

Reverse culture shock | Campus Times

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Courtesy of Chris Bethmann

“I went to get a hair cut one time at a place near my apartment,” junior Chris Bethmann reminisced. “When I walked in to ask if I needed an appointment, I got a really confused look from the girl at the counter for about 10 minutes.” Bethmann, who studied abroad in Madrid, Spain during the fall 2011 semester, tried all sorts of ways to ask his question, but the woman continued to stare, mystified.

If compiling a list of cultural differences between many foreign destinations and the U.S., language might sit at the top. When choosing to study abroad, foreign language majors, international relations majors or students who simply enjoy studying in a language other than English might consider going to a city like Madrid, where the native tongue is not their own. They must be prepared, however, for that language barrier to pose problems.

“Then she got frustrated with me and told me to come back later,” Bethmann continued. “I did, got my hair cut and was on my way.”

After walking away from the parlor, Bethmann later found out from his Spanish friend that he was actually asking the woman behind the counter on a date by mistake, hence her puzzlement. As it turns out, the word “cita” means both appointment and date.

Culture shock is often obvious, sometimes painfully so, when studying abroad. A certain willingness to overcome obstacles and to learn from hardships is necessary for students who want to take the most from their foreign experiences.

The shock that students hear less about is that which they receive upon returning home. In Paris, France, senior Nam Lee had grown accustomed to her price tags matching exactly the amount she was charged. The sudden upsurge in price between viewing the product and purchasing it has proven alarming since her recent return home. The constantly changing economy of the U.S. might continue to bewilder citizens and economists alike, but one thing is for sure: Hidden taxes are plentiful.

Senior Shaelom James misses the sociability of Barcelona, Spain’s culture the most.

“People ate as a way to catch up with friends, relax and even people-watch,” she explained. “They

also hugged and kissed their friends every time they said 'hi' and 'bye,' which I thought was nice."

A kiss on the cheek between friends is a rare sight at UR. Maybe the stubborn and stoic personalities that Americans are often said to have do not welcome such a calming custom. In light of the reversed culture shock, perhaps UR students can learn from their homecoming peers — whose foreign customs have been stripped from daily life — what American culture needs.

Overhauling — or merely modifying — a culture takes time, but ideally the transition back into American and Rochesterian culture should be as painless as possible. Bethmann noted that the hardest part of coming back to the states has been readjusting to a fast-paced life.

"I was really taken aback the first time I went out to dinner here and we finished in about 40 minutes," Bethmann said. "In Spain, dinner would have lasted an hour and a half."

In reference to the "freedom, independence and worry-free lifestyle" that James developed while abroad, one of the most difficult aspects of re-acclimating to the UR lifestyle has been dealing with such a busy schedule. While she would spend days exploring Barcelona on her own, she has more responsibilities at UR and feels that she does not have the same interest or independence to explore Rochester.

"The cold, wet weather is a deterrent as well," she added.

Coming back to a normal college workload, or at least normal in the eyes of UR students, has been challenging for Bethmann. The sheer number of duties that once seemed manageable might appear daunting for study abroad returnees.

Yet, "study abroad changed a lot of the ways I look at life and really broadened my perspective," Bethmann said.

In spite of the reversed culture shock, the experience was well worth his time, even after asking a woman on a date by mistake.

Seligman is a member of the class of 2012.