

MEANINGFUL TRAVEL TIPS AND TALES

AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES



An Initiative to Make Travel More Inclusive



TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Note From GoAbroad.....	3
OurContributors.....	4
Study Abroad	
Studying Abroad While Black: the Good, the Bad, the Weird.....	5
Scholarships for African American Students.....	9
Don't Take Our Word For It: Travel Program Testimonials.....	12
Study Abroad Beauty Tips for Black Girls.....	13
Teach Abroad	
Tips for Teaching Your Black Culture in the ESL Classroom.....	17
Lessons Learned	
The Lessons I Learned Learned Living in Europe.....	20
The Lessons I Learned Working In Africa.....	23
Questions & Comments.....	26

WHY WE CREATED THIS BOOK FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN TRAVELERS

A NOTE FROM GOABROAD



Only about [5.6 percent of U.S. students studying abroad are African American](#). We want to change that. This guide is part of a push for inclusivity in travel and international education.

Accessibility is an issue for most students who want to study, intern, teach, or volunteer abroad, but don't have the resources to do so. Beyond just financial resources, if students can't see themselves in the stories, articles, and blog posts, written by alumni, going abroad won't seem like a viable option. In a field centered around diversity and cultural exchange, this is a shame. Our contributors, as members of the GoAbroad Diversity Squad, are sharing their personal stories and travel expertise in order to change that.

More and more, studying, interning, working, and teaching abroad is becoming somewhat of a standard endeavor of college students and recent graduates; this guide was created to help ensure that African American students have all the resources they need to participate in these experiences safely, happily, and successfully. Everyone deserves the opportunity to travel, and GoAbroad is dedicated to providing every African American student, and every student for that matter, with the tools, knowledge, and confidence they need to do so.

This is an open book (pun intended). It will continue to grow as we share more stories and add more voices.

Interested in joining this initiative? [Partner with us!](#)

OUR CONTRIBUTORS



Karl Gourgue discovered his love for travel early on. Now a junior at the Stern School of Business, he has taken his business studies to more than 25 countries around the world. He has studied for semesters at NYU Prague and HEC Paris, and has completed internships in New York, Prague, and Shenzhen in fields ranging from education to manufacturing.



Kerry McLean is a human rights lawyer from the US. She has lived in countries in Asia, Africa and Europe, and traveled to more than 40 countries around the world.



Nathan Thadani is a Japanese, Indian, Black American from Oakland, CA. Growing up in the Bay Area, he was exposed to different cultures from a young age which naturally sparked his interest in exploring and immersing himself through out different parts of the world.



Alicia Harris is from Sacramento, California. She recently graduated with honors from the illustrious and historic Alabama State University. Going to Argentina was her first time going abroad to work. After networking in Argentina, she landed a job taking pictures of a famous clothing line called Ginebra. Before heading off to Argentina, Alicia worked in play production, sports production at her university, and on multiple independent film projects.



← This could be you! Want to share your own travel tips and tales? [Give us a shout!](#)

STUDYING ABROAD WHILE BLACK:

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE WEIRD

by Karl Gorgue

In January 2015, I got on a plane at JFK in New York and flew across to the ocean to Denmark. For the next twelve consecutive months, I didn't go more than three weeks without hopping on a plane, train, or boat. I explored the corners of Europe from Greece to Iceland, Portugal to Serbia. I ventured into Turkey and Ukraine and spent a week in the United Arab Emirates in between. I spent months working in and traveling through China. My journey was a bit unusual, but I never really considered myself anything other than a typical American student/traveler looking to see what's out there.

It didn't take long for me to realize that I'm unmistakably and unequivocally black. Living out of the country long-term for the first time, I noticed distinct behavior that was unfamiliar to me. I found myself nodding at random black strangers I'd never seen before (for more on this, look up "The Nod," or "The Negro Nod," or "The Black Head Nod"). It was like an acknowledgement of ethnic solidarity.

In the U.S., black people are a strong minority. Anyone who grew up outside a predominately black community can tell you that. Traveling to other countries was, quite literally, a different world. Looking back, I never actually saw another black person in the following countries: Denmark, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Poland, Serbia, Italy, Ukraine, Turkey, Sweden, Finland. From my home in Prague, I might've seen one other black traveler once a week at most. **My ability to stick out in a crowd wasn't the focal point of my trips, but it was definitely something that stuck out to me.**

THE GOOD

Dark skin is weird. Relatively, I mean. Asian countries were probably the places where I stood out the most, but it was amazing to see how out of place I could feel. That being said, reactions to my seemingly-unusual skin color were often positive.

The fact is, people are honestly curious about things that are different. When people approached me with that kind of curious mindset, it actually made a lot of things easier. I found myself easily striking conversations with strangers (even if we didn't speak the same language). **Something about the physical appearance of being black makes people you meet want to understand you.** They're normally curious about things like your home and occupation, but I found that people would be extra curious around me.

People in China were actually willing to pay money to get pictures with me. While I decided against launching a career as a token black model, I was able to leverage that power to make connections. Some guys I met at a conference in Finland told me I looked a lot like James Harden and asked for a picture. If that's not a great opportunity to network, I don't know what is. Whether hanging out in clubs in Shenzhen or solo-exploring the parks of Istanbul, I took advantage of people approaching me to nab freebies, personal recommendations, and new friends.

