

What Is a Cross-Cultural Experience?

Traveling is wonderful experience. Going to new places and experiencing new things is both exciting and enjoyable. Such a traveling experience can, however, be appreciated in different ways.

A lot of travel is for the purpose of tourism. In general, tourism connects tourists to the emotional and sensory aspects of experiencing a new and often unique place. In tourism, the culture and/or landscape of a place are commodified, that is, presented in ways that give them value so that they can be “sold” to tourists. One way to define tourism is to say that it *is* the commodification of cultural and natural resources. For example, here in east Tennessee, people come from all over the world to see Rock City, Ruby Falls, and Lookout Mountain. Those same tourists will buy Moon Pies, eat at Cracker Barrel, listen to country music, and buy “southern country” souvenirs to take back home. They will have a good time. On the other hand, those same Japanese, Chinese, and European tourists who do all of that will not understand American culture any better than before they arrived. Unless there is an intentional effort to learn the other culture, it will not be learned during short term visits as tourists.

Culture is like language; it is a complex of shared and understood knowledge that participants know, but do not explain. No one explains a foreign language to you while they are speaking it, and it is the same with culture. Just as you cannot understand a language just by listening to it, you cannot understand a culture by just being around it.

For the cross-cultural experience, we want you to go beyond the tourist type of experience. We want you actively ask questions about other people’s family, politics, language, economics, religion, and daily life. We want you to learn how other people think about the world and how they think about you. We want you to listen to what they say, without injecting criticism. We want you to talk to people in the other culture, do things with them, and reflect on what you have learned so you can decipher what it means and compare that to your own culture.

To fulfill the cross-cultural experience, you must have 45 hours of interaction with people in the other culture. If you are doing an Individually Arranged study, you must keep a daily journal, and you must do 5 case study interviews that are turned in at the end of the experience and graded. If you go on a faculty led study abroad trip, the trip director will determine what you must do to document the cross-cultural requirement.

Visiting museums and historical sites, eating “authentic” cultural foods, and listening to another culture’s music do not necessarily constitute cross-cultural experiences. If you visit a museum with a person of the local culture and have them explain the items in the museum to you, then that is a cross-cultural experience. Visiting the museum alone is not a cross-cultural experience. In order for you to have a cross-cultural experience, you must have people of that culture explain things to you. They need to tell you what you’re seeing, what

you're experiencing, means to them. Your opinion of what things mean will probably be wrong. For example, bull fighting in the Spanish speaking world is not about what most Americans think it is about. Bull fighting is a powerful cultural symbol that reflects many values and concepts in some Spanish speaking cultures, and those values and concepts are different than those found in North American culture.

In order to have a significant cross-cultural experience, you must interact with people in the target culture, spend time with them, ask lots of questions, interview them, write in your journal, reflect on what you have learned, and then compare what you have learned to your own culture. The cross-cultural experience involves active learning. You cannot passively observe the other culture and hope to learn it. It would be like trying to figure out the rules of football (the American NFL kind) by only watching a game on television with the sound turned off. Someone needs to explain the rules to you. Better yet, you should go somewhere and play football while the players explain the rules to you. That is what we hope you do. We hope you go to another culture, get in the game, and have someone explain it to you.