

## Diversity Abroad Network Listserv

### Topic: Transgender Student and Study Abroad

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#### Original Email

We have a student planning to study abroad in fall who we just found out is transgender. She identifies as female, but was born a male. Her passport still lists sex as male. She was planning to go to Thailand, but to a school that requires uniforms, and would require her to wear a male uniform (as determined by the sex listed on her passport).

We are concerned about possible discrimination she may face if she decides to continue with her original plan, and how this would impact her study abroad experience. She has the option to change locations within her provider based on programs that still have availability, but would need to act quickly. The other locations available to her at this point would be:

- Rome
- Madrid
- Beijing
- Lima
- Cusco
- Costa Rica
- Gold Coast of Australia

Does anyone have insight/experience with a transgender student going abroad, and which of the location options may be best suited for her in terms of being the most welcoming, least discriminatory destinations? We want to be sure she is informed and has realistic expectations for what her environment may be like while abroad, and of course, do not want to put her in any type of uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situation. I had heard good things about Thailand, but knowing

that this particular institution requires uniforms, I'm not sure it would be the best option. I know Australia could be a good option, but I've heard the Gold Coast is not as metropolitan as Sydney and may not be as welcoming for her. I am thinking a big city location would be best, but I am not sure how the environment in Rome or Madrid may be for her. Any feedback and insight from your experiences would be appreciated, including any resources that may be helpful to share with her as she prepares for her time abroad?

### **Response 1**

This question came up on the NAFSA Rainbow SIG recently. Ironically, the suggestion was to check Diversity Abroad country reports. The exchange is pasted below, so you can contact the individuals and find out more from them, if you would like.

I agree that the student in reference should explore other options. I do not recommend Lima, Peru. It is very traditional and there are places as I have been told by friends who had come to visit me who have said that there are places within the city that are not safe. I certainly would have serious concerns about the student in reference to go there. It would be the student's choice, but I would seriously consider not going there. Costa Rica may be more open, but again, overall, Latin American countries are very chauvinistic and even though they have become more open in regards to sexual preferences, as advisers, we should be cautious.

My daughter studied in Siena and Mexico. Let me share the situation with her to ask her what does she feel about the sites mentioned since she has travelled some and have interacted with students from Spain, Rome and other European countries. She may have some insight in that respect. Please let me get back to you on this matter after talking to her.

### **Response 2**

Madrid would be an excellent location for your student. There are very open, visible and well-represented (politically) LGBTQAI communities in Madrid, and discrimination is low. Hate crimes are rare. Gay marriage with all attendant rights is legal at the federal level, there are powerful gay student associations at the public universities, and in general a welcoming to neutral atmosphere for LGBTQAI students. I would have no reservations about sending your student to Madrid.

### **Response 3**

I agree. Madrid is the best in the list for your student.

### **Response 4**

Thank you for advocating for your student and working to give her choices that are safe and supportive!

Have you confirmed with the school that the student would be mandated to wear a boy's uniform and that no other accommodations could be made for her? Thailand could in fact be one of the most supportive possible locations, given the existence of the concept of Kathoey, which is in fact quite different from many trans women's identities <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathoey> and that some trans people travel to Thailand for medical purposes. I don't have experience in Thailand to say, but am concerned that study abroad advisors who happen to be on this list, who may\* not be familiar with trans issues would tell a young trans woman there is only one safe location (Madrid) where she should/must go. As a student on study abroad in Madrid, I personally witnessed and experienced a lot of gendered harassment, and my classmates experienced attempted gender violence. I know students travel there constantly without issue as well. At least in the US, that type of harassment and violence is even more heightened for trans women, and particularly for trans women of color.

The Caribbean and some African countries are known legal and safety threats to LGBTQ travelers, but it may also be well worthwhile to seek out resources from trans communities (online or otherwise) specializing in the issue of safe travel, or your campus LGBTQ resource center. I looked briefly but didn't find anything right away to recommend.

Again thank you for looking for all the best resources and guidance for your student, and educating us by sharing this situation!

### Response 5

Just to follow up, I spent about two weeks in Chiang Mai, Thailand in September 2012 and I was actually struck by how many transgender/Kathoey people I interacted with, both in the city and on the campus. It was certainly the most open and accepting place I had ever visited, compared to my experience in Rome where I saw one openly gay couple in the ten days that I was there. There were Kathoey students on the campus and also in town. There was actually a professor who spoke at the students' orientation and addressed gender and sexuality specifically, explaining how open and accepting Thailand is compared to other countries. I would see if they can make any exceptions or accommodations with the uniform because personally, I would recommend that a transgender student study in Thailand over possibly any other location, based on my experience there.

### Response 6

I can recommend Buenos Aires, Argentina as a very positive environment for the LGBTQ community. I had a student go who was openly gay and loved every minute. Based on his feedback, I feel that almost who is looking for an open environment who has gender acceptance concerns would find it a good place to be.

## Response 7

In the interest of sharing additional resources (destination country aside), I thought it might be good to post these sites, which the student (or any transgender person with a U.S. passport) might find helpful as s/he prepares to travel, or considers applying for new documentation:

<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/passports/information/gender.html>

[http://transequality.org/Resources/passports\\_2012.pdf](http://transequality.org/Resources/passports_2012.pdf)

<http://www.iglta.org/>

The information does signify that it might be in your student's best interest to get a new passport ASAP (which may not be possible at this stage).

A few years ago, I worked with a transgender student and we were concerned about his documentation for travel. He did experience some delays at the airports because his passport still listed him as female (he took a driver's license that reflected his most recent appearance). I do not remember coming across the first site listed above back then (this was about four years ago), so I think some of this information is a result of the State Dept policy changes in 2010 and 2011 regarding LGBTQ travelers.

## Response 8

I am not a member of your group, but my former colleague, Erin Hillis, forwarded me the thread as I just got back from leading a study abroad trip to Thailand and my group spent some time specifically studying and talking to trans men and women in Northern Thailand. I agree that Thailand could very well be a good place for the student as long as the school would accept her as a woman (some will, some will not - much like here - it will depend on the specific administration). Even if the school will not, it is likely the student would find quite good support for who she is around Chiang Mai. It is true, Thai people cannot change the gender in their identity cards in terms of the Ms and Mr, but they are allowed to change their names to reflect their new gender. Your student should not have a problem being called by her name. Male to female trans people are much more accepted in Thailand than female to male and she will not be the only open trans person in the school (if she is open and can't "pass"). The term Kathoey is now often seen as a negative name by the local trans community and all the male to female people we talked to preferred the term "ladyboy". All the female to male preferred going by the term "Tomboy". One thing to look out for is that there is a lot of pressure to "look good" in the Thai ladyboy population. There will be pressure to be quite feminine, so if your student identifies as a woman, but not a super feminine woman, it could be more lonely. Obviously, there are going to be people who don't like "difference" everywhere, so much like here, it may not always be easy. But gender is generally much more fluid in Thailand and I hope your student will have a good experience there if she goes. One of the things most commented on in our interviews was that the Thai people are used to ladyboys. They have been very open and visible in Thai society for a long time, so it is not considered something "weird" or "abnormal" and therefore not bad. However, they also seemed to work through their transition very quietly. They sought support from other trans people in terms of "learning the ropes" such as figuring

out their make-up, deciding what bathrooms to use, etc., but they do not talk easily about difficulties with their transition, especially not in relation to family. It is considered bad karma or impolite to talk negatively about others (especially parents), complain, or talk openly about feeling depressed/struggling - so they often work through such things alone. This could feel very isolating, not just for trans people but for all students struggling with identity issues. If I can be of any further help, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am thankful your student is getting this support from you.