THE BAD

I'm really into big cities. Some of my favorite memories in life are taking aimless walks about big cities, just to disappear into the crowds and get lost. On my first day walking around Shenzhen, I went to KK100 (the 14th tallest building in the world) and couldn't shake the feeling that this guy was staring at me.

"The fact is, people are honestly curious about things that are different. When people approached me with that kind of curious mindset, it actually made a lot of things easier."

I looked him in the eye for a few seconds and he burst into a smile, waved, and then walked away. Little did I know this was the start of long summer of strange behavior. I traveled to nearly a dozen cities in China and couldn't escape the onslaught of pictures and videos. After we got off a train in Guilin, a man put his ~5 year old daughter in my arms as I wasn't looking. That guy probably has the single most awkward photo of me ever taken.

Declining pictures in Chinese ("búyào", which means "don't want") became a daily activity, often punctuated by vigorous head-shaking and me walking away. The behavior was more than reasonable. If I saw someone with green skin walking through New York's East Village right now, I'd be pretty shocked too. That being said, **it didn't feel good being a black face in a differently-colored crowd. It felt at best annoying and at worst invasive.**

It could be tough, too.

Some things were pretty serious - friends with experience studying in Shanghai were advised to avoid skin products in China, as many of them contained skin-whitening chemicals (that's a hard "búyào" from me).



THE WEIRD

I got recruited for my office basketball team on my first day of work in China. I get James Harden comparisons in a surprising number of countries. In Vietnam and Greece, I was offered drinks at a bar by other black travelers. Both times the person started with, "Hey, you're black right?"

Honestly, sometimes being black creates bizarre moments. I have a friend who once got separated from our group because a few intoxicated American girls saw his skin, guessed that he was from the US too, and forced him to help them get home. These are the kind of moments I live for.

Travel is great because it's weird. Climbing a mountain in a foreign country or going for a walk on the streets of a famous city are cool, but they're too typical. What's unique about time you walked around London or Dubai? What makes travel great is when it gets weird. You're left with nothing but a memory that's entirely your own. That memory is what inspires you to think deeply about the country and its culture.

I know the NBA is big in China, but after my coworkers recruited me we had a full conversation about how much basketball they watch. People approached me with Harden comparisons, but I was able to use that to get to know them. Oftentimes free drinks turn into new contacts and social media connects. My Twitter and Snapchat feeds are full of friends from abroad indirectly exposing me to their culture.

THE BAD...CONTINUED

I actually only got one haircut in Paris during my four month stay in France because most of the barbers I talked to openly admitted to not knowing how to cut afro hair. I would've asked for a recommendation from a friend, but I don't have any black friends that have ever lived in Paris and there weren't many black students at my school (I actually never saw more than 5 in the student body of 4,000).

While these things seem small, I think they're incredibly isolating in totality. I had fun in France for sure, but there were more than a few moments where I felt more alone because I was black. In Asian countries, it's hard to understand (coming from the U.S./the West) why people go to such extreme lengths to keep their skin as white as possible. Given the lack of black travelers as it is, a lot of these small things shape your perspective of the world. I remember China as the country where people stared at me too much, but because of that I see Vietnam and Taiwan as places where people didn't bother me.



"Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise."
- Alice Malsenior Walker

DISCOVERING MY OWN CULTURE

I feel like I've gone to significant lengths to understand the cultures around me without ever stopping to understand my own. I understand the links between our general American culture and its roots in Europe. I can tell you a surprising amount about the strange politics of Hong Kong and mainland China, or the political history of the Czech Republic. I talked to Israelis and Palestinians about the root of the conflict there, and I spoke with migrant workers in Abu Dhabi about why they've left home. I had late-night conversations with Finnish entrepreneurs in Helsinki. I even once traveled to Ecuador to gain immense appreciation for the relationship being built between indigenous and modern people.

Despite all that, I couldn't tell you much about why Nigeria's population is increasing at a ridiculous rate. I'm not really sure what the connection is between black fashion in America and its roots in Africa. Why is South Africa so good at rugby? I have no idea. **The only thing I really learned about black culture is how much I don't know.**

I don't regret going to the places I've gone. It's an incredible feeling talking to someone from a foreign country and being able to understand something about their culture. It's not as great to reflect that you're as far from understanding your own roots as you were when you started. I feel incredibly confident in my ability to understand others, but I question my own ability to understand my own ethnic background.

In the end, I think I came away with a better understanding of what black culture is and isn't. After having to try and explain something that's hard to understand in the first place, **I realized that being black is having a culture within a culture.** It's a way of speaking, dancing, or just thinking. It's more than just being American, but it's less than just being human. I spent a lot of time learning more about myself just from getting a better perspective of what I'm not. Maybe I'm black-er than I thought I was.

Maybe I'm just a James Harden-esque figure traveling the world in search of a good haircut.

5 STUDY ABROAD SCHOLARSHIPS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

by Nathan Thadani

Going overseas to an entirely new environment can be a daunting task no matter what type of cultural background a student is coming from, but especially as an African-American student, which as an underrepresented group can be a nerve wrecking experience at first thought.

I remember when I first thought about studying abroad back in my junior year of college. **I had always wanted to study abroad in Europe, but after discussing the finances required with my college advisor at the time, I thought it would be impossible.** I couldn't believe how expensive some of these programs were. I was fortunate enough to find the correct resources and scholarships to fund my experience abroad and I want to help pass along this info to other African-American and minority students.

Although there are a ton of programs and scholarships out there to promote study abroad, there aren't a ton geared toward African-American and other minority students. The programs listed below all have the common goal of promoting diversity amongst study abroad participants through offered scholarships.

