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Journal 1: The land where buses are Mercedes and police cars are BMWs

A week and a half ago, 46 students arrived in Rome to begin our semester abroad. We knew we'd learn about history, better understand a new culture, have some trouble with the language, and eat plenty of gelato. Little did we know we'd be climbing up a mountain, see a traveling band, or be whisked away before the peace march could commence. I'll explain all of these events in a minute.

Our orientation took place in Assisi, a usually sleepy town in the Umbrian valley. It is home to St. Francis of Assisi and one of the most beautiful views in Italy. Our 3-hour bus ride led us to the base of the mountain, which we would climb halfway up to get to our hotel. Our fearless leader Ms. McHugh climbed this in heels, which made her even more astonishing.

We had good food, explored a bit, and all went to bed early. We then rose and took our first tour, up the rest of the mountain to a castle rightfully named La Rocca. The rest of our trip was very similar. Tours to various churches and other markers, people catching up on sleep, and exploring to find the better gelaterias.

Our last day provided some excitement when we were suddenly rushed out of dinner and were pushed into 8 taxis, all waiting to take us away. Some girls were confused, others excited. One even exclaimed as we left "It's like the Von Trapp family escaping the Nazis". It was quite exciting because as we drove away from the place we'd become comfortable in, we saw the beauty of the town once again, but also the impending peace parade. The peace parade is when 50,000 people march across the region to Assisi in promotion of peace. They were coming and would not let us out, so it made sense that we left quickly.

Rome, which we would soon call our home for the next 3 months, came shortly after. We soon settled in our hotel, got a tour of our campus, and had delicious pizza, which was far cheaper than any in the states and tasted much better.

I noticed many things in my first week in Rome. For one, I laughed at the Mercedes buses and taxis and the BMW police cars. I loved that the city was much cleaner than I imagined (if you pretended the graffiti didn't exist). I also noticed how there were constant sirens everywhere. This could be because of the fact we were in the city or because we were close to a hospital. Little things such as old men in suits eating gelato at lunchtime make me laugh. Hearing all the different languages makes me smile, especially when I hear English or even better, understand Italian.

The language barrier wasn't as bad as I thought. For one, I could understand them more than they could understand me. Also the hand gestures my teachers had told me about made a huge difference. They trusted me because I knew them, and I understand more because they were universal.

The trip so far has been an amazing experience. I love my classes, I love my professors, I've made great friends, and have had a lot of great food. It's going to be a great experience I think, and I'm glad it is just beginning.

Journal #2- Southern Italy Fall Break Trip- views on the program halfway through.

On Tuesday morning we set out for the Southern Italy tour. Waking up at 6 am after a week of midterms was not exactly what we all had in mind for our fall break. Neither was going on tours of ancient sites and museums or being in Naples, a city full of garbage. Turns out while most of us were dreading going, it ended up a lot better than we thought it would.

Tuesday began with our 3-hour drive to Pompeii where we visited all the ruins of the city that had been uncovered after being under almost 2000 years of volcanic ash, dirt, and everything else under the sun. As we walked along the ancient city, we saw bars, houses, Roman baths, theaters, and shops. The city was a perfect construction of a Roman town, and as we walked along the city we didn't just see what life was like 2000 years ago, but we saw how a city stopped dead in its tracks. There was graffiti on the walls for upcoming political elections and bodies of victims frozen in their last positions, some knocked over from the ash after suffocating, others crouched covering their mouths. As we left Pompeii we saw how the people lived, and how similar they were to us.

After Pompeii we settled into our hotel in Naples, found yummy pizza, and went grocery shopping. Everyone went to bed far earlier than they had in years, since most students were asleep at 10 pm.

Waking up at 7 again to head to the archeological museum was much better after a nice breakfast of fresh pastries on the terrace at the hotel. The museum ended up being closed for All Saints' Day (a legal holiday in Italy), so we headed to Cumae, which is the location of the acropolis of Cumae and of Sybil's Cave. For students not in the mythology course the cave was, well a cave, but if you've read the Aeneid (or listened to the student presentations on it), it's the spot of a fortune teller Sybil who helps Aeneas on his journey.

After our morning tours we were let free to wander around Naples. My group chose to visit the Castle of the Egg on the Bay of Naples, which led to breath taking views of the city and the sea. We then wandered through the main street, soaking up the activity of Naples. This city was so unlike Rome, but I can't exactly say how; it's just one of those things you have to experience on your own.

For dinner that night we wandered around looking for a pizza place. Naples is known to be the best city in the entire world for pizza, and they weren't lying. I've never had better pizza in my entire life, including the 6 weeks I've been living in Rome. We happened to stumble upon the pizzeria from Eat Pray Love where we each ate too much pizza, took a few too many photos trying to be Julia Roberts, and made great friends with the staff.

