Chapter One

Exploring International Opportunities
Your overseas dreams may be the product of long years of planning and preparation, or they may arise from a flash of inspiration. Either way, as you begin exploring the possibilities that await you in the world, you’ll find yourself contemplating your interests and needs, clarifying your goals, studying possible destinations, seeking opportunities, devouring other people's stories and, ultimately, making important decisions. This will be a journey in itself. It may take as long as, or longer than, your actual travels; and it may offer you valuable insights about yourself and your international prospects.

Johana Schwartz, who has cerebral palsy, went through a fairly typical process of envisioning, seeking, finding and choosing an international program. Both scholarly interests and pragmatic disability-related considerations influenced her choices. As a student of the works of James Joyce, Schwartz had wanted to visit Ireland for some time. Her own university did not offer any study abroad opportunities in Ireland, but did refer her to programs available through other institutions. She eventually selected a summer Irish Studies program, operated by New York University, at Dublin’s Trinity College. There she found the Irish literature and language courses in which she was interested. Equally important, Schwartz adds, “as an American entity, NYU was subject
to the Americans with Disabilities Act." The program largely met her disability-related needs, providing notetakers, a wheelchair-accessible apartment and other necessities.

Other people locate and embark upon their path overseas more quickly, almost instinctively. Marvelena Quesada clearly remembers the day one of her college professors mentioned an upcoming study abroad program at the University of Madrid. Quesada, who is blind and fluent in Spanish, snapped to attention. The departure date was less than a month away. "I had nowhere near enough time to properly prepare," says Quesada, "but I knew that I wanted to go." She filled out the application even though she knew little about Spain "or even whether the program was disability-friendly." It was, mostly, and Quesada (who traveled with her guide dog) was able to learn a great deal about Spanish culture and politics. "The nicest thing about my trip," she adds, "was that I was able to travel independently for the first time. I consider that to be quite an achievement and would recommend this sort of program to anyone with a disability."

Serendipity is nice when it happens—but don’t wait for opportunities to seek you out. If you know what you want to do and where you dream of going, actively pursue avenues that will lead you there. "Where do you want to go?" asks Alicia Contreras, who has traveled to Asia, Africa and throughout Latin America in her wheelchair. When you know the answer, Contreras advises, share your goal with others. "Tell every single person you know that you want to go, because someone might know about an opportunity. Spread the word!"

Take the example of Ellen Rubin: Tell everyone about your dream, and sooner or later you may tell someone who can help make it happen. As a Jewish blind woman, Rubin was passionately
interested in going to Israel. It was 1967, and Rubin knew that many Israelis had been blinded during the Six-Day War. "I thought it would really be interesting to go there and work with people who were blind," says Rubin. She mentioned her desire to a number of people. "I said it to the right person who had connections," she recalls. A week later, Rubin was offered a grant to visit a rehabilitation center in southern Israel. "I went for three weeks, and I stayed for six years!"

Think about the people you know who might have international connections—family members, friends, colleagues, teachers, community organizations, service organizations, business people or world travelers. Even if you're not particularly close, or have been out of touch for a while, consider reaching out to these individuals. Ask them to meet with you and answer questions about their overseas travel. You may find that people are very willing to take the time to share their stories and ideas, and to answer your queries—especially if you show that you value their thoughts and guidance. These conversations might just lead to further contacts, discoveries of opportunities, maybe even invitations.

Mobility International USA/National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange also has an extensive peer network of people with disabilities who have been abroad. Through this peer network you can find others most willing to share their ideas and get you started on your way. For example, Marie Sharp has volunteered at a health clinic in Mexico, taught English in Venezuela and studied in Brazil. As a woman who uses a manual wheelchair, she can share her best tips on getting around, contacts she gathered and strategies for interacting with people from other cultures. (See the Appendix for information on how to request peer contacts.)
Develop your own international contacts as well. There are many ways to get to know people from other countries: Join international organizations and read their newsletters. Subscribe to international listservs. Become a host family for foreign visitors or volunteer with exchange programs. Attend international events in your community. Taking these steps will enrich your life and broaden your horizons—and they may also help you find your own way overseas!

You can also research the many international exchange programs that are available. A list of international exchange resources can be found in the Appendix. However, given the wide array of opportunities, this list is far from complete. If you're interested in an international exchange experience, you can also ask around in your local area. You might try contacting organizations you are involved with in your local or broader community, such as philanthropic associations, groups promoting cross-cultural understanding, or social justice groups that work on international issues. Searching the Internet, contacting the study abroad office at local universities, visiting your high school guidance counselor's office and browsing the resources on MIUSA's website (www.miusa.org) provide other good places to begin. If you are a U.S. citizen, you may also want to contact the embassy or consulate of your destination country for information. If you are interested in traveling to the United States from abroad, an excellent informational resource is the EducationUSA advising center in your country's capital city. See the Appendix for further details.