1 The Fund for Education Abroad (FEA Scholarships)

The Fund for Education Abroad (FEA Scholarships) was established in 2010 to help independent study abroad programs. Since then, they have sent roughly 100 students abroad from all over the United States. Applicants should be participating in an academically rigorous and immersive study abroad program that ideally includes a language component. FEA offers Dedicated Scholarships to applicants that meet general eligibility requirements and fit specific demographic, regional, or semester criteria.

Award Amount: Up to \$10,000 per year (\$5,000 per semester)

Application Deadline: Cycle of applications accepted annually in the fall, check their website for the most up-to-date info.

Eligibility Requirements:

- U.S. citizen or permanent resident of the U.S.
- Currently enrolled as an undergraduate at a college or university in the U.S. (graduate students are not eligible)
- Study abroad program must be eligible for credit at the student's educational institution
- Study abroad program must be at least four weeks long (30 days)

2 Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program

This scholarship is not only geared toward African-American students, but all students of limited financial means to pursue academic studies abroad. While most students from the U.S. end up choosing countries in Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand for their study abroad destination, this scholarship encourages students to choose more challenging locations. The Gilman scholarship program supports students who traditionally have been underrepresented in study abroad, including, but not limited to, students with high financial need, community college students, students in underrepresented fields such as the sciences and engineering, students with diverse ethnic backgrounds, and students with disabilities.

Award Amount: \$5,000

Application Deadline: Depends on when student chooses to go abroad

Eligibility Requirements:

- U.S. citizen or permanent resident of the U.S.
- Good academic standing as undergraduate student (both four-year and two-year institutions are acceptable)
- Must receive a Federal Pell Grant during the term abroad
- Must be in the process of applying to, or accepted for, a study abroad or internship program of at least two weeks for community college students and four weeks for students from four-year institutions, in a single country and eligible for credit from the student's home institution

3 API Diversity Scholarship

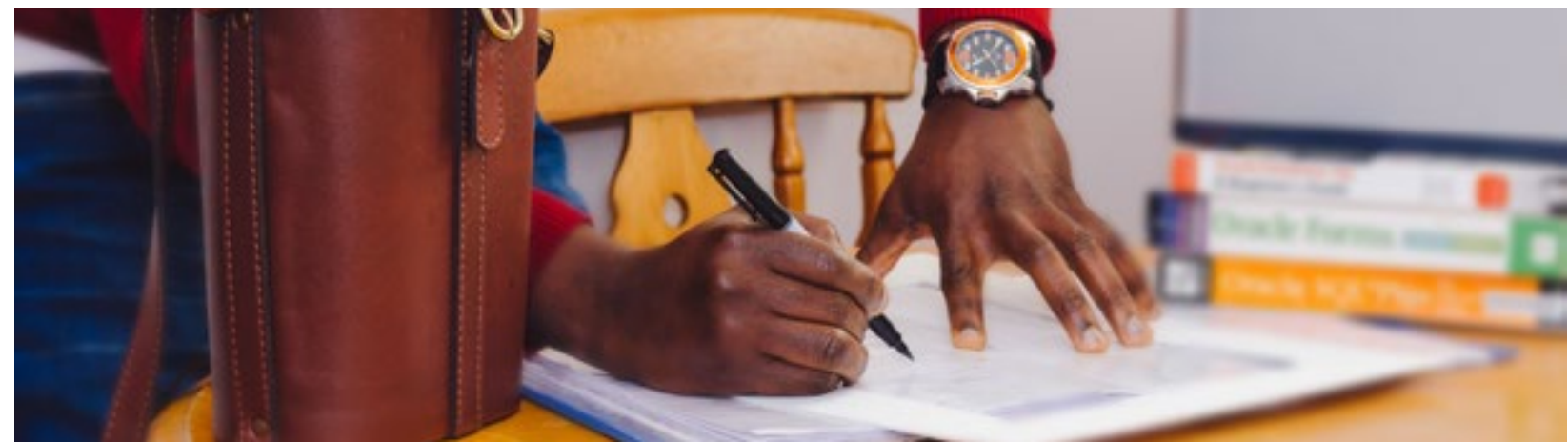
API's diversity scholarship seeks to support participants from a variety of backgrounds. It provides the opportunity for students with traditionally marginalized identities to study abroad. API awards up to \$500,000 to students annually ranging from \$250-1,000 per student. Students are encouraged to apply for multiple API scholarships in addition to outside scholarships, however, in order to maximize the number of students receiving financial aid, API's total contribution cannot exceed \$1,000 per student (so read this list thoroughly and get going on all those applications).

Award Amount: \$250 to \$750

Application Deadline: Depends on when student chooses to go abroad

Eligibility Requirements:

- Minority students, U.S. military veterans, non-traditional students (30 years old or older), students with a disability, and/or LGBTQ students
- Participant in an API program



4 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Scholarships

This scholarship was created with the intent of sending students from a HBCU abroad with IES programs. Students awarded this scholarship will need to take stock of their time abroad in order to complete additional return requirements. At the end of your program abroad with IES, students submit a one-page reflection paper about how it affected you personally, professionally, and academically and how this scholarship supported your endeavors.

Award Amount: \$2,000 including \$1,500 toward the program and \$500 toward airline ticket

Deadline: November, annually

Eligibility Requirements:

- Open to students who attend an HBCU that is a Member or Associate member of the IES Abroad consortium and that transfers at least 75 percent of home school aid to IES Abroad.

