



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

STEPHANIE

FROM

USA

TO

MALAYSIA

DURATION

1 MONTH



0123456789



Making the Most of First Experiences Abroad

The humid heat in Malaysia, lack of air conditioning, and cold showers made adjusting to the first four days of her study abroad program difficult for Stephanie, a student from University of South Florida. She also had to get used to wearing long skirts and pants in the heat, as is customary for women in this predominantly Muslim country.

“I have depression paired with anxiety and once I got there, it spiked. I don’t know what it was. Leaving a lot of the luxury that you take for granted played a part. It was like the realization that you are definitely not home.”

Then by the fifth day, it all changed. The experiences she had been exposed to in Malaysia began to make the journey worth it, despite some discomforts. She had put in place different strategies to make adjusting to living abroad easier: journaling her feelings, maintaining her medication, and finding a way to connect by Internet back home.

“I didn’t fully know in my head if others were also experiencing this, but when I told them that I found a way to get Internet access, everyone jumped on it. Everyone wanted to communicate with their families, and I was like ‘Okay, cool I’m not the only one here missing my family.’”

She also reached out to her roommate, who agreed to encourage her to join in when others were going out, since Stephanie’s psychologist and therapist back home had advised her not to isolate herself.

“The culture was a stressor but once I got used to it, I always enjoyed going out. It was just pushing myself to go was the hardest part.”

Stephanie was traveling with about twenty other students to two cities in Malaysia, Penang and Sawaok, for a one-month special education and global health course. Her undergraduate research mentor led the program and encouraged her to use the mentorship program’s study abroad scholarships towards her participation.

“What really interested me is when we went to special education classrooms and saw how they were run and the programs for adults with disabilities. We did a lot of extracurricular activities too.”

She ended up enjoying learning about the culture, not just the etiquette of pointing with one’s thumb instead of forefinger, but also the four-hour canoe ride to stay in a long house and learn traditional dances from the indigenous people.

I had a lot of firsts—it was my first time going abroad, it was my first time going hiking, it was my first time having new foods. I really wanted to get the most out of the experience and it was definitely worth it.

