International students from Uganda, South Korea, Mexico, and Uzbekistan share their experiences of IU Bloomington and IUPUI. They discuss surprises, adjustments, and the overall impact of the experience and offer advice for new students studying in an unfamiliar environment.

FROM UGANDA AND SOUTH KOREA TO INDIANAPOLIS

Sharifah Kyazike and Juyeon Han came to IUPUI as first-year students. Sharifah spent much of her childhood in Ngando, a small village in Uganda, before moving to the capital, Kampala, for her secondary education. She has won several scholarships and awards for her studies at IUPUI. Sharifah has been a Life-Health Sciences intern and is now a junior in biology at IUPUI. Her goal is to become a surgeon and take those skills back home where she can “make a difference.”

Juyeon Han also grew up in a small town, Nonsan, South Korea, and at the age of 18 spent two years in Seoul. Her major is applied mathematics. She is president of the IUPUI Golden Key International Honour Society. She has decided to pursue a lifelong dream of a career in veterinary medicine.

Both Sharifah and Juyeon are active in the IUPUI International Peer Mentoring Program, which provides
an international mentor to groups of new international students. For Sharifah and Juyeon, coming to Indianapolis was their first encounter with life in the United States, and the surprises of those early days remain vivid in their memories.

Juyeon went through customs in Los Angeles. “When I got off the plane, customs officials in uniform were being very casual. In Korea, officials bow to you; they are very nice to you and say, ‘May I help you?’ Here I still remember one official lady chewing gum, leaning with one leg; she was very casual in asking for my passport. Chewing gum and talking at the same time is bad manners in Korea. I started thinking some crazy things. ‘Is she treating me this way because I’m Asian?’ After living here three years now, I understand these manners. I know that’s it not that they wanted to be rude.”

Sharifah’s first impression was a difference between life in a village and life in the city. “I was raised in a small village. No tall buildings. It is rare that you see a car passing. There are not very many people, but if you go walking in the street, you always find somebody. Here there’s nobody in the streets. If you’re lost you just keep going round and round until you find your way.”

Adjusting to the new world meant taking the initiative and seeking out opportunities for interaction. Sharifah advised, “I would definitely tell new students to go to the Office of International Affairs. That is the starting point for meeting new people. When I met my mentor, she took me to I-Club (the International Club). Someone there introduced me to the African Students Association. I have even gone to clubs I didn’t belong to—the Timmy Global Health Club, the Biology Club.”

Taking the initiative is difficult. “It was not easy at first. I was very nervous at the beginning because of my accent. I worried that people wouldn’t understand me because I speak differently. But you have to try things. I used to try to make friends in class, ‘Oh, hi, how are you?’ Some people will not respond, some will. Americans are interested in talking to people from different places; they are willing to learn.”

Juyeon had a similar beginning. “For my first two years, I was a very quiet student. I didn’t do anything else but just go to classes. When I was a junior, I started thinking, ‘Other than having good grades, what else did I do?’ I wanted friends so I started with the Math Club because I’m a math major. It was not enough, so I joined the International Honour Society and even took an official position. I-Club is all foreign students, and all have accents, so I don’t care about my own accent or grammar and such. On the other hand, at the first meeting of student government, the students were dressed nicely. They addressed ‘Madame President’ about ballots, objections, motions, calling a vote. I was so lost. When I went back home I looked up council meetings in America.”

Top: Juyeon Han at the entrance to Seoul’s Namsangol Hanok Village, a restoration of village life in the midst of one of the world’s largest urban areas

Bottom: At the international peer mentoring kick-off event, seven teams competed with “minute to win it” games. Juyeon (on the right) is setting up “noodling around” in which contestants pick up six penne noodles placed on a table using only a piece of uncooked spaghetti in their mouths.”
Cultural differences often pop up in surprising ways. Juyeon remembered first encountering her professors outside class. “It was so awkward for me to wave to older people. When I was first here, I met my math professor in the hallway. He waved his hand. For a second I started thinking so many things. I couldn’t simply wave my hand. ‘Okay, he’s older, he’s a professor, I cannot wave my hand, but this is America.’ All these thoughts just happened in one second and I bowed and waved at the same time. If my American friends saw me, they must have thought, ‘Why does she do that; she’s so weird,’ instead of understanding that she’s doing that because she’s Korean.”

In adjusting to these differences, Juyeon and Sharifah were surprised to find how much they themselves changed. Juyeon related, “I went back to Korea for the first time in two-and-a-half years last December. I really wanted to go home. I missed my family, Korean food, having a mom to cry for when I’m sick, rice cake on New Year’s Day. Very minor things, but they made me want to go home so bad. When I went back, I realized that I had
changed. People here always hold a door; that is not the Korean way. At a subway station I was holding the door for the next person, and everyone was looking at me, ‘Ah, you’re so kind, thank you.’ But no one else took over, so I was holding the door for like 10 people, and they were thinking, ‘Maybe she’s not Korean.’ Back in Korea, there were things I missed that I never thought I would miss—things like mac and cheese. When I came here and went to a Japanese restaurant, I thought, ‘This is a rip-off; this is not fresh fish.’ But when I was in Korea, I said, ‘This is not a burger. It’s not even the right size.’"

Sharifah found that her work as a mentor has a big effect. “When I spoke at the mentor symposium, my self-confidence improved a lot. It opened doors for me; I have self-confidence that I didn’t have before. The way I used to speak when I came is not the way I speak now. The more you talk to Americans the more you change the way of talking.”