If you are determined to study, volunteer or work abroad, keep looking until you find what you want. Marta Lukjan longed for an international experience, but the kind of program she was seeking was not available at Princeton University where she was
an undergraduate. Most of her peers were not interested in international education and were less than supportive of her plan. At the time, she recalls, many students and faculty members questioned why anyone would want to study off-campus, after working so hard to get to Princeton; and with her learning disabilities, she had to work even harder. Lukjan persisted until she found and enrolled in a multi-college study abroad program operated by Butler University. Ultimately, Lukjan actually earned the envy of some of those who had discouraged her. “My roommates thought I was crazy,” she recalls, “but desperately wished they too had planned for such an adventure.”

Many different types of opportunities exist for going abroad. The avenue you choose will depend on your situation and goals. In the next section are some of the most common ways of having an international experience.

Types of International Exchange Programs

There are many organizations that arrange exchanges for individuals from different countries. Some of these programs specialize in specific regions, populations or exchange types. For example, there are international exchange programs designed primarily for young people, educators, residents of sister cities, political activists or farmers. You can go abroad to intern, study, volunteer, teach, consult, learn a language or participate in professional development activities. Some exchange programs emphasize learning about topics such as human rights, public health, art history, gender studies, literature or many other topics; others focus on foreign languages and country or area studies. And most programs will help you gain cross-cultural under-
standing. An international exchange experience can last for a few weeks, or a full year or more, and any length in between.

Short-Term Delegations and Exchanges
If you don’t have a long period of time available for an exchange program, consider short-term exchanges, which span most of the above-mentioned exchange types. Some of these exchange programs are highly structured, involving a busy daily schedule of activities and a focused agenda. Jean Parker, a radio journalist who is blind, went to Latin America twice with two different exchange programs. Parker usually prefers traveling alone rather than with a group, but she found these two sojourns valuable because they offered “a way to gain access to people I wanted to talk to,” she says. She joined a delegation to Central America, sponsored by the Center for Global Education at Augsburg College. “At that time, there were wars and conflicts going on there,” says Parker. “The purpose of those trips was to get a better understanding of those conflicts and the U.S.’ role in them.” Parker also went to the border area of Mexico and the United States with a group called Border Links to learn about immigration, the impact of globalization and other issues. They talked to both liberals and conservatives alike, going to the land reform offices and government representatives. “That was an educational experience,” Parker recalls. It gave participants “a better idea of what the issues were from people on various sides of things.”

Getting that much education and information required a tightly structured itinerary packed with field trips and meetings. If that’s not your style, there are other programs that are more relaxed, allowing participants more free time to explore the local culture on their own, at a slower pace. Consider which style suits you best when you are seeking and choosing an exchange program.
Jean Marchant, who has multiple sclerosis (MS), advises people who have limited stamina to seriously think about the pace of an exchange. "If you're going to be in one place, that's one thing," says Marchant. However, she traveled to Germany with a Mobility International USA (MIUSA) exchange that involved a lot of day trips and moving from place to place. Marchant remembers the trip as both enjoyable and illuminating, but it took a toll on her, causing fatigue and increased spasticity. She urges people with MS and similar conditions to "find out about the flexibility of the program, in terms of needing to participate in every activity, and being able to prioritize what is important and what is not beforehand."

Sometimes short exchanges can give you a taste of what overseas travel is like, and provide you with contacts, confidence and skills that will be valuable when you go on a longer exchange later. On the other hand, it can take a lot of energy to plan for a trip of any duration, so you might consider staying longer to really get a feel for the community—especially since you never know when you might get a chance to return.

Academic Programs
Many universities and nonprofit international exchange organizations offer study abroad programs for college or high school students. These programs usually combine both academic study and cultural experiences. For example, the student will typically attend classes, complete assignments, earn credits and take field trips, while also participating in different cultural activities. Students can go on group programs focused on
specific topics like the environment, political science, literature, art or architecture. Some of these group programs allow students who may not know the host country's language to take classes taught in their native language while at the same time studying the language of the host country to improve their proficiency. Other exchanges place students directly into the host university or high school, where they can access the same accommodations and experiences as the host country students.

Students with disabilities have participated in and benefited from an enormous variety of overseas exchange programs, some operated by their own schools, some by other schools or by independent programs. Most of these programs offer a structured experience, complete with academic programming and a living situation that may be a host family placement, apartment or on-campus dormitory housing. Factors such as accessibility features, reasonable accommodations and support services will vary widely from program to program; researching these factors may become an important part of your exploration of overseas exchange possibilities. Equally important will be the program's potential to meet your needs for learning, personal growth and career development.

An international educational program may be the beginning of many exciting opportunities. It certainly was for Karla Rivas, a Guatemalan woman who is blind. Rivas was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study communications at California State University, Chico. This particular Fulbright Program granted at least two years of undergraduate study in the United States to Central American students selected on the basis of financial need and exceptional academic promise. "It was great news for me, but a hard decision," says Rivas. "I was 22 years old and I had never been outside of my country. Being blind, going away from my family was a difficult decision, but my family was always very
supportive of me. They said it was not an opportunity that came into your life every day.”