5 David Porter Need-Based Diversity Scholarship

The David Porter Need-Based Diversity Scholarship was created to give minority students the opportunity of studying abroad. This scholarship, also affiliated with IES Abroad, was named in honor of David Porter from the IES Board of Directors. It seeks to provide opportunity to groups traditionally underrepresented in study abroad and international education.

Award Amount: \$5,000 off the IES Abroad program fee

Application Deadline: May 1 (Fall/Academic Year), November 1 (Spring/Calendar Year)

Eligibility Requirements:

- Recipients must attend a private college or university that is a Member or Associate Member of the IES Abroad Consortium. In addition, your home school must have a policy of transferring at least 75 percent of institutional aid for study abroad.

Once you've narrowed your own list down, I'd recommend looking over a few guidelines to make sure you're submitting an application they simply can't refuse.

There's no greater experience than studying and traveling abroad. I encourage you to apply for the scholarships listed above and to do thorough research; really put your all into each application. **It's a beautiful world out there that you can learn a whole lot from.**

To find more Scholarships visit the GoAbroad [Study Abroad Scholarship Directory](#)

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT: TRAVEL PROGRAM TESTIMONIALS

“ How I was viewed truly made my experience unique. Being a black woman is something I was proud of before studying abroad, and traveling to Costa Rica made my pride even stronger. **The people of Costa Rica viewed me as something unique and beautiful because of my skin.** The constant adoration and appreciation was positively overwhelming and truly helped me to embrace the diversity that I represented.

-Brittany Beene,
CIS Abroad



“ The overall experience of being completely uncomfortable and being fine with that. Being in China, you stand out like a sore thumb and everyone knows it, but that's a part of the experience. **You learn to be fine with being different and still love most days.**

-Deshawn Peterson,
Mandarin Spring
Language Schools

“ My program abroad has impacted me by learning from others who look and live differently than me. **I learned to suspend my American ego and enjoy a different life.** My program has impacted me by destroying some of the prejudices I had that were taught to me through my environment that I didn't realize I had picked up until I got to Buenos Aires, Argentina. The people softened my heart. I will never forget this place.

-Alicia Harris,
Connect-123 Internships

STUDY ABROAD BEAUTY TIPS FOR BLACK GIRLS

by Alicia Harris



Okay, ladies! You've got this amazing opportunity to travel abroad and now you are thinking about all the things you will need to bring with you on your trip whether it is clothes, shoes, hygiene products etc.

Hold up! Are you feeling unsure of or hesitant about bringing your precious hair, makeup, and skin products in an effort to pack light and save room for souvenirs? Are you nervous to travel with the products, scared they won't travel well, or pass the begrudged customs wall? If you're anything like me, you'd almost be willing to let these setbacks become a deal breaker from signing up for a program.

But, I'm here to tell you that it's not necessary to fear studying, volunteering, teaching, or interning abroad for the lack of familiar beauty products. In fact, this would be an intense sacrifice for your precious serum. So instead of throwing in the towel, just commit to packing SMART.

While your efforts to pack light are valiant (good on you) and there are some necessary rules to keep in mind with packing, you might need to go back to the drawing board. Even though beautiful, dark skinned people (like you!) live in many places in the world, they don't live in all the places in the world.

Read on for hair, makeup, and skin care tips from one black girl who has been abroad to black girls going abroad.

A Beauty Horror Story

I was in Buenos Aires, Argentina for about two months for an internship and I ran out of foundation [gasp!] - I needed some badly. I generally don't mind not wearing makeup, but I felt I was more presentable to clients on the job when I looked a bit more polished. Anyway, there's no makeup for women of color because there are barely any women of color in Argentina, so I was out luck. But the worst was yet to come.

Further, my hair has been natural and chemically free for about 4 years, but before I even arrived in Argentina, I had my hair put in a protective style (I put my hair in braids and added extensions, so that when I got to my destination I wouldn't be worried about doing my hair all the time). I was worried about my new environment stripping my moisturized hair dry, so I thought this was a smart step prior to travel.

Unfortunately, my luck ran super thin and **I ran out of the hair extensions** that I was using!

To the rescue - another American volunteer's mother was coming to visit her the next week, so I asked (no, begged!) her to pick up some makeup and hair extensions for me at her local beauty supply. The heavens parted and she said yes, and I knew my days of nappy hair and blotchy skin would soon be behind me. Picture my face when she brought me my much-needed bag of goodies!

The moral of the story: if you don't want to go through all that beauty hassle (stress lines are real, people), just bring the stuff you need with you so you don't run around a country you hardly know looking for things they may not have.

Girl, Do Your Research

It's always a good idea to research the country that you are going to, whether it is the people, culture, mannerisms, and food. But you also need to take it a step further. In order to avoid basic beauty blunders while studying abroad, you need to research the season, the climate, and your shopping options in the country you're headed to.

For instance, you're going to want to know if you're studying in Xi'an, China but the only black beauty store is in Shanghai. Try to know what stores will be within reach. It's pretty likely that some countries don't even have the hair, makeup, or skin products that you're used to - so better to plan ahead and pack right than to end up in a pickle like I did...

The Perks of a Protective Hair Style

If you're headed to a very cold area, it's good to keep your hair in a protective style (natural or permed hair) to protect the ends. I brought Jamaican castor oil, spray conditioner, and hair grease to put in the scalp of my hair, even when my hair was in extensions. I really wanted to make sure my hair was growing healthily underneath my French braids.

