

Foreign exchange: Adventure is study-abroad program's main currency

BY PAUL R. HUARD
Copley News Service

At a time when many Americans fear terrorists, foreign exchange programs remain popular options for high school and college students.

What draws both parents and youngsters to these programs is the chance to visit another country, learn a new language and culture, and add "polish" to an education that only studying abroad can produce.

According to the Association of International Educators, a nonprofit U.S. group that promotes and monitors overseas study programs, participation in programs remains brisk even after Sept. 11.

Last year, more than

154,000 American students studied abroad, a 7.4 percent increase from the previous year. During the past five years, the number of U.S. students who studied abroad for academic credit increased by 55 percent. Western Europe is still the preferred destination for American students, attracting more than 60 percent of those who studied abroad last year.

Giving your student the chance to go abroad has a supporter in Secretary of State Colin Powell. Powell declared his support for foreign exchange programs, saying the experience will help Americans understand the world in which they live.

"People-to-people diplomacy, created through international education and exchanges, is critical to our

national interests," Powell said during a speech in August 2002. "Americans who study abroad expand their global perspective and become more internationally engaged."

Foreign exchange programs abound. If interested, your first stop should be your child's school. Both public and private schools often have someone who is familiar with foreign study programs. Many even have a formal "foreign studies" office that can help you search for information.

Two online clearinghouses for programs are www.studyabroad.com and www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com. Both provide excellent search engines for identifying programs by location, length of



CNS Photo/Charlie Neuman

Middle-school students Sarah Marsh and Caitlin Hartney look at photos they took while participating in a foreign exchange program in Australia. More than 154,000 American students taking part in foreign programs last year.

stay, purpose and cost.

The next step is to start asking questions. The Study Abroad program of the University of Georgia suggests that anyone considering a foreign exchange program needs to ask the following:

■ **Why do you want to study abroad?** Do you want to immerse yourself in a foreign culture, develop foreign language skills, travel, have a good time, or a little of each?

Some programs are more academically challenging than others. Some offer many excursions included in the price, others none. An exchange program will offer a high degree of cultural immersion and a greater possibility of developing foreign language skills (also possible in a longer study-abroad program). A shorter study-abroad program will give you a taste of a country and help you brush up on a foreign language.

■ **How much, and what kind, of structure and support will the program provide?** Many "study abroad" programs involve a group of students and teachers traveling with a program director. These programs provide a high level of support. Travel arrangements and excursions are often arranged by the director and included in the program cost. Housing and meal arrangements are also frequently included in

the cost and arranged by the director.

This type of program may be good for someone going abroad for the first time. "Exchange" programs give less support but a higher degree of cultural immersion. While arrangements for your housing, meals and course registration will usually be made by the international education office of the school you will be attending, there may be less support than in a study-abroad program. Excursions are usually not included, and you will often be one of a small number of U.S. students at the university you attend.

This gives you an excellent opportunity to meet both students from the host country and other international students and form cross-cultural friendships, but does require a more independent and adventurous spirit.

■ **Do you want to study in an English-speaking program?** If you do not speak a foreign language, it does not mean that you have to study in an English-speaking country. Many programs offer classes in English in non-English-speaking countries.

■ **What are the costs of a study-abroad program?** Costs for study-abroad programs may appear high, but if you add up tuition and fees, housing costs, meals and entertainment at home, you will find that many programs come out to about the same

price, with the added cost of a plane ticket. —

■ **Are short-term or summer programs less expensive?** While short-term programs may appear less expensive, the daily cost is actually much higher than that of semester or longer programs.

■ **Where do you want to live while abroad?** Most programs do not offer a wide range of housing options and each housing option has its pros and cons.

"Home stays" will allow the greatest amount of cultural immersion, the opportunity to practice a foreign language and, frequently, home-cooked meals. However, staying in someone else's home will require a certain amount of flexibility on your part and you will need to adjust to the habits of your host family. Students can not always expect a "typical" family.


Residence halls, if shared with people from the host country, are an excellent opportunity to meet many people your own age from the host country.

However, in many non-English-speaking countries, residence halls, when available, are often populated primarily by international students.

If you are looking for cultural immersion, make sure you will not be in a hall full of students from the United States.

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