

NO DUE DATE

a practical guide to traveling in college

Ross Lee Tabak



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“ The student is put outside of society, on a campus. Furthermore, he is excluded while being transmitted a knowledge which is traditional in nature, obsolete, "academic" and not directly tied to the needs and problems of today.

This exclusion is underscored by the organization around the student of social mechanisms which are fictitious, artificial and quasi-theatrical (hierarchical relationships, academic exercises, the "court" of examination, evaluation).

Finally, the student is given a gamelike way of life; he is offered a kind of distraction, amusement, freedom which, again, has nothing to do with real life: it is this kind of artificial, theatrical society, a society of cardboard, that is being built around him; and thanks to this, young people from 18 to 25 are thus, as it were, neutralized by and for society, rendered safe, ineffective, socially and politically castrated. There is the first function of the university: to put students out of circulation.

Its second function, however, is one of integration. Once a student has spent six or seven years of his life within this artificial society, he becomes "absorbable": society can consume him. ”

- Michel Foucault, in "Rituals of Exclusion," Collected Interviews 1961-1984

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WHAT THIS IS

This book is a practical guide to traveling the world while still in college.

This book is about how to travel in college and get away with it. It's intended for an American audience - while those elsewhere may find it useful, gap years are not a common phenomenon in the USA and information tailored to the college-aged American is difficult to come by.

We'll cover the benefits of taking time off vs. studying abroad, deciding what to study at home and how to deal with issues like health insurance, loans and financial aid while out of the country. We'll also touch on teaching English, volunteering and backpacking as means of escape.

Information will vary. Everyone's financial and academic situations are different, so check with your institutions first.

Throughout the following chapters I'll be forced to use terms like "career" and "real world." These are thoroughly nonsensical concepts that have no place in a happy, fulfilled life, but I'm hoping that you, dear reader, have already come to the same conclusion and are looking for a way to live your dreams. I've tried to stay away from philosophy and instead focus on the nuts and bolts of traveling.

If you're still in need of inspiration or justification, I recommend [Brave New Traveler](#) as a spiritual pick-me-up.

WHY TRAVEL NOW?

The younger you travel the more you get out of it.

If you're reading this, you probably already want to see the world and just haven't worked out the details. The obvious solution, and indeed the advice you might already have gotten, is to finish your degree and save the traveling for later.

This is a great way to make sure you never go anywhere.

You're going to have a lot more obligations when you graduate. College is a time when we're afforded all the independence of an adult without having to adhere to what's expected of one. With a bit of planning, you can spend that capital on a lot more than drinking Miller Lite at nine in the morning and wearing the same pants for three weeks (but do some of that, too).

Striking out on your own for a summer, a semester or a year gives you a sandbox in which to play around with new ideas and responsibilities without the consequences of messing up in the "real world". Real world responsibilities might not be any harder to handle, but they are less deferrable. You can't take a semester off of your job and your student loan companies aren't going to give you a forbearance to climb the Andes.

WHY TRAVEL NOW?

College isn't great.
Being young is great.

While many people do manage to take their epic backpacking trip and find jobs overseas when they finish school, it's much more likely that things are going to get in the way -- a significant other, a job offer you can't refuse, an amazing apartment with your best friend -- and if you haven't yet satisfied the urge to travel you may well have to choose.

College might be the best time of your life, but it's not because college is great. It's because *being young* is great.

Neurologically speaking, the younger you are the more readily your brain accepts new information, which is why kids pick up languages so quickly and everyone over forty hates hip hop. The younger you are the more enjoyable and rewarding your experiences will be.

In other words, *the sooner you travel, the more you'll get out of it.*

AMERICANS DON'T TRAVEL

Yes, you will still
finish your degree.

The statistic that only 10% of Americans hold passports is a myth, but the idea that we don't travel very much is still valid. *Why* is a question with a long list of possible answers – the US is so big we don't have to, we're ignorant, we've been bred to be afraid of everything, we're in so much damned debt from college that we can't afford to – but if you want to see the world it's a quirk of culture that you'll encounter over and over again.

