even when you fall short of meeting the challenges of travel, you may learn about yourself, and find yourself testing out and developing new perceptions, abilities and coping strategies. During an earlier trip abroad as a teenager, Abbott felt insecure about herself and her visual impairment and therefore had not learned to ask for what she needed. On that exchange to Chile, Abbott had been excited to go but says, "When I was there, I kind of felt left out." She avoided some group activities such as hiking, because she was too embarrassed to ask for help. "I didn't want to ask, 'Hey, do you mind walking with me when we go hiking, so I don't trip over a rock or something?' I was around all these teenagers in a new setting and not able to speak the language," says Abbott. "It made me face my disability." She reflects, "It taught me not to be so shy, to work on being more confident and outgoing."

Later, as a college student, she traveled to Israel with a school group. This time, she took a different approach. "I was more assertive. I wanted to make sure I had somebody to stay with me, so I could always find the group. In Israel, the streets are crowded

with people, and it's very easy to get separated from a group." By asking for help, Abbott developed a clearer sense of herself and her disability-related needs.

Many other disabled travelers report similar increases in their ability to manage different aspects of their disabilities as a result of going overseas. Unfamiliar situations and logistical challenges call for new coping skills, innovative techniques and more decisive action on the part of the traveler abroad. Such opportunities for personal growth are valuable for anyone, but particularly for people with disabilities. "I learned to be more resourceful and more flexible in various situations," says Jean Lin, who has cerebral palsy, "and to be more aware of my surroundings and to be more adaptable to the environment."

International travel can also build confidence. Alona Brown spent a semester studying in Alicante, Spain. As a result of her experience, Brown says that her self-esteem "went up 100 percent." "Here I was a blind individual, I didn't know the language that well, I'm older and I'm African-American. I didn't know many of the challenges I would be faced with and I didn't know if I would be accepted," recalls Brown. "I did it," she adds. "I met every challenge, and I was warmly received. Now I have bigger dreams for myself, and the courage to pursue them."

Overseas travel may put your typical experiences in a broader perspective. Shanda Grubb, who has cerebral palsy, traveled to Russia as a volunteer with Wheels for the World, a nonprofit organization which distributes wheelchairs and other equipment in various countries. "The experience in Russia continues to affect my life even now—often as a reference point in daily life," Grubb says. "As everyday challenges pop up, related to my disability or not, I often think, 'If I adapted to Russia, I can here

too!’ As I look back at the experiences, I’m thankful for the hard times and the good ones. Every moment taught me something new about who I am and the kind of person I want to be.”

You may also discover new interests—particular social issues, a certain cuisine, a language, the history of a country, an art form such as flamenco dance or Renaissance sculpture. The rewards of international friendships may become your new passion. Jean Marchant says her participation in a foreign exchange program “definitely made me want to be a homestay provider, and as a consequence I have met people with disabilities who stayed at my house from all over the world.”

A More Complex and Exciting World: Travelers Learn Cultural Lessons

Among the effects of international travel on disabled and nondisabled individuals alike, cultural awareness is often the most marked change. This may include an enlarged view of the many possibilities in the world. Says Frank Hernandez: “International travel offers people with disabilities the opportunity to see different ways of doing things,” such as communicating, getting around and functioning when access is less than perfect.

David Dye, a graduate student in international relations who has a significant hearing loss, participated in two different study programs in Brazil—one in Rio de Janeiro and one in São Paulo—where he learned Portuguese and studied economic and business conditions. He found he was very compatible with Brazilian society, and he experienced great joy in meeting many warm and friendly people there. “Brazilians are, without a doubt, some of

the most generous, fun people on the planet,” Dye says. “As a matter of fact, I’ve felt depressed and a bit lost since my return to the United States.” However, he knew he would return to what he had come to think of as his new home.