A study abroad program can greatly enrich your academic experiences and provide you with cross-cultural understanding. It can also give you extraordinary opportunities to develop your strength and independence as a disabled person. During her sophomore year as an art major, Elizabeth Castellano decided to explore the possibility of studying overseas, hoping it would offer her new opportunities for development, both as an artist and as a person. Castellano, who has a visual impairment, said, “I believed that a study abroad experience would teach me how to become more independent and give me a greater sense of confidence and personal identity.” She learned about a variety of study abroad opportunities from her fellow students, and ultimately chose Lancaster University in England “because of its superior services for people with disabilities and its enclosed (self-contained), rural campus.”

As an undergraduate at Princeton University, Marta Lukjan took part in an overseas exchange program at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. As a result of a childhood brain injury, Lukjan has “a really unusual constellation of strengths and weaknesses” including learning disabilities. “Princeton can be intimidating to those with hidden disabilities,” she says. “So I viewed study abroad in slightly different terms than most of my classmates.” Feeling somewhat out of step with her Ivy League peers, Lukjan was ready to take risks to expand her horizons. While she knew next to nothing about Australia, she knew she needed to “get out of the pressure cooker” and seek new challenges. She found what she was looking for—Lukjan calls her time in Australia “by far the most memorable semester I had” while working toward her college degree.
Language Programs
If you are interested in learning or teaching a language, there are many options to choose from. Hundreds of language training programs are available worldwide. Some programs are short-term and intensive, while others can last up to a year or more. Many language schools offer the option to stay with a host family, do volunteer work, intern or participate in other activities in addition to attending classes, all of which can enrich your understanding of the language and culture you are studying.

Instead of enrolling in a language training program, you may be interested in teaching your native language in another country. While abroad, you will have the opportunity to immerse yourself in another culture and language, and learn from your students as you teach them your language. Zachary Battles, who is blind, spent two weeks on a group exchange to Ukraine where he and other volunteer teachers helped students learn conversational English skills at the Language Institute in Kiev. He says that the teachers became students as well: “The time spent in the classroom was merely a fraction of the teaching and learning experience for both teachers and students. Teachers must be willing to learn as well as teach, and the team of Americans was certainly willing to experience as well as learn about a different culture.”

Whether you decided to enroll in a language school or teach at one, there are many books and other resources written on this topic. See the Appendix for a list of options and resources to explore.
Working Overseas
If you have particular skills or a willingness to learn and a strong desire for an international experience, you may want to apply for jobs overseas. Although overseas employment can be one of the most competitive avenues to living abroad, many opportunities do exist. Short-term work programs are good opportunities for college students or recent graduates who want to live abroad for up to a year and work in the hospitality or tourism industry, national parks, or other types of service or administrative jobs. You may be able to work for a foreign company or organization, depending on your own talents and qualifications, and on the applicable laws such as visa requirements for foreign workers. Other work-type options—paid, volunteer or in exchange for room and board—including freelance jobs, seasonal agricultural work, internships and working as an au pair or a language teacher.

When Ellen Rubin arrived in Israel and fell in love with the country, she began looking for work. Eventually she found a job in a rehabilitation center for children. After a couple of years, Rubin returned to the United States to obtain a master's degree in special education, then went back to Israel to help set up a program for children with blindness and/or other disabilities. "Our program was an inclusion program; we trained teachers to work with children in various areas and help them integrate into school," Rubin says.

Some people with disabilities have obtained jobs with companies or organizations based in their home country but doing business overseas. The United States government is a major employer. Don Galloway, who is blind, worked as a Peace Corps country director in Jamaica for three years. A friend told him the Peace Corps was interested in hiring people with disabilities.
Galloway loves to travel and already had overseas experience in Latin America and the Caribbean, so he went for an interview and got the job.

Many employment services and job search websites advertise international jobs. You can also find overseas work opportunities through newspaper advertisements, exchange organizations, trade associations and college employment offices. You may want to pay particular attention to announcements from federal agencies that employ large numbers of people at your country’s embassies and consulates abroad, for example. The U.S. Department of State and other foreign affairs agencies are an exciting option to consider, although the process is competitive. Consult the Appendix for some leads on overseas work, volunteer and internship opportunities.

In any kind of job search, however, the best opportunities may come from personal contacts. Ask friends and acquaintances to alert you to jobs in the field and country or region in which you are interested. Seek out and introduce yourself to people who are employed in similar situations. Find local companies doing business in countries where you want to work. The Appendix lists exchange programs that provide work visas and/or can match you with a company or organization with job openings.

When considering job opportunities, take note of different employers’ policies regarding workers with disabilities. If the company you’re applying to work for is based in the United States, and has more than fifteen employees, it is bound by the requirements of Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This means it cannot deny you a job for which you are qualified, based solely on your disability; and it must provide you with reasonable accommodations, such as adaptive equipment,
interpreting or reading services, to enable you to do your job. This also applies to U.S. businesses or organizations operating overseas. While in the United States or working for a qualifying U.S. company, the ADA covers people with disabilities regardless of citizenship. Other countries may have similar laws.

