

THE GREATEST GIFT



"When you immerse yourself in a new environment, you are not supposed to know every single outcome."

—David Sharif, study abroad alum

Global citizenship is everything to David Shapiro Sharif's family, and it has led him to all of his worldwide expeditions, spanning 40 countries across five continents. "My dad gave me the idea to become an independent world traveler. He told me, 'You are very fortunate, and you have to make the most of every upcoming opportunity.'" David took his father's advice to heart, including throughout his education.

A Magna Cum Laude graduate of Pace University with a degree in Political Science & Peace Justice Studies, David spent almost as much time studying in other countries as he did at his local institution! He enrolled in programs with the American Institute for Foreign Studies (AIFS) in Quito, Ecuador; Barcelona, Spain; and Berlin, Germany. He also participated in a Global Challenges course in Geneva, Switzerland and acted as a delegate at a Model United Nations conference in Rome, Italy.

Prior to his first study abroad experience in Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, David had serious doubts about how the trip would go. To calm his nerves, David's family and friends encouraged him to appreciate what he could potentially gain. Towards the end of his encounters, he reflected on what he acquired: living with a host family for the first time, conversing in Spanish, and passing a course on Ecosystems & Biodiversity at another university... not to mention irreplaceable memories of climbing rocky cliffs, savoring the views of the open sea, and mimicking the sounds of sea lions.

Name:

David Sharif

Home Institution:

Pace University

Major:

Political Science

Programs:

AIFS Study Abroad

Destination:

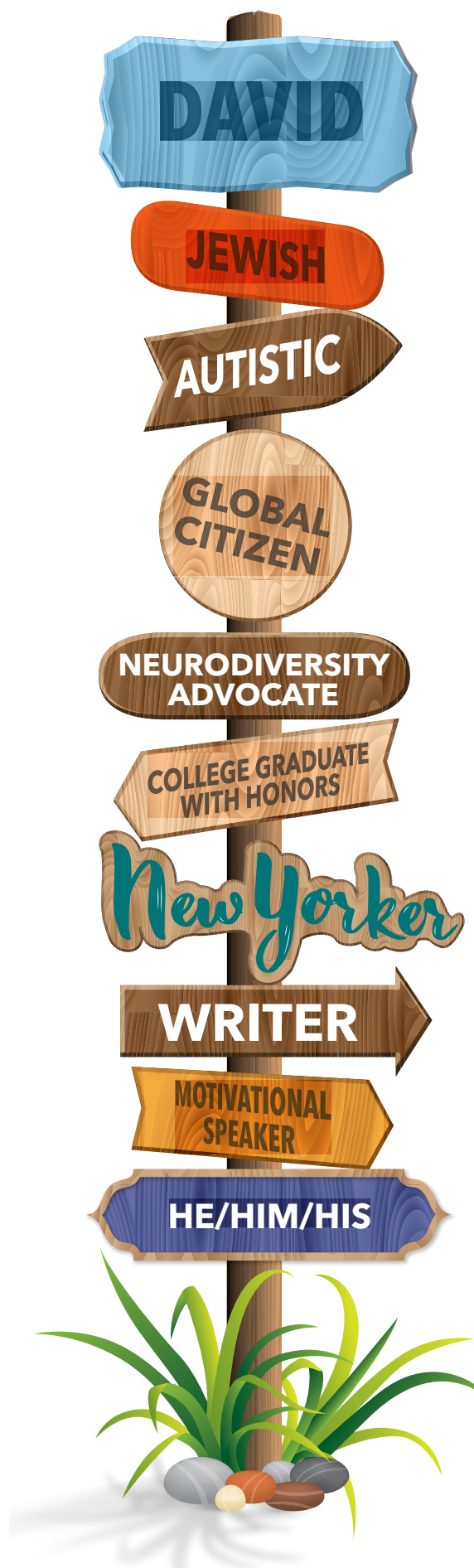
**Berlin, Germany;
Quito, Ecuador;
Barcelona, Spain**

As a visual learner, David is drawn to the images, diagrams, shapes and designs he observes at art exhibits, religious memorials, and other structures. Those visuals often stir up strong feelings. In Spain, David was captivated by the architecture of Sagrada Familia and Park Guell, whose colorful stones and windows resembled the bricks he used to play with as a kid. He also noted some peculiar visual differences in European cities in contrast to his life in New York: buildings constructed like the letter L, street names affixed to the brick walls as opposed to the traffic light poles, and intersections shaped like a stop sign.