Many travelers become so comfortable with the values and lifestyle of their host country that they experience a kind of reverse culture shock when they return home. For example, Pamela Houston, who has cerebral palsy, spent time in Peru, and despite initial difficulties, she eventually came to feel very much at home there. She says: “Coming back to the States was like... well, coming to a foreign country. Everything looked so different, so extravagant, overdone and pompous.... my eyes and heart had adjusted so thoroughly to Peru.”

During her trip to Costa Rica, Daisy Sipp met people who were Deaf, like her, but who lacked the educational advantages that she enjoyed. She saw Deaf adults learning basic literacy and elementary math, because they had not received schooling when they were young. “After leaving Costa Rica, I felt that it was part of my duty to help educate Deaf children in other countries.”

Many disabled travelers return home with convictions about advocating for social justice issues, after witnessing what they perceive to be injustices abroad. These may take different forms in different places, but there are common threads that extend worldwide. It may be harder to recognize injustice in your own backyard; it’s so familiar that it seems normal. Perhaps this is why many international travelers seem to recall examples of oppression overseas—why injustice seems more obvious in a foreign context. Some of the most vivid cultural lessons brought home by disabled travelers are those involving human rights advocacy. Many people return with a strong sense of global solidarity, and a

greater desire to fight for what's right. "It's so easy in the U.S. to become cocooned," says Jean Marchant, who has multiple sclerosis. In the small German town of Oberwasel, she saw disabled people who were segregated and shunned, and others who were actively organizing for change. "It made me a stronger advocate for people with disabilities and their rights, internationally as well as nationally. Now, when I see something, I don't just stay quiet and say, 'That's terrible.' I speak up! I've become good at writing letters and all the stuff that one needs to do to be a voice of activism and a squeaky wheel, because I had first-hand experience with how life can be for people with disabilities in countries outside of the United States."

Another important outcome of international travel is the opportunity to learn techniques and skills that can encourage both individuals and communities to work for increased opportunities. People on exchanges can learn new strategies from each other, a benefit that reaches across all interests, academic disciplines and professions. Both sides of an exchange benefit from shared learning. Tia Nelis, a leader in the self-advocacy movement



You may have taken a language class before you went abroad, which helped introduce you to your host country's people and culture. Now that you are home, don't let those valuable language skills you've practiced overseas go to waste. Take up a language class or start a weekly conversational group in your area to maintain and improve your language skills.



in the United States, credits an international exchange with fueling her initial local organizing efforts. Years ago, representatives of People First of Canada came to Illinois to meet with people with developmental disabilities. That contact got Nelis and others interested in starting a People First group of their own. Recently, Nelis traveled to Belgium to meet with people with developmental disabilities whose self-advocacy movement is still new. As people continue to cross borders, they pass on the motivation and the strategies to change their societies.

Travelers who go abroad to offer their skills—as volunteers, visiting speakers or consultants—almost always find that they learn as much as they teach. When Nelis went to Belgium to share her knowledge and experience concerning self-advocacy, she found that Belgian counterparts were addressing this topic in an innovative way. The government was planning to publish an informational booklet about disability resources, and the local self-advocates were reviewing it for readability. The group found that most people with developmental disabilities would be unable to comprehend the book, which used long words and complicated sentences. “They took a highlighter,” says Nelis, “and they highlighted all the stuff that they didn’t understand, then gave it back and said, ‘Put it in simpler language.’” Nelis brought this idea back home to her People First group, which later implemented the same strategy to make policy documents and other written materials more accessible to people with cognitive disabilities.

Many other travelers reported being changed forever by seeing different cultural attitudes toward disabled people—and also by meeting people dedicated to changing the cultural status quo. David Oaks vividly recalls visiting one of the poorest neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile. “We visited one of the few places there for people who were diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities,” says

Oaks. When he found he was getting VIP treatment that separated him from the clients, he encouraged the hosts to seat the visitors with the clients during snack time. This fostered inclusion, rather than a separation that was not comfortable for Oaks and isolating for clients.

