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[current issue](#)
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Center for International Education

Fall 2007

PUTTING THE “STUDY” IN STUDY ABROAD: MATHEMATICS IN FINLAND, HUNGARY, AND RUSSIA

Erin Kiley is a senior from Loudon, NH, majoring in mathematics and Russian. A member of the University Honors Program, Erin has won two summer research grants through the National Science Foundation, has presented her research at national conferences, and has had her research results published in professional journals.

by Erin Kiley '08

In this Issue

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[Additional Articles](#)

[Faculty Travel Reports](#)

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Erin Kiley in Austria while on a break from her studies

Most people my age have many interests, and I'm certainly no exception, but my passion is mathematics. So when I was first preparing to study abroad in Russia, home to some of the most rigorous undergraduate mathematics education in the world, I wasn't about to spend a semester there taking business stats with some American professor. I wanted to dive in.

Unfortunately for many science and math majors dreaming about far-away places, it seems that they've got exactly that choice to make—to stay in the United States taking upper-level courses and conducting research in the fields they are passionate about, or to put their studies on hold for a semester for the sake of exploring the world, learning new languages, and experiencing new cultures. But with careful planning, they can do both.

Googling study abroad programs in mathematics will do future globetrotting Gausses almost no good, as it seems to lead primarily to the handful of vanilla study abroad programs whose course offerings include some sort of gen-ed math, not the upper-level courses we are looking for. Luckily for me, in skimming undergraduate journals, talking to professors, and browsing web pages of good math departments, I found what are considered the top programs for American students of mathematics: the Math in Moscow program and the Budapest Semesters in Mathematics program. Surely there are more programs out there, and most of them will be direct-enrollment programs at universities which instruct in English—but these were the most widely-known of all.

It was also by good fortune that I was pursuing a second major in Russian, so I decided to apply to the Math in Moscow program as my first choice and the Budapest Semesters program as my back-up. I was accepted to both programs, had them approved by the UNH study abroad staff at CIE, and was a month away from boarding a plane to Russia, when I learned that there had been a small fire in the dormitory of the Moscow program. The Budapest program contacted me, offering to let me change my mind

about attending their program that fall. I did, and a month later I was outside of my time zone for the first time, moving into a beautiful flat in the center of Budapest, listening to Survival Hungarian tapes, and practicing old Putnam problems. As it turned out, the Putnam exam is offered in Budapest, as are the GRE and GRE Subject Tests—so I did not even have to delay that portion of my education.

During my semester in Budapest, I met up with some other UNH students who were participating in UNH's own program at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics—mostly engineering and computer science majors with whom I was friends before the semester started. This should make the Budapest Semesters program particularly appealing to UNH mathematics students, since many of their friends will be in the same city, and they can even arrange to be housed in apartments together. But that's far from the only reason to study math in Hungary; Hungarian mathematicians are well-represented, especially in discrete mathematics, and mathematics education in Hungary is known to be of a very high quality. Something which surprised me and many of my fellow American students in Budapest was the way that instructors, at last, trusted students to be self-motivated, and didn't assign graded homework in order to keep tabs on our progress. In many cases our grades were dependent solely upon midterm and final exams, and it was expected that we would attend the lectures and do as much studying on our own as was necessary to truly understand the material.

Most students thrived in such an environment, since for many of us, it was the first time we had been truly challenged by mathematics courses. For me, it was my professors in Budapest who taught me the most valuable thing I have learned as an undergraduate—how to teach myself.

I loved Budapest so much that I was tempted to return for the following spring semester—until I talked to a friend who revived the idea of studying in Moscow. After the arduous task of getting a Russian visa, I visited the program for a weekend, and in talking to the students I found that the very things I loved about mathematics education in Hungary were the same things that the Math in Moscow students told me they had loved about education in Russia. I decided that I would spend the next semester in Moscow, and I am very glad that I did. Russia is another country which is very well-known for the quality of its mathematical education and research, and having had three years of Russian at UNH prepared me to appreciate certain aspects of Russian culture that may have otherwise been lost on me.

The skills and knowledge I gained studying mathematics overseas have been invaluable to me, and the connections I made have already been useful: I've had offers from graduate departments in three different countries, and I keep in touch with many of my colleagues in Finland, where I attended a summer program in scientific computing following my spring semester in Moscow. And my life would indeed be very different, had I settled for either taking a bunch of gen-eds abroad, or taking more math courses back home. I truly had the best of both worlds.

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