Assuming that your relatives and friends are mostly American, you may not get much encouragement in your grand plans. You'll probably get a lot of doubt and scoffing instead. This is totally normal for any risky enterprise, in this country or anywhere else, but the idea of long-term travel is particularly alien to Americans.

While many will paint doomsday scenarios brought on by your wandering ("You'll never come back to school! You'll never finish your degree!"), this kind of travel is extremely common in most other developed countries. The gap year is an institution in Europe, Australia and New Zealand and it's pretty much expected of young Israelis (In fact, the UK has started paying for kids to take them). Not just before college, either – it's widely accepted for those who've finished or never gone to university to take a gap year.

So disregard the naysayers. As long as you're serious about your endeavor, traveling will only take you closer to the person you want to be.

CHOOSING A DESTINATION

It really doesn't matter
as much as you think.

The truth is that not all destinations are equal – some are cheap and some are expensive, some are easy and some are heavily regulated. Some places are just harder to get to than others.

It may seem frivolous to choose where to travel based on something like money or accessibility, but those are really the only metrics you have when deciding between places you've never lived. Travel does nothing better than shatter preconceived notions, so deciding that the people are nice or the language sounds pretty isn't a good way to choose where to spend your time.

Your experience will depend so heavily on unpredictable things like the people you meet and your own mindset that going anywhere is a complete crapshoot. If you didn't already have your heart set on France or Italy or Bhutan, money and bureaucratic hurdles may be the best way to pick an ultimate destination.

This won't be the last time you leave home, either. People who travel and enjoy it always find a way to get back on the road. It's best not to worry about landing that perfect program in Dublin where beer costs gold bullion and instead focus on where is most cost effective so you can do what you really want later on.

CHOOSING A LANGUAGE

You can always learn another one.

Like your destination, the subjects you choose to study aren't nearly as important as they might seem. It's easy to get hung up on your major and foreign language, but none of these will ever prevent you from going anywhere.

Still, the right language can be a huge boon if you're set on a particular region. Two years of French will go a long way in Africa, Spanish is invaluable in Latin America and if you've got a 'stan fascination Russian is a godsend. But then, what do you do if you studied Japanese and you want to go to Argentina?

There are almost 7,000 living languages on the planet. Since your school probably offers five, you can't expect yourself to have taken just the right one for where you want to go right now. Luckily, it *is* possible to learn a language outside of the classroom – it's actually pretty easy if you're surrounded by it every day.

Even if you're not conversational by the time you leave, don't despair. English is continuing its steady march across the globe and almost all tourism and study abroad programs are conducted in it (this is less true in Latin America), so as long as you're willing to study hard while you're overseas and in the months prior you won't have any problems getting by.

CHOOSING A MAJOR

Pick something you're interested in.
Treat travel separately.
They might come together.

Your choice of major will never stop you from doing anything, but certain fields are predisposed to travel opportunities. Some of the more obvious are international relations and tourism, but social sciences like archaeology, anthropology and linguistics can also involve field schools in far-flung locales (in fact, they're often required).

Majors like these will present you with more opportunities to travel than, say, finance, but it's important to remember that they're not actually about traveling. For example, an archaeology program might give you the chance to spend a summer in Chile, but you're probably going to be digging holes in a desert for two months. That's wonderful if you love archaeology, but if you chose it more for travel than pot sherds you might be disappointed. Same with international relations – studying abroad will be a breeze, but if political theory isn't your thing you'll be in for a long four years.

Language majors can be attractive, but they're really for budding linguists who are interested in questions like, "How did the use of the written French pluperfect change between the Revolution and the founding of the Third Republic?" or, "Can Japanese really be said to have diphthongs, or are they all in fact two entirely separate phonemes?" If that sounds good then by all means go for it, but for the rest of us majoring in a language to travel is like building a car to learn to drive.

STUDYING ABROAD

It might be abroad,
but it's still studying.

