Why Every Student Should Study Abroad
By Gina Barreca

When I left for London in 1977 for my junior year abroad, I was weighed down with enough paraphernalia to guarantee a safe trip. I had two rosaries, one rabbit’s foot, several notes of support, a lucky necklace, and a hardcover copy of Gravity’s Rainbow.

More experienced students carried only sleeping bags, backpacks, and paperbacks.

We choose our own baggage, I have since learned, but I wasn’t aware of that in 1977. I took everything with me because I had no idea what to expect.

Along with the amulets, I carried the piece of paper from the Study Abroad office to reassure myself that this was all perfectly normal, but there were elements I found less than reassuring in this document. One of the items, for example, indicated that I might want a “rucksack.”

I figured that I wouldn’t need this mysterious item because I didn’t have a ruck.

As a scholarship student, I traveled on the cheap and lived on the cheap. I took public transport, schlepped my too-stuffed suitcases, and wept when I saw the concrete building where I’d be spending the next several months. My section of London looked about as quaint as Flatbush. It was about eighty degrees (although they used that weird centigrade business) and all I had with me were heavy sweaters and flannel skirts.

The first few days, I was miserable. I’d sit in my room on Gower Street and listen to people talking and laughing from the street below. It struck me as unbelievably odd that for everybody else it was simply an ordinary week. I wanted to phone home, but I couldn’t afford it; I wanted to leave but I’d taken out all those extra loans. There was nothing to do except to stay.

Since I couldn’t just sit in my room all day, I decided to do the only thing I could afford to do: I went for walks.

I walked to the law courts and admired the buildings. I walked to Kew Gardens. I walked down the Strand and went into bookstores, walked through the Regent’s Park Zoo. Finally, when I was thoroughly exhausted at night and could sleep without wondering every 15 minutes what time it was “at home,” I started wondering what I was eating while I was eating Toad-in-the-Hole. I regained my sense of curiosity. I smiled. And even the staid Brits smiled back.

During those first days I groped around as if I were exploring a dark cave, not realizing that I carried a light with me—even though I had packed poorly.
One fine day I walked to the British Museum. I felt safe in museums and immediately started searching for a place where I could buy a cup of coffee (always my first stop). I happened to pass a manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*.

This wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen at home. This was Something Else, with a history longer than anything I could imagine. People had looked at this manuscript before it became required reading. These luscious pages weren’t hidden away in some small room for the exclusive and fetishistic gaze of serious scholars but were instead right there on the ground floor. Suddenly it felt as if there were enough of everything to go around.

I knew then, with smiling relief, that I wouldn’t have to be too scared to be across the Atlantic anymore. I’d found a place of safety. If this manuscript could be safe here, then so could I.

Within a month I’d seen 12 plays, made good friends, and fallen in love. But those first few days had as much learning as anything that followed, even if it wasn’t part of the curriculum, even if what was necessary—a little courage, a little imagination, a little belief in the possibility of unforeseeable happiness—that hadn’t been listed as a suggested resource.

I left London with less baggage than I’d come with, and what I left behind was at least as important as what I took with me. I’ve heard the same stories from nearly every one who has studied abroad.

You learn that you carry the ability to make a life for yourself wherever you are.

It is a lesson that should never be underestimated; it is one of the few lessons on which we are all tested again and again.