Other times, the feelings stirred up by visual imagery are more somber and solemn. In Germany, David visited Jewish museums and concentration camps, where the sight of anti-Semitic imagery would make him clench his fists as he looked for clues about how the Holocaust began during World War II. "Germany was a very touching experience for me. My responsibility was to keep my emotions intact. In my opinion, Jewish history is all about taking the lessons that leave a significant influence regardless of how I perceive it."

In addition to visiting monuments significant to Jewish history, David finds small ways to honor his own Jewish heritage and traditions while traveling internationally, whether it's bringing along a yarmulke in his luggage or preparing a modest Shabbat dinner for himself on Friday nights (that is, when he can locate a good loaf of challah bread and a glass of grape juice in the host community!) In fact, it was David's Jewish identity which provided a gateway to his first independent travel experience abroad, a one month trip to Israel with fellow Jewish youth from Camp Havaya in the summer before his junior year of high school.

In addition to backtracking his Jewish background, David is proud of his autistic



“For me, traveling is the gift of my dreams. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will lead to friendships, fond memories, and being challenged to look at the bigger picture of my inner-self.”

identity and appreciates the ways in which this aspect of himself has added a unique lens to his travels. He is never afraid to show who he is as a person and what he is capable of.

"I am a neurodiverse man with the desire to learn whatever is being passed down. I will always have a way to navigate myself, no matter how long it will take me to feel accustomed to the cultural practices."

Traveling also enhanced David's independence. The everyday tasks of shopping for groceries and cooking in another country sharpened his skills of living in another home. His heightened sense of direction made him feel like a seasoned world citizen.

David wants autistic students to know that travel is meant to be unpredictable.

“When you immerse yourself in a new environment, you are not supposed to know every single outcome. Fear will make you waste everything you've worked so hard for. Striving with courage is how you persevere.”

To balance the uncertainty of travel, David tirelessly advocated for his academic accommodations to be in place. In college, David had access to comprehensive support services like academic coaches, personalized study plans, campus life coordinators, and extended time for exams. Although he knew the programs wouldn't be able to replicate all of those services abroad, he negotiated several helpful methods to support his needs:

In Ecuador, the Resident Director arranged critical lecture notes out of the PowerPoint slides.

In Spain and Germany, David requested tutors with extensive knowledge of the education systems who could help him adapt to new grading scales, interpret the expectations, and read between the lines of his projects.

Going to Italy for Model United Nations, the Political Science Department was able to budget one of David's academic coaches to travel and provide guidance as needed.

David recommends that students discuss their accommodations and the course requirements with the programs early on in the study abroad application process. "Give directors ample time to go over your needs. It will allow them to determine what is best to help you feel comfortable with the workload. You have to communicate directly on how you learn."

David values the connections he's formed with the autism community, most recently serving as a community moderator for the Global Autism Project. He especially admires popular autistic leaders who share their stories through public speaking, books, poetry, and he aims to follow in their footsteps. David's dream career is to be a global professional speaker giving talks about autism and contributing to the Jewish community on religious education. But whatever his future may hold, David will find ways to build on his self-advocacy. Especially if those pathways involve a passport.

“For me, traveling is the gift of my dreams. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will lead to friendships, fond memories, and being challenged to look at the bigger picture of my inner-self.” ■

David's Travel Essentials

Mapping:

Depending on where he's going, David generally downloads the map of the city's metro system and notes the stops from his residence, school, and study abroad office. "As it becomes familiar, I can get around without having a map in front of my face."

Money management:

David uses the GlobeConvert app for converting currency in foreign countries and keeping track of his expenses. No Wi-Fi required!

Community-based travel:

Consider an international exchange experience with travelers who share a common identity. David's first taste of independent travel was a trip to Israel with the No'ar Hadash Israel Experience for Jewish teens, organized through Camp Havaya (<https://havayaisrael.org>). David also plans to travel abroad through the Global Autism Project, which runs a SkillCorps® program (<https://skillcorps.globalautismproject.org>) for autism self-advocates, professionals, and parents to travel to partner centers in 11 countries around the world.