Taking advantage of your school's study abroad programs is usually the easiest way to escape for a semester or two. The larger your school, the more destinations they're likely to offer, but smaller universities usually accept outside programs to make up the difference.

It's an open secret on college campuses that semesters abroad are *really easy*. The workload is a fraction of what you have now and the students are generally expected to do nothing. I suspect this is by design – culture shock can take a long time to run its course and it's unreasonable to expect much work from freaked-out nineteen-year-olds (see my article, "[Four Stages of Culture Shock and How to Beat Them](#)"). This is a good way to avoid burnout after a year or two of hard work, but the real benefit is the amount of free time it affords you.

With the rise of no-frills airlines like EasyJet and Ryanair, flights in Europe have so become mind-bogglingly cheap that it's perfectly feasible to visit a new city every weekend. If you're able to book a few months in advance you can easily score a round-trip ticket for less than EUR100. Plenty of young people in Western Europe do this on a regular basis, so most cities are full of cheap hostels to accommodate them. Budget airlines are catching on in Asia too, but trains and buses are still even cheaper.

STUDYING ABROAD

School sponsored programs

Your choices might be limited by your field of study, but the situation isn't nearly as cut and dried as it seems. Your school's program list will have specific fields attached to certain destinations – for example, "Globalization and Ethnic Minorities" in China or "Politics of the European Union" in Belgium – so if one of them applies to your major in a place you're interested in, you're all set

If not, your adviser might still be able to find a way to get you where you want to go. University bureaucracies usually don't have much control or interest in what goes on during their programs abroad, and the people deciding what "fulfills major requirements" are probably only vaguely aware of the actual class content. Regardless, large numbers of students studying abroad make universities look really good on their brochures (if you go to a big school, look through the literature they give out and it's probably full of that kind of thing) so most advisers are willing to bend the rules just a bit to get you credit for classes that are barely relevant.

This is all great if you go to State U with forty thousand students, but what if you picked a small liberal arts college in the woods? You're not out of luck. These schools generally don't have the resources to run their own study abroads, but they'll very often partner with larger American schools and use their programs. They're also more willing to accept accredited outside programs.

STUDYING ABROAD

Outside programs

Outside programs are companies that run study abroad programs beyond the auspices of an institution. There are a ton of them, but each school only accepts certain ones for credit – your adviser will have a list. While each company is slightly different, they fill the similar niches by offering programs in out-of-the-way places and uncommon fields of study. Like everything, there are pros and cons:

PROS

- Far-flung destinations (think the deserts of Western China instead of Barcelona)
- Adventurous curricula (you'll spend a lot less time in the classroom)
- Cooler professors (the people who run these programs tend to be a lot younger and hipper than you'll encounter with your school's study abroad)
- More flexibility (many include independent study projects)

CONS

- More work (hopefully it'll be work you're pumped about doing, but you may not be able to travel every weekend)
- More intense application process (but you got into college, didn't you?)
- Expensive (many offer scholarships and financial aid might help you out, but...)
- Financial aid is a huge hassle (see "[*Financial Aid*](#)")

Studying abroad is by far the easiest way to see the world before you're thrown headfirst into it. It's still studying though, so if you want to really run away you need to look elsewhere.

TAKING A SEMESTER OFF

Just like the real world
without all the hassle.

If you can't stand the thought of writing another paper, it's probably time to take a semester off.

The minute you announce your intention to take a leave of absence, you will likely be descended upon by hordes of people telling you how bad of an idea it is. This will continue until the moment you set foot on campus again.

Time off from school or anywhere else isn't something that's well-respected in our culture, so you're going to hear a lot of talk about how you'll never return to school once you've tasted sweet, sweet freedom (see *Americans Don't Travel*)

This, of course, is complete nonsense. Unless you're watching TV on your parents' couch the entire time, "semester off" is a bit of a misnomer. Working, volunteering or just traveling are all demanding and rewarding pursuits that will change your outlook on not only school, but life in general and what you want out of it.