Consulting Overseas
Working abroad need not depend upon finding a permanent job with one employer. Another option is to do various projects for which you can be paid, under contract to one or more client organizations. As a consultant you can find yourself working with many different people, and enhancing your skills with each new project.

Some people build an entire career on freelance work overseas. As a radio journalist, Jean Parker has traveled all over the world—throughout most of Western Europe, India, South Africa, Mexico and most of Central America. Wherever she goes, Parker records interviews, news and feature reports for broadcast on radio stations including the British Broadcasting Corporation. Parker, who is blind, also operates her own program, Disability Radio Worldwide, which can be heard on short-wave radio, and on the Internet at www.independentliving.org/radio. Parker says, “I view disability as a social and political condition,” in that it is shaped by the context in which one is living, and is influenced by community attitudes, the physical environment, the economic situation and other social factors. “Because I think of it that way, it has led to an interest in people from other places, particularly other places that I don’t know much about.” Parker learns of interesting stories and potential interview subjects through her extensive personal and professional networks. She is involved in many associations, including disability groups, Quaker organizations and human rights groups. She is also a ham radio operator, and through this
medium she meets many diverse individuals throughout the world. Some of them become news sources, advisers, future tour guides and friends.

Perhaps you are a person who is committed to making the world a better place through organizing, advocacy and/or development efforts. You may have a role to play in working for social or political change in other countries. Many people have traveled abroad in the service of causes such as human rights, environmentalism, peace, women’s rights and economic development.

In particular, disability rights advocacy has become a worldwide phenomenon. In virtually every country, disabled people are working together to improve their living and working conditions, rights and opportunities. Some of these disability rights groups look to other countries for networking, advice, resources, training, information and inspiration. If you have been active in organizing and advocating for disability rights, and have developed skills that could be beneficial to people in other countries—or if you want to find out about others’ work and bring new ideas and perspectives home to your own country—then you may find opportunities to travel overseas to share your knowledge and learn from others.

Richard Mouzon is a psychologist and advocate who is quadriplegic and uses a wheelchair. He has worked on issues involving personal assistance, education, employment and disability rights legislation. He has made several trips to South Africa, working with the South African government’s office for disabled persons, and consulting on the development of a national program for inclusion of disabled persons. This project led to several other overseas invitations. For example, Mouzon was asked to go to Bermuda to give a talk on disability rights, and to meet with the government officials there working in disability services.
Many of Mouzon’s overseas opportunities came through personal contacts, and a strong interest in achieving inclusion through policymaking. “People here connected me with people in other countries,” says Mouzon. He has found that officials and advocates in emerging nations are very often open to networking and using expertise of advisers from abroad. For people seeking similar opportunities, Mouzon suggests researching the political environment and the advocacy activities of a particular country. Many countries have a disability website that provides information about organizations and government agencies involved in disability policy.

You might be a person who is passionate about learning about other cultures and languages, without any particular social interest. Perhaps your passion is anthropology, business administration, history, music or art. Research the options available to do consulting in whatever field you are interested in.

Volunteering Overseas
Service programs are another great way for people with disabilities to get involved in the international arena. These programs offer the opportunity to

There are different ways to go overseas. You could go on an organized program, where many of the logistics are taken care of by staff who know the country well, so you have time to focus on planning for the extra details. You usually have to pay an administrative fee for these additional services, but for some it’s worth the extra costs. Another option is to plan your own experience or go on the less expensive programs that may provide less staff assistance. Some prefer the greater independence with this option and learn to rely on the host and expatriate community for information.
spend time interacting closely with people from another culture and being of service to them. Community service and workcamp opportunities come in many forms. Programs may involve physical, social, academic or other types of contributions. They vary in length from a few weeks to more than a year. Examples include building houses with Habitat for Humanity in the United States or elsewhere, distributing food in Bangladesh or participating in an archeological dig in Israel.

Many volunteer abroad experiences involve structured programs or workcamps, such as those offered through Volunteers for Peace. This organization places people in short-term workcamps, where groups of volunteers work on a specific project together. These groups may include people from many different countries. You can also try to arrange an independent volunteer experience by contacting organizations in other countries and asking about volunteering for a period of time while staying with a host family. If you are going to be in another country as part of another type of exchange, such as study abroad, you might also find that you have the opportunity to volunteer while there.

Regardless of the opportunity you choose, you are bound to have a rewarding experience. Angie Allard, a Canadian Crossroads International volunteer who uses a wheelchair, says of her time volunteering at a workcamp program in Malaysia, “My life has been vastly enriched by participating in this overseas service program.”

International Conferences
Even if you’re not (yet) an internationally known specialist in your field, you can travel abroad and learn more about the issues that interest you by attending international conferences. You’re most likely to find out about international conferences if you get
connected with national and international groups or associations working in your field of interest. For example, organizations such as The American Archeological Union, TESOL, American Bar Association, International Journalists' Network, Global Fund for Women and other professional associations and nongovernmental organizations hold international and regional gatherings on a regular basis.