In order to style my hair, I brought an eco-styler gel to help the edges of my hair stay in place (not an easy task considering I was taking the train back and forth to work - sometimes I'd barely make it, which would result in my hair being crazy!).

When I took my extensions out, I co-washed and conditioned my hair and wore my fro out. Otherwise, I used the eco-gel to (gently) force my hair down. I used a sock (yup, an everyday sock!) to make the perfect bun until I put my extensions back in with fresh packs.

Hair Straightening + Travel: A Winning Combo?

If you straighten your hair using perms, I would **highly** suggest bringing the perm with you, especially if you do it yourself anyway. Otherwise, you should think about putting your hair in braids instead. Ghana Braids, singles, the Senegalese twist, or the Marley twist are all great options. Be forewarned if you opt to stick with the perm - you might be disappointed and put into a **hair-raising** situation you don't wanna be in.

There's only one word your hair ever needs to know: hydration! Whether you're permed or not, protective hairstyles are convenient while you're abroad. I wore my hair in crochet braids for 3 months before I actually did it again and the second time it lasted for 4 months. I went through my 7 month journey in South America without any issues after my mini crises in Argentina.

The Skinny on Skin Care Products

Although basic skin-care needs are the same for everyone, there are some issues that darker skin tones are more likely to experience, whether at home or abroad. Our increased levels of melanin mean we need to be more cautious about dealing with acne or ingrown hairs. And remember: being ashy is nobody's friend.

I brought Vaseline and Hemp Lotion with me so my skin would stay super moisturized. Plus, the Vaseline kept unwanted bugs away - really important if you're going into areas home to a lot of mosquitoes or gnats.

Bring sunscreen with you from home - they'll usually have it abroad, but it could be twice as expensive and harder to come by than you'd think.

In Short: Pack Smart

Bring all of your preferred hair, makeup, and skin products with you. It would be smart to bring two of everything with you so you don't run out (can you imagine being without your precious Miss Jessie's baby butter cream?!). Pro tip: make sure to put any of your liquid-based products in your checked luggage, lest you find yourself bargaining with customs officer over Madame C.J. Walker.

Assume nothing and you won't be left out to dry without your beloved products.

You Look Great!

Even if your hair gets a mess or your skin decides to flare up, that's not what your study abroad experience is really about, anyway. It's more about interacting with locals, pushing yourself past your limits and out of your comfort zone (Ding ding ding! This includes feeling comfortable without your "creature comforts" aka beauty products), and having an incredible learning experience. Just know that your outward beauty is one manifestation of yourself, and not the most important one by far. **So put on a smile, walk out the door, and go see what this beautiful world has to offer you.**

PACKING LIST FOR BLACK GIRLS ABROAD

- HAIR BANDS/TIES
- ECO-STYLER GEL
- HAIR EXTENSIONS
- SHAMPOO AND CONDITIONER (ESPECIALLY DRY SHAMPOO!)
- OIL/HAIR GREASE
- SKIN CARE PRODUCTS (SUCH AS AMBI OR RX FOR DARK SKIN)
- HAIR SPRAY
- LOTION
- VASELINE/COCO BUTTER
- HAIR PERM PRODUCTS
- MAKEUP (ESPECIALLY FOUNDATION)
- HAIR ROLLERS
- SOCK BUN

4 TIPS FOR TEACHING YOUR BLACK CULTURE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

by Karl Gorgue

How exactly are you supposed to summarize hundreds of years of culture into a three minute answer to one question? As a 19-year-old teaching an ESL class in Prague, I learned the hard way that culture can't really be explained that simply. I decided to start with the basics - slang.

I was teaching a class of students from a local university, some of whom had already conquered two or three languages. After a few weeks of trying to figure out how much English they knew, I started to realize that they needed help with more advanced topics. Many students were confused by certain words, and they didn't understand the context behind the words. Unlike me, they didn't grow up witnessing the effect black culture had on the English language.

What started with trying to explain what "swag" is turned into a conversation on dance crazes, which turned into a conversation on pop culture, which turned into a conversation on social media. I mean how can you explain "bae" without explaining the prevalence of black twitter and it's impact on how we speak? More importantly, how can I teach my students to keep up with the times and quickly learn new, culturally relevant words?

Problem 1: The old "give a man a fish/teach a man to fish" problem. I can easily spit out meanings for words that aren't clear or were introduced recently, but that wouldn't help the root issue. The English language moves quick, and to speak English with young people especially you need to understand the culture.

Problem 2: You can't understand culture without knowing the proper channels. Czech social media is a bit different compared to usage in the U.S., and the difference was effectively killing my students ability to see black culture for what it is - a little bit goofy, a little too harsh, and extremely hilarious.

Teaching that is freaking hard. Here are four ways to make it a little easier:

1 Test the Waters with Popular Media

Explaining black culture is a big task, and it's best to start small. Show a viral video or something that may not make sense to someone learning English, and then work on explaining that first. Try to identify what is and isn't making sense right off the bat.

Rather than feeling lost, your students should feel more like they're already beginning to understand. Not to mention seeing one thing should make them interested to see more. Engaging curiosity is important because you'll need to keep people interested until you get to more serious topics.

2 Make Them Laugh

Black people are hilarious like no one else. There's something hard hitting and too real about black humor that makes you either laugh hard or cringe. See Larry Wilmore's [first 30 seconds at the Correspondents Dinner](#) for an example.