Most universities make it very easy to pick up where you left off and there's no shame in taking an extra year to graduate. If anything, taking a semester off allows you to return to school refreshed, ready and able to see your studies with new eyes.

TEACHING ENGLISH

It's not a golden ticket,
but it's pretty close.

Back in the late 1980s, Japan's asset price bubble made it the richest country on the planet.

People found their salaries tripling overnight and were dying to for something to spend them on - one-room condos in Ginza were selling for USD30 million and a Y10,000 bill wasn't worth the space it covered on the pavement. Japanese people started throwing so much money at English teachers that it was hard to be American without making a hundred bucks an hour.

The Bubble Economy lasted for about five years before Japan lapsed into its Lost Decade, but even now the myths and legends of English teaching owe a lot to this era. Stories of easy money are still filtering down to the general populace, so you'll occasionally hear of young expats getting free apartments in South Korea, insane salaries in Dubai or living the high life in Bangkok.

There's a grain of truth to many of these. Full-time teaching jobs in Dubai can pay upwards of USD5,000 a month plus living expenses, even with the economy in the toilet, and South Korea and Taiwan offer similar deals.

Unfortunately, as a college kid with no degree, no teaching experience and only a few months to commit, you're not going to get any of that.

TEACHING ENGLISH

Finding a job

Finding a throwaway teaching job was much easier ten or fifteen years ago, but governments are slowly taming the Wild West of English instruction and hoping for higher standards and fewer creepy burn-outs.

This means that the jobs you'll be looking for are exclusively in developing countries. As a college student it's basically impossible to get a job in Europe or Japan (the JET program accepts unqualified teachers, but it requires a four-year degree and a two year commitment) and even places like Thailand are becoming painfully competitive.

It's feasible to land a job through the internet before you even leave home, but don't despair if you can't find exactly what you're looking for. Most schools don't post job listings on the internet, probably because of the high number of teachers who get hired and just never show up.

None of this means that landing a teaching gig is hopeless; it's just a lot more work than you've probably been led to believe. Certification is a must without a degree, which is where TEFL courses come in. TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) is a general term for the whole field, not a specific organization. It's also known by a slew of other names, including TESOL, EFL, ELT and ESOL.

TEACHING ENGLISH

Getting certified

There are several different ways to take a TEFL course. Most universities offer at least basic courses, so the easiest way might well be to do it as an elective the semester before you plan to go teach. You'll also get credit for it, which is usually out of the question with any of the other options.

Plenty of companies offer online courses, which tend to be the cheapest option. These don't offer any actual teaching experience though, so it's possible that potential schools will move your application to the bottom of the pile.

Lastly, you can take a month-long course in the country you plan to teach in. This is by far the best option; you'll not only be familiar with the environment before you begin teaching, but you'll also have a chance to meet like-minded people and develop a support structure. If you're concerned about that last part, an even better solution is LanguageCorps – they'll set you up with lodging and a facilitator in addition to the course, and they'll even help you find a job when it's over.

Keep in mind not all TEFL courses are equal. Since "TEFL" isn't a standardized term, just about anything can bill itself as a certification course. With a little bit of research and the help of the enormous number of TEFL websites, finding a course that works will be no problem.

VOLUNTEERING

Like work,
for no money.

Volunteering can be a great way to spend some time away from school, allowing you to really experience a country and meet an amazing array of people. Plus, doing good work makes you feel good (I know, I didn't believe it either).

Here's the catch: it costs money. Sometimes a lot of money, and you're not going to get any of it back. Most of the time you're actually paying an organization to work for them. It makes sense in the end: 'volunteering' means you're not getting a salary and somebody has to cover the institutional expenses of taking care of you (training, transport, paperwork, etc). If you're set on building schools for poor kids in developing countries this is a pretty good deal, but if you're just looking for a cheap way to travel then I suggest moving on to the next section. Once you're actually in a country, you can easily find short-term volunteer work on the side.

