

## Living Abroad

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Living in a small, mostly ethnically homogenous country like Taiwan, you tend to grow up with relatively little exposure to other cultures. Everyone around you goes to the same schools, observes the same holidays, and follows the same traditions. Modern day luxuries like television and the Internet do bring us examples of other cultures, but these tend to only increase our sphere of reference into the United States and Japan, while at the same time they only provide very narrow glimpses into the country's culture. Hollywood, for example, has a great reach and hold on people's imaginations, but no one truly believes that Hollywood movies represent real life. In order to better understand how and why other people live, work, act and think the way they do, everybody should go abroad for a time and live in another country if they have the opportunity.

Oftentimes, when we see someone doing something we don't understand or don't agree with, our reactions are either to laugh at the absurdities of these foreign folk or to blow them off as the ignorant beliefs of people who did not have the good fortune to be born into a society such as ours. What we are unable to understand, however, are the motivations and feelings behind those seemingly strange actions or viewpoints. Each culture has its own history, its own beliefs that shape the way people living in that culture act. Those others could just as easily look upon some of our traditions and think the exact same things, that they are absurd or ignorant superstition. Living abroad, immersing yourself in another culture, opens your eyes to a new viewpoint. No longer will your mind be enclosed by what is familiar and stable around you; you'll be able to better see things from others' perspectives.

When you go abroad to live for a time, it is best to do so for a long period. A week-long vacation in South Korea won't give you a good idea of the way ordinary people there live. Neither will a month-long stay at a relative's house in Britain. These short time spans are simply insufficient for you to understand the intricacies of a new culture, or even to begin to realize how different it is from your own.

Similarly, when you go abroad, don't choose a place that is heavily occupied by people who have the same background as you. Don't go to one of those ethnically monochrome places, like the various Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and Japantowns scattered throughout the large cities of the world. The point of living abroad is to experience a different culture, not to put yourself in a position where you can live exactly as you had back home.

Once you've found a place that is suitably different from where you come from, try your best to immerse yourself. Find out how the local community operates. Attend local governmental meetings. Volunteer at the library. Tutor someone in your language in exchange for lessons in theirs. Join a club. Do whatever you have to do to go out and be a part of the new culture. Don't be afraid if things seem different or embarrassing, the entire point is to experience new things and to learn from those experiences.

Living overseas for a few years will broaden your horizons immeasurably. Not only will you have participated in a culture different than your own, but you will also now be able to think and act in a manner that you would not have been able to before. You'll know some of the reasons behind those strange or absurd traditions. You'll find out why people act the way they do. You'll be able to better place yourself in their shoes. And you'll be a better person for it.