Evaluating Overseas Opportunities: Defining Your Interests and Needs

How will you know what kinds of opportunities to seek out? Once you find them, how will you know which ones are right for you? How will you choose?

Some people jump at the first chance they get to go abroad. After all, an opportunity is an opportunity, and they don't knock on your door every day. Jean Lin was attending a youth group at an independent living center in California in 1986 when, one day, the group leader made an announcement about a trip to England. Lin, who has cerebral palsy, was immediately interested in joining the trip. It was the first time she had considered any foreign exchange program, and it seemed perfect. Her parents shared her enthusiasm. Lin enjoyed the program so much that she has traveled with other exchange programs—to Russia in 1991, and to China in 1995. “After my experience, I feel confident traveling,” says Lin.

You may, like Lin, have a strong and positive initial gut reaction to a travel opportunity. If you don't, or if you're not inclined to trust your gut reactions, then by all means ask questions. In fact,
asking key questions is always a good idea when you are choosing an exchange program. Quiz program personnel about the program mission, policies and procedures, criteria, as well as their ability and willingness to accommodate you. If you’re particularly concerned about access and/or support for your disability, discuss this with program staff.

Alona Brown spent a semester in 1996 studying in Alicante, Spain. In searching for an exchange program, Brown wrote letters and made phone calls to several programs that especially appealed to her. She chose a program at Colegio Mayor in Alicante because the director, while on a trip to the United States, actually called her on the phone. “She was so friendly and welcoming, I said to myself, ‘This is where I want to go,’” Brown explains. That’s when she contacted the Council on International Educational Exchange, the organization that coordinates the program there and has experience in including individuals with disabilities in its programs. “I told them I was a visually impaired student and asked if they could help me,” she recalls. “They were willing and happy to help. They answered all my questions.”

You may find that some exchange programs lack knowledge or experience related to people with disabilities; but if a particular program appears to suit your other needs, such as academic goals or work experience, don’t rule it out without further discussion. Find out whether the program staff are ready to work with you to create an accessible, accommodating situation. Angie Allard was the first wheelchair user ever to apply for a cultural exchange with Canadian Crossroads International (CCI). “Staff and volunteers displayed an impressive degree of openness and willingness to try something new,” says Allard. “There were legitimate questions about the very basics like transportation, accessibility and housing. But in the end CCI trusted my judgment
about what I could do and what we could do together.” Allard was accepted into the program, and given a volunteer assignment in Malaysia.

If, like Allard, you’re motivated to be a pioneer in a program that may have less experience, there are resources that can help. The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange can offer a wealth of information and ideas to enable international exchange programs to become more accessible and disability-friendly. See the Appendix for more information on this resource.

Not all sponsoring organizations are so easy to work with. “Be careful when you’re checking out programs, and make sure it’s a program that’s going to be responsive to you,” says Susan Brown, whose psychiatric history became an issue during her year as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine. “If they’re not responsive during the interview or initial processes, they may not be that responsive afterwards.” Brown was initially denied entry into the Peace Corps, a decision that she successfully appealed. Once overseas, Brown encountered various difficulties and, ultimately, she returned home early. Looking back, Brown feels that if Peace

It’s a balancing act between not limiting yourself too much, and focusing in on what you want to do. If you speak French, don’t only limit yourself to France but consider West Africa and the Caribbean too. On the other hand, if you want to teach abroad but are open to “anywhere in the world” it will take you longer to narrow it down. Thinking too broadly will make it harder to spread the word about where you want to go and get solid leads and suggestions.
Corps had had a clearer understanding of her accommodations needs before she left, things may have turned out differently.

Other disabled people have reported more positive experiences with investigating and applying for the Peace Corps. Sarah Presley, who has a visual impairment, walked into the national Peace Corps office and requested an application. She received two very different reactions to this request. “One person bubbled over with enthusiasm as she told me what a wonderful time I would have,” she recalls. “The other person in the office was less optimistic. He explained many of the challenges I might face, such as the fact that it is sometimes necessary for Peace Corps Volunteers to ride from village to village on a motorcycle. He wondered how I would manage that.” Presley was persistent and assertive, and had a successful Peace Corps assignment. “Once I had been accepted, I found the Peace Corps staff in the United States and in Morocco to be very helpful and supportive,” she said.

If you’re still not sure a particular international exchange program is right for you, ask for names and telephone numbers of former participants who can tell you about their experiences.

Besides the responsiveness of a particular program, several major factors, such as occupational, personal or other interests, will affect your decisions about how and where to spend your time abroad. The following section discusses some of these factors.
The World to Choose From: Where Do You Want to Go and What Do You Want to Do?

Academic Interests
You may choose your destination and activity based on your educational or vocational goals. Working, studying or volunteering overseas can greatly enhance your knowledge of your particular field of study. It can also give you a significant advantage in the job market.