Volunteering options for college students tend to look a lot like study abroad programs – they offer various packages at set prices that require a certain time commitment. The benefit of this is that they usually include language and culture training in an environment full of like-minded people. Idealist.org is a fantastic resource for finding volunteer opportunities, especially if you don't have a specific destination in mind. Otherwise, Googling "volunteer in (country x)" will spit out all the results you need.

JUST WINGIN' IT

Or,
backpacking.

If you have the money and time, you can fly to the other side of the world and figure it out when you get there.

I don't mean to say that it's a good idea to have no plan at all (the romance wears off very quickly), but there's no reason you need institutional backing to travel the world. In fact, extended backpacking trips are fairly common amongst the college-aged and you'll likely encounter a lot of people doing the same thing. Backpacking is a great way to see the world, but it's also a chance to meet interesting characters and nurture your independent side.

From a purely financial perspective, backpacking actually comes out ahead of studying or volunteering. If your volunteer program in Bolivia costs USD1,500 for one month, that's $(1500/30) = \text{USD}50/\text{day}$. Lonely Planet says frugal travelers in Bolivia can get by on less than USD15 a day, and if you [Couch Surf](#) you can probably cut your expenses in half.

Of course, you probably won't help anybody with trans-continental partying and you definitely won't get college credit, but it *will* teach you how to take care of yourself. Backpackers get a lot of negative press for being lazy hippies, but that doesn't actually preclude backpacking from being a worthwhile enterprise. It just depends on how determined you are to *make* it worthwhile.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Traveling
will never be easier
than it is now.

When you're in college, much of the annoying minutiae that defines adult life is being handled by someone else. This not only makes your life simpler, but it saves you a few hundred dollars every month and makes travel much more worry-free.

Regardless, you're probably still enrolled in school and there are always things to keep up with. You'll need to make sure your insurance is in order and, if you're getting financial help, that your money is still there when you return to college.

The mountains of paperwork and bureaucratic black holes can be complicated to slog through, especially if you're doing something unique, but if they're handled properly you won't have any problems while you're gone.

Convincing everybody that this is a good idea isn't as straightforward. Everybody has their own reason for traveling, but rarely does it make sense to anyone else. If you're having trouble winning over your parents, professors or friends, we'll take a look at how to frame the benefits of traveling so that they make sense to the unconverted.

INSURANCE

You'll be fine without it,
but you might go broke.

Many employee health plans cover dependents until they're out of school, so you might still be covered by one of your parents' plans. Many of the better policies will reimburse your foreign medical bills, but it's important to check with the provider before you leave. If they won't, there are two options—domestic and travel insurance.

It's easy to forget living in the US, but most developed countries (and many that aren't) have reasonable national health plans. It's different everywhere, but study abroad and volunteer programs will help you take care of this and it's usually part of the process of obtaining a visa.

In places where the standard healthcare is less than world-class, major cities generally have one or two Western-run hospitals. These, of course, charge Western rates. Once in rural Vietnam, I fell off a motorcycle, sliced a fist-sized hole in my abdomen and had to go to a crumbling colonial hospital that didn't stock anesthetics. The stitches ran about USD3, but having a French doctor in Hanoi tell me I was fine cost upward of fifty bucks.

In these cases, travel insurance comes in handy. For emergency situations, you'll simply pay out of pocket and send in the claim afterward. It's not just for health, though—travel insurance can cover everything from cancelled flights and lost baggage to coups and terrorist attacks.

STUDENT LOANS

Better than credit card debt,
but that's not saying much.

One good thing about student loans (actually, the only good thing) is that you don't really have to pay them if you genuinely can't. They'll keep getting bigger, sure, but unlike that flatscreen you bought with a credit card no one will break your kneecaps if you can't pay yet.

Most student loans come with a no-questions-asked deferment, during which you don't have to make payments and no interest accrues even if you're out of school. It's intended to give you a chance to find a job after you graduate – after all, they can't take all your money if you don't have any – but you can actually use it to take a semester off as well.

