

## **Making Friends Abroad**

Most UI students who want to study abroad look forward to the time that they can befriend host-country students. They want to learn about “the real Ireland” or “the real India” or “the real China” by engaging socially with local students they meet in the classroom. They envision being included in a new circle of friends, traveling to unique locations only the locals know about, and maybe picking up a bit of the local dialect and customs.

### **Caution: Proximity ≠ Understanding**

It is probably unrealistic to think that you will make friends with host-country students just because you are taking classes with them. Consider your classes here in Iowa City. When was the last time you befriended an international student? You might be polite to them and talk to them occasionally in the classroom, but it’s rare for an American student to take the initiative to get to know an international student on a social level, outside of class. Most international students never get invited into a U.S. home while they study in Iowa City. Most international students report that they find it very difficult to make friends with Americans. You may be surprised to learn that you are in the same situation when you study abroad. That’s not to say that you won’t make any friends with local students, but that it takes time and effort to do so. Just sitting in a classroom usually doesn’t work. Below are some strategies to help you get integrated in the local scene overseas.

### **Join a club or society**

Most foreign universities have dozens and dozens of student-run organizations that cater to a broad range of interests, from competitive sports to choral societies to chess clubs to human rights groups. Find out what options are open to you by visiting the foreign university web site or asking your Study Abroad Adviser. Most clubs and societies don’t require a lot of expertise to join – just a willingness to dive in and enjoy it. This is an excellent way to be surrounded by local students outside of the classroom, get to do some traveling (for example, hiking clubs often arrange weekend trips), and learn about things that host-country students do in their leisure time.

## **Volunteer/Service-Learning**

Every location has its share of community organizations and non-profit agencies that provide services to local citizens and these groups almost always rely on volunteers to carry out their mission. You can help young children with reading or homework, assist the elderly by running errands or providing companionship, or work with any number of other social groups. Doing so puts you in touch with other volunteers from the community and gives you a unique perspective on the socio-economic realities of the country where you are studying abroad.

## **Resolve to leave your comfort zone**

Every study abroad experience has its challenges. You might get homesick. You might be confused by the behavior of the “natives” and begin to dislike the host culture. If you’re learning a foreign language abroad, you might get tired of feeling at a disadvantage expressing yourself in conversations. It’s moments like these when it becomes tempting to seek out other Americans overseas and commiserate. Doing this once in a while is only natural and can help you regain your “balance,” but becoming socially dependent on other Americans abroad is a bad path to follow. Resolve to leave your comfort zone and make a conscious effort to meet new people and learn new things about your host country. This requires discipline and strategy. For example, you might consider becoming a “local” in a coffee shop where you will get to know the owners and the other regulars who patronize it. You might resolve to attend church services or sporting events, or any other activity where large numbers of local people gather. Sooner or later, you’ll be noticed and invited into the group, but it takes patience and some courage. Remember that, in order to discover a new country, you first have to lose sight of land.