

## Studying Abroad for Non-Traditional Students

By Justin Morrison

In June 2011, I was fortunate enough to experience six eye-opening and refreshing weeks in Nantes, France as part of the UC study abroad exchange program. I wanted to offer others who are considering this journey the opportunity to read about my experiences to help encourage them to take part in this life-changing program (particularly non-traditional students who may have more reservations about participating in a study abroad program).

I imagine that the benefits of these study abroad programs are similar regardless of which particular program you decide to follow, but I will focus on my experiences in Nantes as that was my selection. One of the primary reasons that I chose this particular destination was the six-week duration of the trip. In order to maximize the benefits of a study abroad program without removing me from my family for too long, I felt that six weeks was the perfect amount. I believe that anything less would not have given me the opportunity to truly experience the lifestyle and culture, while a longer period away may have been too difficult to manage for me and my family.

I'm assuming that anyone taking the time to read this is at least curious about the opportunity to study abroad. Perhaps some of you have already decided to take the next step and apply for the program, while others are still questioning whether it is realistically possible. Others might be worried that they cannot be away from their families for this long. All of our circumstances are unique, and this may be the biggest obstacle for many potential participants. While I encourage you to consider the benefits yielded from such an opportunity, it is understandable that this may be a barrier that cannot be breached. However, if you do have enough support at home, I encourage you to move forward, as it is likely an experience you won't regret, despite your anxieties of leaving home for a period.

I was fortunate enough to have a strong support group. I am married with children, but my wife encouraged me to take this rare opportunity. With extensive planning and a lot of help from our families, we were able to accommodate for my six-week absence. We were even able to arrange for her to meet me in Paris and spend a week with me in Europe! It is also worth noting that my wife has a full-time job. Luckily, we were able to count on additional family members for support (some close by, others came to stay for several days to a week at a time to help).

Finally, funding may be another major concern for those of you considering the program. Only you know your financial limitations, and a trip like this is unfortunately not cheap. You will be expected to pay for tuition as well as any traveling expenses including lodging, food, transportation, or anything else that you may need for the duration of your trip. However, financial aid is available, so make sure to investigate all of your options before making a decision.

Assuming that you are a non-traditional student and are at least committed to either a family or a profession (or both); you are likely anxious about removing yourself from your home environment and traveling alone to another country away from these familiar elements. The most challenging obstacle for me was saying goodbye to my wife and children for six weeks. I had planned the trip for a while in

advance, but as it approached a week or two away, I began to panic. However, everything was set in motion and I told myself that it was necessary to follow through. Once I passed through security and headed to my departure gate, I decided rather than thinking about what I was leaving behind, I would focus my attention on the logistics of my trip: getting from the Paris airport to the fast-train to Nantes, and finally to my residence. This was perhaps the most important coping method that I found during my absence. Avoid guilt and loneliness and instead engross yourself in new culture, new foods, and particularly appreciate the independence that you will have that you likely have learned to live without. Despite the sadness that I felt as a father, after I learned to let go of the guilt of being away I truly began to appreciate the time that I had to myself to explore and reflect that I had not experienced in years.

The first week or two was very difficult for me to adjust. I was not accustomed to starting my day with only myself to consider. It was both frustrating and refreshing. I was not familiar with any of the other students participating in the program, and rather than choosing to stay with a host family, I took residence in a student housing facility. However, through the first week of classes, I familiarized myself with several students who I spent time with exploring the area and quickly developed several new friendships. At home, it is difficult for me to establish or maintain social relationships due to my limited disposable time; but while living alone in Nantes without my usual responsibilities, I found that I was able to relate to many younger students and tried to take advantage of that freedom knowing that it would only be briefly available.

Regarding the choice in living arrangements, I encourage you to consider what situation you would most likely benefit from. I initially intended to stay with a host family, as this offered the opportunity to truly participate in everyday French culture as well as guidance for familiarizing yourself in the area. However, in the end I chose to stay at the student residence as this offered me the flexibility that I am not normally used to having, as well as the freedom to Skype with my family as often as or at any time that I chose rather than having to consider my host family's schedule or computer usage preferences. While I feel that I missed out on the bond that many of the other students had with their families (as well as home-cooked meals), I was happy with my decision as I frequently observed students having to report home for dinner, consider host family curfews, or being limited to how much time and when they could use the internet/phone.

Making the decision to participate in a study abroad program can be challenging and involves many elements of consideration: family, work, finances, travel, and cultural and educational expectations. In a new country, there will be many direct and subtle cultural differences that you will face. Combined with trying to adapt to life away from home, this can seem overwhelming at first. However, with the right attitude and appreciation for your new home, you can recalibrate and possibly even begin to function as if you were a local yourself.

By the end of the six weeks, I felt very much at home in Nantes. I had many friends and even several local spots that I became a regular at. Though during the first week I struggled to adjust, by the end of the trip I actually was saddened to say goodbye to France. Of course returning to CVG and seeing my family was a long-anticipated and amazing moment. However, there was some readjusting that I had to overcome upon my return. From transportation to etiquette, I found that I missed certain aspects of life

overseas. It has now been roughly six months since my trip, and I often find myself missing my student apartment (and neighbors), a particular restaurant, or once-familiar faces. I sometimes think that I would like to have had just one more week to explore more, experience more (or sleep more!).

When trying to decide if I was capable of leaving my home for six weeks, my wife told me something very simple, seemingly obvious, yet extremely significant. "You will likely never have this opportunity again, and should you choose not to go, you will always wonder what you may have missed out on." She was right. I am thankful that I decided to follow through and explore an exciting life unknown. As a non-traditional student, you will realize that you are taking part in something that most people in your situation will likely never have an opportunity to do. In addition to the knowledge that you will receive from your studies, you will also learn a lot about a new culture through living it, and possibly even learn a few new things about yourself. I encourage anyone that can make this journey a feasibility to learn more and consider enrolling in this excellent and rewarding program.