David Dye, who is hearing impaired, was pursuing both scholarly and vocational interests when he decided to study Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Aiming for a career in international business, Dye knew that Latin America was one of the fastest growing economic areas in the world. He became interested in Mercosur, a free-trade zone made up of some of the most dynamic economies in Latin America at the time, including Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Already proficient in Spanish, Dye felt it was important to learn the other major language of the area, Portuguese. “I soon discovered the program at the University of Florida,” says Dye. It turned out to be an exciting challenge, leading him to further study with several different exchange programs in other parts of Brazil.

Social or Political Interests
Academic interests may turn into lifelong ideals. Pamela Houston learned about poverty and international development as a sociology major at the University of Oregon, and joined an advocacy group dedicated to education about world hunger. “As I neared graduation, I felt dissatisfied with being involved with these issues on a superficial level,” says Houston, who has a mobility impairment caused by cerebral palsy. “I knew the statistics and understood some of the complex causes of
poverty, but I needed to touch and see hungry people and do something tangible to make a difference in the world." Houston found such an opportunity with Food for the Hungry International. After a thorough application process, a one-month orientation, a productive discussion about her disability and needed accommodations, and an intense fundraising campaign, Houston spent two years as a volunteer in Peru, where she helped with projects related to hunger and community-building. Perhaps you too will choose your overseas program and destination based on your strong devotion to a particular movement, campaign or philosophy. Like many travelers before you, a compelling need to make a difference in the world might be your prime motivation for undertaking the rigors of going abroad.

Many disabled people have been drawn to international work by a commitment to social change. Cheryl Adams attended a facilitators' training inTodos Santos, Mexico, to learn how to run workshops related to peace. Adams joined sixty other people from 11 countries, all of them committed like she was to "doing what we believe to be the most important work of this decade—learning new ways to resolve conflict." Her interest in this process developed partly from her own experience as a disabled person traveling the world. "I have noticed that using a wheelchair and having a physical challenge brings up other people's fears, guilt and anger," says Adams. She believes that frequently having to operate in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar people led her to an interest in developing peacemaking skills.

Some travelers go abroad determined to work for equality and human rights for people with disabilities. "My main purpose," says David Oaks, a psychiatric survivor activist, "has always been to meet with other people who are working for self-determination." Oaks is the director of Support Coalition International, an
organization that campaigns for human rights and self-determination for people diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities. He has traveled extensively—to Canada, Chile, Denmark, England, Germany and Norway, among others. He has lectured, consulted with psychiatric survivor organizations, helped plan conferences, and supported the development of groups and projects. “I stayed in people’s homes, and I met local group members informally,” says Oaks. He has arranged these trips primarily by contacting people who subscribed to the Support Coalition’s journal.

Commitment to a cause may lead you into extraordinary, even historic situations which will benefit you as much as the issues you are supporting. Mary Lou Breslin went to Bosnia in 1998, about eighteen months after the Dayton Peace Accords were signed, at the invitation of the International Rescue Committee, a development and relief organization that did rehabilitation work with people injured during the war in Bosnia. Breslin was asked to lend support and advice to a coalition of disabled people working for policy reforms. “We worked with an interesting cross-ethnic group of people with disabilities and parents,” she says. “We spent a week, about twelve hours a day, developing a statement of principles and press strategy. The Bosnian, Serb and Croat ethnic communities were all represented, all kinds of disabilities, old and young, some recently injured in the war.” Breslin adds: “I always feel we got more out of it than they did. It was quite an amazing experience for all of us.”

Whatever your ideals and beliefs, you may find them deepened and broadened by acting on them globally.

Disability Considerations
To what degree will your disability influence your decision about where to go and what to do? That may depend on the nature and
extent of your disability, and how able you are to adapt to different surroundings.

Many disabled travelers insist that there are really no limits, just opportunities and choices. After all, people with disabilities are living in every country in the world. "You can go almost anywhere in the world and figure out some way to do it, depending on your needs," says veteran traveler Mary Lou Breslin, who uses a wheelchair. "With a good attitude and some help, you can pretty much go anywhere and do anything."

In the overall scheme of things, disability may be a less important factor than you might think, and less important than other considerations. For example, Jean Parker says she's never decided against traveling to a particular place for disability-related reasons. "There would be other reasons, like climate," says Parker. "I don't like cold places."

For some people, living with disabilities might, in fact, nurture an adventurous spirit. Before Marta Lukjan's processing difficulties had been attributed to neuropsychological damage, neither she nor anyone else understood why she had to work so hard at learning, but she was very aware of being different. That awareness was an important influence on Lukjan's decision to study abroad, she says. "My knowledge of being different all the way down to my toes has consciously or unconsciously dictated many of the risks or opportunities I have taken in the past three decades." She knew the usual route wasn't always the right one for her, and was more likely to explore alternatives, such as overseas study.