Sharifah summed up the best advice from her own experience. “I think when students make a choice to go to America to study, they are making a very big commitment. So I would advise when students come here, they should take that commitment very seriously. They should take all the initiative, all of the courage, and be brave, and explore, so they can have a very good experience.”

FROM MEXICO AND UZBEKISTAN TO BLOOMINGTON

Rebeca Garcia Gil grew up in Mexico City. Her first visits to the U.S. were to major cities as a tourist with her parents. She came to IU Bloomington in 2010 to study journalism; it was her first encounter with the American Midwest. She has studied abroad on an IU program in Ireland, and she was president of the International Latin American and Spanish Students Association. She has not decided what she will do when she completes her degree, but she is considering law school and possibly working in international humanitarian law or international human rights law.

Gulrukh Shakirova completed her first two music degrees in Uzbekistan. She came to the U.S. to study at
the International Center for Music at Park University, near Kansas City, Missouri. She has performed throughout Uzbekistan, France, and the United States. In Bloomington since 2010, Gulrukh completed her artist’s diploma last summer and is now working on her doctorate in piano performance, studying under Menahem Pressler. She won the Jacobs School of Music’s Mozart piano concerto competition in 2012 and looks forward to a performance career.

The culture shock of the Bloomington students related more to issues common to domestic and international students. Both came from large cities, and both needed time to adapt to a less urban atmosphere and a very large university campus.

Rebeca initially was unsure about her choice. “If you asked me three years ago, I would cry and say I regretted coming to Bloomington. I even applied for a transfer because I didn’t want to be here. The world thinks they know American culture because of television, but it’s not the same once you’re here when you try to interact with the people. It got pretty tough sometimes. In my dorm, I was with all Americans and was just clueless. I didn’t know what to say to people. After a time, I realized the problem was me, not IU, and I decided to look into the brighter side of things. I branched out to international students, and up until today almost 80 to 90 percent of my friends are international, not just Mexicans, but friends from all over the world.”

Gulrukh knew the Midwest before coming to Bloomington. “I already had my culture shock in Kansas City.” What she had to adjust to was the size of the campus. “I knew everyone in the International Center for Music in Kansas City. Here, I still see people who are in music and I never met them. Now I have good friends, and they are very diverse. We don’t have time in the music school here to get bored. When I first came to IU, I thought, “Wow! So many people!” You have to take care of yourself. You have to get used to the system, lots of offices. You learn how to communicate, to show yourself, ask questions. You have to grow and get more independent and more mature; those obstacles make you learn and be stronger. Then you can go out into the world.”

Rebeca worked for the IDS newspaper during her first year. “The article I liked most doing was one on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Through the Muslim Student...
Association, I found two students from Pakistan and one from Turkey who had been in their home countries on September 11, 2001; I talked to them about their experiences when the attack happened. Her decision to consider a law degree came from a class she took with IU Professor Steve Raymer. “My professor worked for 40 years as a National Geographic photographer. The class was on visual communication and reporting on war terrorism and humanitarian intervention. Professor Raymer not only taught me how to grab a camera, he asked me if I had considered a career in law. The idea changed my life. I had never thought of foreign correspondence as an opportunity for me. I went to Ireland last semester, interned for an NGO that did really cool stuff for immigrants in Ireland and the UK. That defined things for me.”

Gulrukh noted that IU has improved her professional skills. “Performing is the most important part for me. Gaining more professional stage experience and learning the repertoire. I have met lots of good people that I would never have met any other way.” The doctoral program has kept her busy, especially with its teaching requirement. Gulrukh teaches piano to nonmajors and music majors whose area is not piano performance. “I am also grateful that I have had experience as a teacher. As a teacher, you have lots of different students. With some students it’s so easy; they get it immediately, and everything works. With others you have to learn how to approach them, what pieces will work for them, and what they need. I have seen students grow more confident.”

As far as adjusting to life in an American university, both agreed, as Rebeca explained, “It’s the tiny things that you don’t think will matter, but they do once you get here. For example, in Mexico I address my teachers and my parents with the formal You pronoun. They are figures of authority and respect. In Mexico, when you go into a room you say good morning, and you would never enter, not say hello, and just sit down. Here people don’t say good morning, and they leave without saying good night.” Gulrukh added, “I was shocked when someone was eating in class. That was never acceptable at home. Now I realize that they are not rude. I have got used to it. It took me a year to achieve a mature understanding of Americans.”

For Rebeca and Gulrukh, coming to IU is their study abroad experience, and both would recommend study abroad to their IU classmates and friends. Rebeca said, “I started from zero, I think. Study abroad gives you a sense of self-fulfillment because you have to learn to be by yourself. Back home, there is the comfort of family and friends. Here, I sometimes eat meals alone, and I have to be okay with it. Something Indiana University taught me is that having new experiences can change you for good. Things that you see, that you touch, that you taste, that you hear—those are the things that stay with you. So I would encourage students to have as many of those things as they can.”

Gulrukh also emphasized seeking out things that are different, and she imagined advising an IU student who might be headed to her home country. “Tashkent is such a different culture, ancient and beautiful. Being in that environment, smelling freshly made bread. Best melon in the world. Meet people who are very welcoming. We always like guests. If someone comes unexpectedly, take everything you have and put it on the table. We don’t ask if you would like something. We just say please have it.”