This is actually an easy thing to show in many parts of the world. While the social dynamics may not be clear, the raw nature of humor is much more familiar.

From an international perspective, American humor is often softer and more politically correct. I noticed when traveling in certain places (the Czech Republic and France, among others) that the idea of jokes being a little offensive was commonplace.

3 Get Real For a Minute

Now that you've gone through viral media and humor, it's important to discuss the "cut directly-to-the-chase" nature of black culture. Maybe it was the history of slavery and social inequality in America that did it, but something gave black people to ability to be particularly unrelenting in their speech.

This kind of information doesn't change the way you interact with black people, but it helps understand the meaning behind a lot of issues and causes that come out of black culture. Being black is a lifestyle as much as it is a culture. It is a way of thinking as much as it is a point of pride. No lesson on black culture is complete without understanding this.

4 Go Deep in Pop Culture

Black culture makes the English language difficult because it's hard to keep up. The reason it's so easy for us (black or not) is because we're exposed to a ridiculous amount of black culture in our daily lives. It's impossible to escape. Whether it's Betty White dabbing at the Superbowl or seeing Black Lives Matter put on a new political stage, black culture is pervasive element in our culture and language.

The problem for ESL learners is a lack of exposure. A great way to help students is by sharing the ways that you hear about new trends and changes in language. Show them interesting accounts or Twitter or introduce them to the strange world of Vine. I once had high school students in France ask me about the use of the word "tho" because they kept coming across it on Twitter. Situations like these are much easier than having to introduce new vernacular without context.

Applying Knowledge

Working with students who were already pretty good with English, I learned that **teaching culture takes time even for the best ESL students.** Explaining where stereotypes come from isn't easy, and lessons could easily be derailed by just a few questions about black culture.

That being said, I don't think it was a bad thing. Going abroad helped me learn more about my culture than I could have learned by staying home. I realized that black culture is more than just black people, and it's more than just music or social media. It's much more complex and dependent on other cultures. It feeds off of changes in population, and there's different subcultures within black culture. I've been black for 20 years and I still don't feel like I understand every single aspect of black culture. How can I expect students learning English to get it within a few minutes?

My students in Prague took a lot of this information as a way to learn more about American life overall, and it gave me the opportunity to learn more about Czech culture at the same time. All I know is that I wouldn't trade the challenge of trying to communicate black culture for anything.

If you think teaching ESL while black is going to be easy, you're flat out wrong. That being said, you're also in for a pretty special experience.



THE LESSONS I LEARNED LIVING IN EUROPE

by Kerry McLean

My first experience living away from my family in the U.S. was living in Europe for one summer when I was 18 years-old and trying to figure out what I wanted in life. That summer in Europe helped me to find out. I suppose that positive experience is why I've returned to Europe so many times since then, studying abroad in Spain, working in Hungary, and exploring more than a dozen countries in the western, central, northern, and eastern regions of the continent.

I have learned many things living in Europe. Here are some things that I think will be helpful to Black travelers in Europe:

Take a Picture, it Lasts Longer (Sometimes People Will...)

Be prepared for stares. In some European cities there are people that have never been in close proximity to a Black person. So they'll stare...and I do mean **stare**. Also, for some reason, Europeans seem to be more fascinated by Black women than Black men. It can be tiresome to always be the object of attention, but my advice? Make eye contact and smile. Some people might even want a photo with you, and you'll have to decide if you're cool with that or not. Some might call you Beyonce or Michelle Obama (I'm not kidding). You're a celebrity! Seriously, though, even if it makes you uncomfortable, taking the stares in stride will make life in Europe easier on **you**.

"Hello" and "thank you" are Important, But So are "Stop," and "Leave me alone"

Just like people will stare at you, some people (namely men) will feel entitled to touch you, your hair, your hand, your shoulders, or maybe even your waist. This isn't meant to scare travelers, or to discourage you from traveling, but it is a reality, especially for women traveling solo. While the definitions of "socially acceptable" and "personal space" may vary across cultures, that doesn't mean you shouldn't stand up for yourself when someone touches you without your consent. As travelers we all know the importance of learning "hello," and "thank you," as key phrases for interacting with locals in a new country, but we forget to learn "no," "stop," "leave me alone," or even how to call for help if the situation escalates. Arm yourself with these phrases before embarking on your adventure abroad.

Hate-Groups are Not a Thing of the Past

One big thing to prepare yourself for in Europe is the presence of neo-Nazis. Yep, they're around. I remember my summer in Switzerland, where I stayed at the home of my Swiss friend in Bern. I was heading out by myself one day and the neo-Nazi that lived in the building rode in the elevator with me. My friend had pointed him out to me before, but it was my first time alone with him. I was terrified, Fortunately, nothing happened. This will likely be the case for most travelers, but with [neo-nazi activity on the rise across Europe](#) this means a higher risk for hate crimes. It's important to be aware of your surroundings at all times, know how to contact proper authorities and your embassy, and put your personal safety first.

Packing Your Own Hair Products is Non-Negotiable

It might seem trivial, but trust me on this one. Ladies, bring your own hair care supplies! If you've got natural hair, this is a must. Those of us from the U.S. are used to having access to a range of great products made specifically for the hair of people of African descent, but that access is not available in most of Europe. You're welcome in advance.