In considering overseas destinations, do as much research into the local culture and environment as you can to get a sense of
factors which may shape your experience there, paying particular attention to anything that you know to be particularly significant in light of your disability. These factors may include physical access, climate, social attitudes and/or customs.

Jean Marchant learned the hard way the importance of local weather patterns in choosing where to go. Marchant was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and six years later traveled to Germany. "I didn't have a lot of experience with my disability and the changes that it produces," she recalls. "I checked out the weather in the areas that I was traveling in Germany. The temperature was comparable to Eugene, Oregon, where I was living. But I didn't check the humidity—and that has an adverse effect on my ability to function." She found herself experiencing increased spasticity, partly as a result of the weather. "Think about temperature!" Marchant advises.

While the physical climate aggravates some people's disabilities, the social climate is a bigger factor for other people. When she signed up to volunteer with the Peace Corps, Susan Brown knew she would have limited options in choosing where to go. "You're allowed to turn down an assignment," she says, "but if you turn down too many assignments, they might question whether you really want to do it, since it's a volunteer program." However, she adds, "I was pretty sure they'd send me someplace where I could use my Russian. I was fairly sure I'd go to the former Soviet Union."

Once she received her assignment to Ukraine, Brown began reading up on Ukrainian culture. "I tried to figure out: Are people going to yell at me on the street? What are men going to be like towards women? How unsafe might I feel when I'm in this situation, and how will I deal with it?" She also wrote to other Peace Corps Volunteers to ask about their experiences of, for
example, being the only foreigner in a small town. However, these investigations did not fully prepare Brown for what lay ahead. “What I wish I had done,” she says, “is to talk with other people with disabilities before I left, to see how they dealt with similar issues.” Brown also added that if she had done more research, she probably would have determined that parts of Eurasia might be particularly challenging for her. Brown did experience stress, isolation and depression. She made the decision to accept a medical separation from the Peace Corps, and she still feels that this was the right thing for her to do.

Perhaps as important as choosing your overseas destination, the choice about when to stay and when to leave should be carefully considered. Chances are you will have wonderful, positive experiences, and the problems you encounter will be minor in comparison. But if your international experience turns out to be negative—if your health or safety are jeopardized, or you feel consistently unhappy, especially in a long-term program—then you may be faced with the decision about whether to continue or to return home. “Don’t be afraid to quit!” Brown says. “People put so much pressure on each other. But if you need to leave, then you need to leave. Don’t feel guilty because you didn’t finish this thing you said you’d do. That’s just life.”

The decision whether to go abroad, and where, is yours. The decision to stay there is also yours—as is the decision to leave early, should it come to that. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will be the one to make—and live with—those choices. If you want to work, study or volunteer abroad, don’t let your initial fears put you off the idea—at least, not until you have explored the possibilities awaiting you. Knowing that your options are open may make it easier to take a leap and try something new.
Most of the travelers who shared their thoughts and experiences for this book would agree with the sentiments of Alicia Contreras, who says, “A lot of people [with disabilities] think, ‘I will never be able to travel.’ But once you start traveling, it’s so good to look at the map and say, ‘I’ve been here! I know someone from here!’ It’s a great experience.”

If you have preconceived notions about where disabled people in general can and cannot go, it’s time to banish those myths from your mind! While you certainly need to consider your personal means, health issues and tolerance for difficulty and discomfort, don’t rule out any destination because you assume it to be so-called backward, unfriendly to disabled people or inaccessible. People with all kinds of disabilities have gone to all kinds of places, including poorer and rural locations, and have adapted and thrived in those environments.

Jessica Aaron’s first trip abroad was to Mexico, for a three-week disability leadership exchange program. “At first, I was hesitant,” says Aaron. “I wanted more than anything to travel, as I have studied various foreign languages and am interested in international affairs.”

Often it’s not until you arrive in a country that you realize many of your worries are unfounded. Obstacles may appear, but you will learn from these situations and have good stories to tell upon return. In the context of a new country, the excitement often balances out the difficulties. Keep this in mind when nervousness or doubts threaten to derail your dreams.
However, Aaron was concerned about being able to be mobile in her wheelchair, and about getting assistance if she needed it. Despite these fears, Aaron did decide to apply for the program, and she was thrilled to be selected. Still, she says, “the excitement I felt was coupled with nervousness; I asked myself how I would get around in an inaccessible place in a chair I couldn’t even push by myself. However, as the date approached, I became more and more certain that the experience I would have would outweigh any difficulties I would face.” She was right. In Mexico she coped effectively with the physical environment, and found herself doing things she had never imagined doing. “In Nayarit, our first destination, I visited the ocean for the first time in years,” she says. “When my chair started sinking in the sand, I got out of my chair and into the warm water to look for seashells.” The experience changed her assumptions about what was possible for her. “My trip to Mexico taught me that I can go anywhere I want to, disabled or not,” she says, “and that disability is not an excuse for avoiding adventure.” Since then, Aaron has pursued adventures all over the world.

