

A letter from a Loyola student who studied abroad:

Dear Sojourners,

To many people, race can be a very difficult topic to discuss. It can also be a very touchy conversation. Some of you are minorities here in the U.S., and a few of you will be a minority in your respective study abroad locations. So, why don't we talk about it for a minute?

I identify as Black/African-American, and I couldn't deny it even if I tried. As such, I've always been one of the only minorities, if not the only minority, in the classroom, in my different workplaces, and especially in Asia. I was warned against going to Taiwan before I left, but let's just say I was too stubborn to listen to them, and I'm glad I kept to my goals of going because I had an AMAZING time! For most of my classes in Taiwan, I was the only Black student, and that was fine, not unusual nor unexpected. On the streets, however, I was essentially a celebrity, a life I now recognize as not being for me. Many people took my photo, asked to take photos with me, and touched my hair A LOT! (Warning: when eating, cover your mouth because you may just look up to see a camera pointed at you.) There were times that people argued with me regarding my nationality, too. They refused to believe that I was American, both a compliment and then again, not so much. I got the negative comments too. I slowly learned about the stereotypes regarding black skin in Taiwan, and they hurt as much as the evil ones here in the US.

Despite it all, I can't wait to go back. Looking back, I can laugh at all of that. In the moment, not so much. However, I learned the difference between the genuine curiosity (like how is her skin so soft?) and the outright racism (the don't get close to her because you may turn black too) I met some of the best people I've ever met, and I made friends from all over the world. I don't regret my year there one bit.

Our experiences abroad are going to be different. Whether you directly experience discrimination or one of your new friends does, learn from it. We're the generation that gets to change this, domestically and internationally. We get to lead the discussions about race and ethnicity, and that's pretty awesome.

If you're nervous about what to expect, I highly recommend searching for blogs. I followed the journey of a Black graduate student living in Taipei, and I was able to relate to many of her struggles, including natural hair maintenance. Check out the vlogs as well. By reading those kinds of materials, you build both expectations and excitement for your journey. You'll find some links that you can check out at your leisure before you leave. I welcome you to look at them and search for others.

Thanks for entering this conversation. I wish you happy travels!

Be safe!

-Juli Smith, BBA
Former CIE Peer Advisor
Study Abroad in Taiwan 2015/2016