You Have Privilege as an American Expat

An important thing that Black American travelers to Europe should keep in mind is that many Africans in Europe lead challenging lives. Living and traveling in Europe really helped me to understand this. Because I'm American, I can travel to virtually any place in the world, and have access to things that Black people from some other parts of the world do not. Africans in particular. When I lived in Spain for the first time, I discovered that many women from the African continent were living a very different experience in Spain than I was.

While I was in Madrid as a study abroad student, living with a kind señora (host mother), and having a ball with my classmates, large numbers of African women were being trafficked to Spain and many of those women were in Madrid.

Apart from trafficked African women, when I lived in Hungary and on numerous visits to France, I met many men and women living in those countries that did not have legal residence. This limited their options in terms of work and school. There were also those that had obtained legal residence, but faced discrimination when trying to find work.

I also have African friends in France who are lawyers, many African friends in Switzerland who work for the UN, and African friends in England in a range of professions. The fact remains, however, that Africans generally have difficulty obtaining a visa to enter most European countries, that African women and girls are targeted for trafficking to Europe and that many Africans living in Europe face discrimination because they are from a country on the African continent. So, even though we might look the same, we have very different experiences in Europe.

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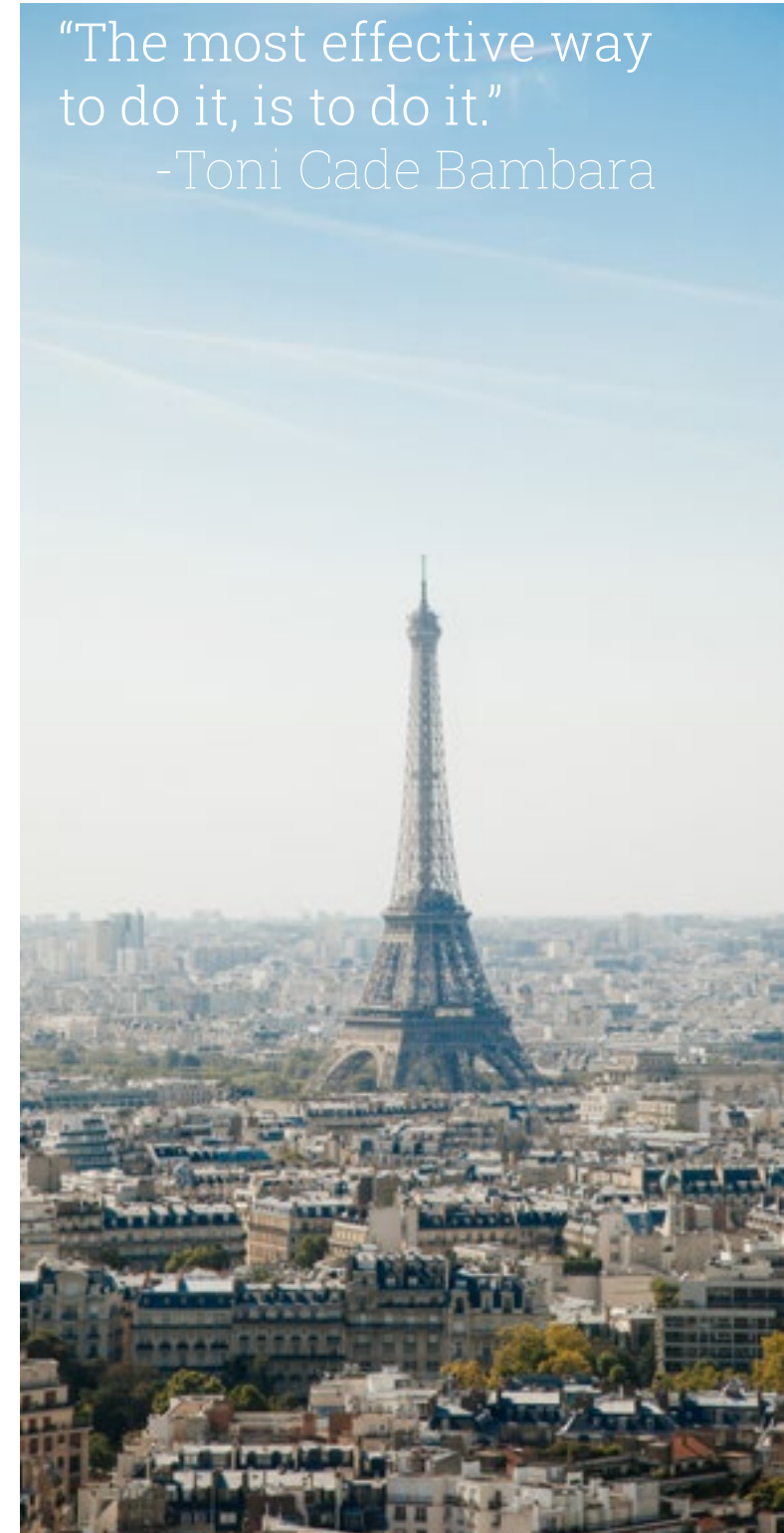
Your Travels Will Inspire You Long After You've Returned Home

Although the news reports had talked about African women being trafficked in Madrid while I studied abroad, it wasn't until I saw it with my own eyes that I believed it was even possible. I wasn't mentally prepared for it. My host mother and I were driving through a park and chatting, and suddenly ahead of us I saw many young Black women standing around. Some of them really only appeared to be girls, not even adult women. It was the largest number of Black women I'd ever seen in Madrid, so that was my initial surprise. Then, I noticed that they were all wearing very revealing clothing, stiletto heels and getting in and out of cars that pulled up beside them. I remember feeling as if I wanted to protect those young women and girls. It was that experience, as well as a similar experience in Portugal, that inspired me to do work on trafficking as a human rights lawyer, years later in Kenya.

