

BUSINESS DAY

A Year Abroad (or 3) as a Career Move

By HILLARY CHURA FEB. 25, 2006

It was a few months before she was to graduate from Colgate University in 2002, but Lauren DiCioccio was not ready for the briefcase or the Brooks Brothers look.

Armed with a bachelor's degree in art and art history, she did what an increasing number of college graduates are doing: she bought a plane ticket to a country she had never visited, backpacked around the region, got a job in that country and then traveled some more.

According to one estimate, 35,000 young Americans realize that working abroad, whether teaching, bartending, taking care of children, typing or picking grapes, has moved well beyond just trust-fund children. Far from being career suicide, it can actually provide a professional boost.

"When I went, I was hesitant because people looked at me and were surprised that I would graduate with a degree from Colgate and take time off to work and backpack around Australia," said Ms. DiCioccio, who picked grapes and was a short-order cook at a roadhouse in the outback. "So when I came back and had it on my résumé, I couldn't believe all of the interviews were about my time in Australia."

Once back in the United States, she said, she applied for 10 jobs, received 5 interviews and was offered 2 positions at the beginning of 2004. She became a program assistant at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, Calif.

Ms. DiCioccio, now 25, obtained her working papers through Bunac, an organization that helps graduates obtain work permits, volunteer opportunities or

community work in foreign countries. Other programs include WorldTeach, Princeton in Asia and the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, as well as offerings by religious groups like the Jesuits and the Quakers.

People unencumbered by technicalities -- like working legally -- will branch off on their own with little more than a debit card, confidence and a copy of "Work Your Way Around the World."

Caroline Miceli, 26, chose the legal route. As she was preparing to graduate from Scripps College in Claremont, Calif., in 2002, she responded to a posting through her college for a year's international project management internship at BMW headquarters in Germany. She earned 880 euros a month (about \$1,000 in today's money) and went into credit card debt to travel.

"I ate bread and sausage, but I got experience working for a world-class brand that everybody recognizes," she said. Working abroad "is a career move."

"It's not a money-making move," she said. "It puts you in a position to leverage yourself."

When her year ended, she returned to BMW in North America, then an interim project in China with a BMW supplier and then to a Toyota Motor Sales management training program in Torrance, Calif. She said her time in Germany convinced her that she could be on her own in Asia for five months. "Four years from graduation, I have international experience with a couple of different major automotive companies and fashion companies," she said.

Many aspiring expatriates live at home and work a few months to save money before they leave. Ms. DiCioccio, for example, worked for nine months doing office work, retail jobs and house sitting to give herself a financial cushion, but ended up saving another \$700 or so from her Australian jobs.

Many travelers depart not knowing how they will earn a living once they hit the ground. With hustle, they often find employment before the jet lag wanes (to the relief of worried parents), according to some who have taken the plunge. Those working legally tend to earn more, but their stays have a set duration -- generally,

four months to three years, depending on the country or program. People working illegally may earn less but can slip under the radar and stay in a country longer. A word of warning: that can result in deportation in extreme circumstances.

No nationwide survey measures the number of young Americans working abroad, but William Nolting, director for international opportunities at the International Center of the University of Michigan, maintains a rough estimate. From tracking the major organizations, he said at least 34,900 people worked and volunteered abroad in formal programs in the academic year 2002 through the summer of 2003. That is up from about 29,000 a year earlier. Mr. Nolting said the actual figure could be twice as high since he does not count participants in small organizations or those working illegally.

By comparison, about 191,000 students studied abroad for credit in 2003-4, out of an estimated 14 million college and university students, according to figures from the Institute of International Education.

Years ago, recent graduates headed for Britain and other parts of Europe. That has changed.

"Most students and young people have been to Europe on vacation and seem to be thinking much further afield," said Anna Crew, director of Bunac USA. Australia and New Zealand are popular. Her group is starting a volunteer program in Cambodia.

Brandon Steiner, 24, is in his first year as a teacher with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. Though he does not plan to teach after Japan, he will stay another two years or so. A 2005 graduate of Virginia Tech, he earns about \$32,000, has minimal expenses since he lives in a rural area about three hours from Tokyo, and pays no United States or Japanese taxes.

"Admittedly, it is a way to goof off and have a good time in a foreign country," he said, but he added that "having international experience under your belt -- employers are enthusiastic."

"It looks good and is not a bad step out of college," he said. "It shows you already are open-minded."

Sometimes those who have worked abroad do not realize the benefits until long after the adventure has ended.

Julie Androshick, now 41, spent two years teaching English, history and algebra to high school students in American Samoa from 1987 to 1989 with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Room and board were free, and she taught algebra on the side. After Samoa, Ms. Androshick spent more than a year tending bar and getting a master's degree in international relations from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Ms. Androshick later worked as a journalist and a McKinsey & Company analyst. She now helps big clients manage internal information as a partner with Kenning Associates, a small consulting firm. Based in Manhattan, Ms. Androshick said working abroad had expanded her worldview, gave her the courage to pursue long-shot jobs and made her a more loyal employee.

"Because I did it for three and a half years and traveled so much, I wanted to settle down and establish a career and focus on that," she said. "The thought of picking up now and living abroad actually stresses me out."

Foreign experience demonstrates entrepreneurship, resourcefulness and independence, according to recruiters. Rosalind Clay Carter, senior vice president for human resources at A&E Television Networks, said people who work and support themselves overseas tend to be inquisitive, flexible and adaptive -- valuable skills in today's workplace.

"You are interested in that person who can move quickly and is nimble and has an inquiring mind," she said.

Know Before You Go

Those who need help in finding work overseas should know that some groups charge hefty placement fees. Determine whether the groups are covering room and board or are charging you just for the paperwork. Research will also uncover which

programs require applications a year ahead of time and which accept only recent graduates.

Following are Web sites for job, volunteer and general information:

Bunac provides work permits (though not employment) and volunteer opportunities (www.bunac.org).

Dave's ESL Cafe lists teaching jobs (www.eslcafe.com/jobs). GoAbroad.com and Interexchange (www.interexchange.org/) also list foreign jobs.

Japan Exchange and Teaching Program calls for a one-year commitment and pays about \$32,000 (www.mofa.go.jp/j--info/visit/jet/).

The National Consortium for Study in Africa at Michigan State University lists opportunities (www.isp.msu.edu/ncsa/volteer.htm).

Peace Corps has a rolling admissions process (www.peacecorps.gov).

Princeton in Asia places business, media and nongovernmental fellows in countries like East Timor, Kazakhstan and Hong Kong (webscript.princeton.edu/pia/main/).

Transitions Abroad is a travel magazine, but its site offers information about working abroad (www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/work/index.shtml).

The University of Michigan's extensive work abroad site is open to nonstudents (www.umich.edu/icenter/overseas/work/index.html).

WorldTeach dispatches volunteers in developing countries like Costa Rica, China and Poland. Volunteers need not be aspiring teachers (www.worldteach.org).