That does mean that you won't get a break at the end of school, though. If you can spare an extra couple bucks a month, it may actually be better to make small monthly payments during your time off to keep the interest at bay and save your deferment for when you really need it.

FINANCIAL AID

Free money
takes a lot of work.

If you're lucky enough to be receiving financial aid, you need to be extremely diligent about it.

It's complicated enough when you graduate in four years without going abroad, but if you're going to muck up the system by taking time off or studying outside the university's established programs things can get even worse. The most frustrating part is that nobody has any interest in keeping you in the loop – you'll get very little warning that you've filled out the wrong form or that a deadline is approaching.

Making friends with your financial aid adviser is a good idea, but the best way to ensure everything goes smoothly is to plan ahead. Find out what information you'll need to submit, both now and when you return, and get it done as quickly as possible.

Generally, if you're studying abroad with your school then the financial aid process will be the same as any other semester. Outside programs are a little more complicated – some have their own scholarships, but will accept your current financial aid as long as it goes through your home institution first. Again, talk to your adviser.

CONVINCING YOUR PARENTS

Respect your elders,
but don't listen to
everything they say.

You probably justified your world travels to yourself a long time ago, but your parents might still need some convincing. It's important to remember that, while your parents have 25+ years on you and all the wisdom that comes with that, the only lens they have with which to view your plans is what they would have done when they were your age.

Let's look at some things that weren't in widespread use when your parents were young adults:

- Cell phones
- The Internet
- Debit cards
- Answering machines
- Microwavable popcorn
- Karaoke
- Disposable contacts
- Rollerblades

They might use these things now, but real adults have no idea what it's like to have them as a young adult. They're also not used to the accessibility of information the internet offers, nor how cheap and easy flying across the world has become, so traveling for personal development seems like a ridiculous luxury.

CONVINCING YOUR PARENTS

Pretend you have a plan.

All this means is that you have to be able to explain things differently than you would to yourself and your friends. You don't need a twenty -page manifesto, but having your plan down on paper might make it a little easier to swallow.

Know exactly how much it will cost and where the money will come from. Or at least make up something believable.

Have exact dates. Know when you'll be leaving and getting back, but even more importantly when you'll graduate. If your parents went to college they probably didn't take time off or study abroad, so they need to know that you do intend on graduating (see Americans Don't Travel).

Explain the benefits. What tangible good will come out of traveling? Being able to say how this will help you academically is important, but it's even more important to know how it will help your "career."

A FINAL WORD

After reading this, I hope you'll have some of the practical tools to satisfy your urge to globetrot. Now that we're done with all that...

The world is a mess right now and the people who made it that way don't understand a thing about it. They're all going to retire pretty soon, at which point this debacle becomes our problem. What we're doing now is clearly not working, so we're going to need brand new paradigms and tactics to deal with the rubble left by the previous generation.

These ideas about travel and open-mindedness aren't just fun to think about - they may well be what puts this whole place back together. We people who are curious, hungry, who want to grasp every part of the world we live in. We need people like you, dear reader, and we cannot make them in a classroom.

So go. Travel. Explore. Understand. Come back with answers. We're all counting on you.

“ Stare,
pry,
listen,
eavesdrop.
Die knowing something.
You are not here long. ”

- Walker Evans

RESOURCES

For further
reading.

STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

Where There Be Dragons

wheretherebedragons.com

SIT

sit.edu

CIEE

ciee.org

TEACHING

Dave's ESL Café

eslcafe.com

TEFL Forums

tefl.net/forums/index.php

No More Easy Money for English Teachers in Japan?

matadorabroad.com/no-more-easy-money-for-english-teachers-in-japan

How to Move to Saigon

matadorabroad.com/jobs-work-in-saigon-vietnam-ho-chi-minh-city

GENERAL TRAVEL

Wikitravel

wikitravel.org

Lonely Planet Forums

lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/index.jspa

Couch Surfing

couchsurfing.com