Another trip abroad offered Oaks an example of leadership in action. During a trip to Oslo, Norway, he visited Arnold Juklerod, a person working for the rights of people diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities. Juklerod drew attention to the issue of institutionalization by doing a long-term sit-in in the recreation building of a local psychiatric facility. Oaks says, "I felt humbled by meeting him and other people. They had been working for years on this major campaign, hundreds of people." Not only was he impressed with their level of organization and work, but the experience gave Oaks a renewed commitment as he returned home.

Increased cultural awareness often leads to personal growth for international travelers. Leticia Arellano, an American who is Deaf, lived in Japan for ten weeks, teaching American Sign Language and learning Japanese Sign Language and Japanese Deaf culture. "Sharing the cultures, values and sign languages increased my understanding of other Deaf, and hearing, people all over the world," Arellano says.

Telling the Story: Share Your Experiences with Others

After you return from working, studying or volunteering abroad, you'll bring with you a valuable commodity—the story of your trip. While you're settling back into your home environment, you will want to think about how to share your story with others.

Many travelers have found great satisfaction in recounting their adventures, describing their experiences overseas and articulating their conclusions.

There are many different ways you can share your story. You can:

- Write a guest column for your local or campus newspaper's opinion page or feature section.
- Write an article for a specialty magazine focusing on the type of subjects, issues or work you engaged in during your trip.
- Make presentations for community groups, international associations, college or high school classes, youth groups, service clubs or advocacy organizations. Your presentations may take several forms, including:
 - A slide show with narration and recorded music
 - A reading from your travel journals
 - A formal report on your study project, with maps, charts, graphs, photos or other illustrations
 - A demonstration of a skill you learned
 - A talk describing your trip, followed by a question-and-answer period.
- Write an academic paper or a discussion paper, and present it at a relevant conference.
- Create a web site where you can post photos, journal entries, interviews and even audio and video files.

Sharing the story with others offers numerous benefits. You may earn college credit or have your report published. Depending on the extent of your international experience, you could gain recognition as a specialist in your field or in the particular region that you visited. You may also fulfill obligations to groups who sponsored your travel.

As you share stories with other travelers, you may also become inspired to explore other destinations, or you will motivate others to become involved in an exchange program themselves. Wendy Harbour, a Deaf professional, first traveled abroad as a high school student to Japan, but has since ventured to places such as Malaysia, Singapore and Venezuela. In addition, her positive experience in Japan started her whole family's interest in traveling abroad and in hosting international students in their home.

Most rewarding of all in sharing your experiences, you may find yourself reliving your travels and understanding them even more deeply, by virtue of having to reflect upon your time abroad while preparing your presentation, article, paper or website. Thus you can bring your newfound knowledge and wisdom home for keeps, making it part of your life and your community.

Values and Skills: The Impact of International Exchange on Travelers' Lives and Work

Exchange participants with disabilities often bring home more than friendships, memories and enlarged perspectives. Many come back ready to take on new roles in their communities and careers. These new roles may include any of the following:

- Serve as a peer advisor, volunteer or advisory committee member for an exchange organization you participated with or that is located in your hometown.
- Explore other international exchange trips to deepen or diversify your knowledge or host exchange participants coming to your country.
- Find an internship or volunteer with an international visitors program in your area.
- Consider an international career or bring international perspectives to your current one.
- Revise academic course content and develop new course work at your local school, college, university or continuing education program.
- Develop other exchange programs, for example a professional exchange program between your home and host communities.
- Form an informal alumni group on campus or in your community, or join a formal alumni association serving your group.

Many disabled travelers find great value in the very things that make their host country so different from their home country. For example, some visitors to the United States express admiration for the accessible facilities, assistive technology and nondiscrimination laws, all of which may translate to expanded opportunities available to disabled people. “I was able to bring back information on [accessible] buses to my country,” says one past participant in an exchange program sponsored by MIUSA. “In fact, because of that, now we have an almost accessible bus system.”