I've been traveling in Europe for years now, and despite a few less than ideal experiences here and there, the continent still holds a lot of charm for me. In fact, I'm living in Europe again as I write this! I encourage Black travelers to see Europe. Go. Be prepared. **Take these lessons I've already learned and then learn a few more of your own.** Whether you holiday, study abroad or work abroad, I know Europe will charm you as well.

"The most effective way to do it, is to do it."

-Toni Cade Bambara



THE LESSONS I LEARNED WORKING IN AFRICA

by Kerry McLean

Africa is **not** a country. I've always known that, but it's very common for people to refer to Africa as if it is one country like the United States. **News flash:** Africa is a huge continent. **HUGE.** In fact, it's the second largest and second most populated continent on Earth. There are 54 countries on the African continent and while some may share similarities, and each country is unique in its languages (all 2,000 of them!), cultures, and traditions.

Because it's an incredibly diverse continent, your experiences will not be identical in every country, but I learned my fair share living and working in East, West, Central and southern Africa. Hopefully you can take my lessons learned and apply them to your time working in Africa- whether you're working as a teacher in Morocco, with NGOs in Kenya, or anywhere and everywhere in between.

"Hello," and "How are you?" Go a Long Way

If you need to speak to someone about something, whether it's the receptionist at work or making a transaction in a shop, I encourage you to say "hello" and maybe even "how are you?" **Don't just launch into asking for what you want. Otherwise, in many African countries, people will think that you are rude.** It matters. It can affect future interactions with that person. Also, be particularly respectful when you are speaking to older people.

What would be even more impressive is if you learn basic greetings in one of the local African languages. Try "hujambo" in Swahili, "sawubona" in Zulu or "as-salām 'alaykum" in Arabic.

You'll want to pack your faves.

If you're picky, like me, about which conditioner to use or what you wash your face with, bring your special toiletries from home. **You probably won't find your particular brands or products in the supermarkets in many African countries.** With medication, often you can find something similar in the pharmacies, but generally speaking I bring what I think I will need. When working abroad for long stretches of time I do try to visit home on occasion, but when I might not visit for 4 or 5 months I stock up on my favorite things.

Cultural Competence is EXTRA Important

When visiting Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt (more conservative cultures), I did not expose a lot of skin when dressing. Also, while living in Kenya, I discovered that women are expected to dress a bit more conservatively. They were not covered up to the extent that I had observed in north African countries, but you did not generally see Kenyan women in mini skirts or very revealing clothing. Locals would probably not be bothered by an obvious foreigner (i.e. a white person) in revealing clothes, but as a Black woman I was often mistaken to be Kenyan.

I still remember an incident when I was with two Kenyan friends. I was stunned when out of nowhere a strange man came right up to me and began shouting at me in Swahili. My Kenyan friends intervened quickly and told him that I was American, and then the man left me alone. They told me afterwards that the man was angry because I was wearing a short skirt. Before visiting a country, try to do as much research as possible about cultural norms.

Related: Work Etiquette Matters

In a work setting, **take note of what local colleagues wear.** When I worked in Liberia, there was one intern from Europe that wore clothes to work that my Liberian colleagues (law professors and judges) perceived to be unprofessional. They often talked about his clothes and did not take him seriously. Don't be that guy/gal!

Related: Check Your Preconceived Notions of Religion and Culture at the Door

Being culturally sensitive also pertains to religion and local traditions. I have cringed when I've been in shops or restaurants in some countries and heard tourists or expats loudly saying critical things about the local culture or religion. If welcomed as a guest into a foreign country, show the people of the country that you respect their way of life.

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Cultural Immersion is Both Fun AND Tasty

In my opinion, all over the African continent the food is full of flavor and simply amazing. Food that is cooked will be generally safe to consume, though there is always a difference in food safety between eating from a street vendor and eating in a restaurant. Expect there to be lots of chicken, beef, goat, pork and fish. In certain areas, usually in more rural areas, you will encounter gamier meat. There are lots and lots of wonderful fresh fruit and vegetables. Keep in mind, in most African countries the tap water is not safe for consumption, and take care in eating uncooked vegetables or fruit if you did not prepare it yourself, or if you bought it straight from a street vendor.

The music is amazing in so many African countries, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana. Great instruments, great beats, and so many people that seem to have the gift of song and dance. **Your visit to the continent is not complete until you lose yourself to the music at least once.**

One great way to bond with the people that you work with is by showing appreciation of their culture. Learn about the food, the music and other things. Your colleagues will appreciate your efforts.

It's Just Always a Good Idea to Check the Weather

It should go without saying, but just in case, remember to double check the kind of climate you'll be living in. Some countries, like South Africa and Kenya, to many travelers surprise, do get cold enough to warrant a jacket or coat and you've probably heard of the intense rainy seasons. Do your research so that you will know which clothing to pack for the duration of your stay in the country that you will be in.

Because I've lived in several countries in Africa, versus just visiting, I've had the opportunity to see the good and the bad. Despite the challenges, I find the African continent to be magical. I've had some of the most defining moments of my life on the continent. **Experience Africa for yourself. Just bring an open mind and heart.**



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Email erin.oppenheim@goabroad.com

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