While some people have concerns about the physical terrain, others worry about their ability to master a foreign language. Kristin Hoobler has learning disabilities (LD) including dyslexia and was hesitant to travel to a Spanish-speaking country. “Although I have learned how to manage my LD,” says Hoobler, “I really struggled with the idea of going overseas and learning a new language. I was told as a young girl that I would be unable to learn another language.” However, says Hoobler, “I refused to accept this and I went overseas for a year and learned Spanish fluently.”

As Hoobler learned, other people’s predictions are not necessarily a good indication of your ability to survive and thrive overseas.
Friends, family members, teachers, exchange staff or physicians, among others, may offer support and encouragement—or they may try to discourage you from taking what they see as a risky trip, given potential problems related to disability or health conditions. For example, Elise Read was elated when she was granted funding for a full year of study in China. Just a week later, however, Read was diagnosed with type I, insulin-dependent diabetes and was suddenly forced to contend with all of the physical and emotional changes such a diagnosis meant. “Originally, my doctors told me that living and studying in China would not be in my best interest,” says Read. She held on to her dream, despite their warnings. She delayed her trip for several months, and spent that time adjusting to her new routine of daily injections and blood sugar testing, as well as to the psychological ramifications of coping with a chronic disease. “Fortunately,” says Read, “I have a very supportive family and I was persistent enough to convince my medical team to allow me to spend the spring semester studying in China.” While there, Read had to contend with such challenges as figuring out how much insulin her body would require after eating a meal that included deep-fried scorpion. “Fortunately, whatever dosage of insulin I’d guessed upon seemed to be correct, as I’m still here to tell the tale,” she says.

Here is Ellen Rubin’s advice for disabled people who are considering working or volunteering overseas: “You really have to think about what your experiences and strengths are. You have to be confident. If your skills are good, then just say, ‘Let me try!’ I’ve had jobs both here and overseas where I’ve thought, ‘I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I’ll do it! I can do it, give me a chance!’ Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.”

Rubin adds, “If you’re a risk-taker, that’s really important. Unfortunately, I think so many people with disabilities are not
allowed to take risks. That really holds us back. You need to have a good sense of what you're willing to try."

Justin Brumelle had already been to Thailand six times before he enrolled in the Council on International Educational Exchange's Khon Kaen program in that country. As a person with a mobility disability, he thought he had a pretty good idea of what to expect and what his comfort zone was. However, he found that one of the program activities that was described as a "90-minute, not-too-rigorous walk through the jungle" was one of the toughest he'd ever been on. "I just wanted it to be over and felt it was pushing my limits a bit too far, yet I wanted to complete it." And with a lot of determination and the support of the other members of his group, he did. "Although leeches and log bridges were not in my comfort level, I realized I could handle them," he recalls. "I pushed my limits and had fun in the process. The program not only showed me my current limits, but it also showed me how much potential exists within me." He recommends that people with disabilities reexamine what they believe to be their physical and mental abilities and constantly revise those beliefs based on new experiences and opportunities.

Are you a risk-taker? If you're not sure, ask yourself some questions: What kinds of risks have you taken in the past? Are you confident in your ability to handle unusual or even unexpected situations? Are you willing to push yourself outside of your comfort zone? Are you able to balance your fears about what might go wrong with strategies for responding to those situations? What skills do you bring to your new international role? What motivates you? What are you willing to try? Do you believe the benefits may outweigh the risks?
With so many different overseas programs available, the following are some questions you might ask in evaluating each one. Some of these questions will help you determine whether you will be getting what you expect from the program, while others have more to do with your personal preferences, or with provisions for dealing with the unexpected.

- How long has the organization been offering its programs? Where is the organization’s home base? (Organizations based in the United States are covered by U.S. laws.) How much direct supervision does the organization have over the staff running the program overseas?

- What do the program fees cover? Will transportation, insurance or free time activities entail additional costs? Does the organization provide full or partial refund of fees in case of cancellation or early return home?

- How are homestays (or host families) selected and what facilities will be available in the typical home?

- Do the planned activities (e.g. foreign language classes) fit with the announced objectives (e.g. study)?

- What is the exact calendar and daily time schedule of the program, the language of instruction and linguistic requirements? Are participants expected to attend all activities?

- What are the qualifications of the instructors, host staff or leaders? How are the exchange leaders selected? Have these people worked effectively with diverse participants, taking into account age, nationality, disability and other characteristics? How accessible and responsive will the exchange leader be to you and other group members and what will be the extent of his or her role?

- How are participants selected? Does the application process require letters of recommendation? Is there a deposit required? If so, how large is it and is it refundable?
• What arrangements have been made for coping with illnesses, accidents and other circumstances that may require medical services or plans for promptly returning home? Are there any extra charges if a participant has to return before the conclusion of the program?

Any reputable organization offering an overseas program wants to maintain and build its good name and should be ready to answer questions from prospective participants. Feel comfortable in asking questions until you’re satisfied and able to narrow down your choice of programs. You can also ask to talk with alumni or past leaders to help you better evaluate the program and choose an exchange that is right for you.