Returning exchange participants also possess confidence and abilities, gained from responding to challenging situations, navigating different cultures and environments, and adapting to major changes—all part of the international travel experience. Adaptability and self-knowledge are preferred qualifications for many occupations. A good example is Jessica Voigts, who, during her sophomore year in college, interned for an international exchange foundation in Tokyo. Voigts has a mobility impairment, and had to learn to get along without her usual support systems and modes of transportation. She endured inconvenience and hardship at first, but she learned new ways of doing things, and found understanding and support from people she met there. “In Japan I had become aware of my disability in a way that I was unlikely to have gained in the United States,” Voigts summarizes. “In an environment that presented barriers, my disability was something that I could creatively and flexibly deal with in almost any situation.” Such creativity and flexibility became definite assets in Voigts’ future employment. “This has served me well in all aspects of my life,” she says, “and prepared me for a later job in London as a resident director for summer study abroad programs.”

Furthermore, solid skills make these returned travelers more attractive to prospective employers, and make them more effective in a variety of occupations. In one survey of former exchange participants, many affirmed that their international exchange experience had brought them concrete benefits in terms of their employability, job competence and leadership capacity. One person applied for a job as a camp program director, supervising a multi-national staff. The employer was favorably impressed by the time spent overseas. “It did spark questions in my job interview,” she said. “I’m sure that my international experience really helped me to get the job.”

International contacts are another vital outcome for exchange participants who are disabled. One traveler gained a worldwide community that became a support system and a valuable consulting resource. “When I have problems in my work,” this participant remarked, “I email friends that were on my exchange, or give them a call or write them a letter and they say, ‘I’ve dealt with that.’”

Heather Harker, who is Deaf, has traveled and worked in Russia, Malaysia, Thailand and several other countries. Each of these experiences gave Harker new perspectives and new opportunities to develop her talents and expertise. Now she works as a nonprofit consultant in New England. Harker’s view of leadership, and the techniques she uses to promote leadership opportunities, evolved considerably as a result of her experiences abroad as a Fellow with the Kellogg International Leadership Program. “When people are committed to common goals, work together to accomplish them and ensure continuity by passing on leadership to others, they will experience positive change in their community. Prior to my work experiences in Malaysia,” says Harker, “I felt that change was all about institutions, policies and government. Now, I understand that change is about ourselves and the people around us—whether we are in government, the nonprofit sector, our families, or even at a neighborhood barbecue.”

Every person with a disability who participates in an international exchange experience will make an impact on the world, and will be affected in return, Harker believes. “There is good work that needs to be done everywhere in the world,” she says. “A disabled student in an international exchange program can make a difference simply by educating nondisabled colleagues that it is possible for a person with a disability to participate. A volunteer in an international work-camp makes a difference in the lives of

those who are affected by her/his work. A policy maker advocating accessible telecommunications is making a difference. Life is a journey and our goal should be to enjoy it, but also to give something back to those who follow after us.”

Travel abroad can be a tremendously enriching and fulfilling life experience, not only for you, but for those you come in contact with too. The impact of your experience abroad will increase after you return, as you share stories with others, maintain the friendships you developed abroad and incorporate your newfound cross-cultural skills and perspectives in your life and future work. Prepare to come back a changed person—with enhanced career opportunities, maybe some new language skills, cross-cultural friendships, new self-discoveries, and a broader view of the world and the opportunities that lay before you.



Now that you've learned so much and met so many interesting people from overseas, what can you do to build on these foundations? Some people return from an exchange and work with local universities or other venues to host musical groups they heard overseas, thus introducing their home community to people and sounds they encountered abroad. Another traveler, after meeting craftswomen who make baskets, came home and set up a cooperative export business to give the profits directly back to the women. Other travelers have started nonprofit agencies, developed new exchange programs, written books, and much more. What will you do?