Thursday was the day of the Almafì drive. If you've never heard of the Almafì coast, look it up because it's absolutely gorgeous. We packed ourselves into two smaller buses and drove for 4 hours down roads that resembled ribbon candy on cliffs compared to actual roads with a driver who drove a tad too fast. Tad may be an understatement since most of the girls were a little carsick by the time we stopped in Almafì, but it was worth it. The sites were beautiful, and once we arrived in the city for our hour break we didn't want to leave. The city is known for its limoncello, and you find it everywhere in crazy looking bottles. The city also has very friendly people and some even better olive oil.

After transferring to the bigger bus with our much better driver (much to everyone's happiness), we headed to Paestum, which is the site of some of the best-preserved Greek temples in the entire world. Dr. Prebys (the program director) wasn't joking when she said they were better preserved than in Greece. I took so many pictures because I was so astounded by them, and the archeological professor I was with on the tour made everything come alive.

On Friday, our last day in Naples, we were ushered to two museums. The first was the archeological museum, which held artifacts from Pompeii and a large collection of Greek statues. We browsed the collection of warriors and gods, and had a little too much fun trying to decide if Apollo's head was really on Aphrodite's body. The professors in this program make all of the visits fun, and you learn without even realizing.

The Capodimonte museum was one where all of the students could agree they didn't want to leave. We got a break from the ancient world and looked at Italian renaissance art in a beautiful palace.

For our last night, a few of us went back to the pizza place we'd discovered earlier. The workers remembered us and were so nice. They wanted to take more photos with us, had pizzas in front of us in less than 3 minutes, and dealt with all of our excitement. After dinner we were sad to leave because not only had we grown to like Naples, but we were sad to leave the pizza place. We decided if it had been in Rome, it would have been our place to go; sort of how in Friends they had Central Perk.

As we left Naples early Saturday morning we all looked back on the trip we'd once been dreading. Everyone had a better perspective on the last six weeks and was excited to get back to Rome. It was funny how the minute we got back to the city limits, everyone was excited; Rome has really become our home the last few weeks. Halfway through I can say I learned so much already, everything from knowing how to make the most of the experience (take archeology, art history, or archeology) to finding the best gelato places all over Italy. This trip was so much better than I thought it would be, but I was so happy to return to Rome. This week just solidified how happy I am that I studied abroad, and I'm looking forward to the rest of my semester here.

Journal #3

My week began with a quick trip on Sunday to Milan for shopping and church visiting. Everywhere we go throughout Europe we always end up looking at churches, and Milan was no different. The Duomo is a giant church that is a work of art in its own right. It's grand and beautiful and insane. I've never seen such an intricate building before in my life. We spent our

five hours in Milan looking at the sights and stopping in more than a few stores before heading back to Rome for Mass, homework, and Skype dates with families.

The second major event of my week was the Thanksgiving banquet that the Hotel Tiziano puts on for us. All of us girls were a little homesick at the thought of missing Thanksgiving with our families back in the states. Thankfully we had a banquet (which is not an over exaggeration) on Wednesday to help bring us together.

We walked into the dining room we use to find banquet tables lined up for all of us, with candles and orange centerpieces all around. There was rolls and butter on the table (which is a rare calamity here in Rome) and everyone sat with their group of friends while our professors and other staff members of the Saint Mary's College Rome Program all sat on one long table at the back of the room, it felt a little like Hogwarts, maybe more so if the students tables had been straight and not diagonal.

Before dinner started we were lead in song by one of the deacons who helps in our church, and together we sang God Bless America, (which Dr. Prebys said was our national anthem. Since she's lived outside of the U.S. for the past 30 years, we'll let it slide) and the Italian national anthem that no one knew the words to. We ate a fabulous dinner of turkey, butternut squash, ravioli, baked potatoes, pees, chestnut stuffing, a saffron rice and mushroom dish, and a lemon tart for dessert. To drink we had white, red, and sparkling wine, the latter of which was used for a toast to the pilgrims, the Italians, and everyone back home. Like in the states we were stuffed to the brim and my friends and I had fun taking pictures with our professors who were in the spirit. It was a fun dinner that made everyone less homesick and thankful to be in Italy. Since I had recently finished my novel for National Write A Novel Month, which is when you write a 50,000 word novel in one month, my friends and I toasted to that as well, since I was ecstatic to be done.

After my last class on Wednesday, my roommate and I boarded a sleeping train to Paris where we were spending thanksgiving break with one of our friends from Saint Mary's College who is studying in Dijon, France. On the train we met a man who was from France but was working in Africa. He decided to be my French professor for the evening since after not studying French for 4 years, I was having trouble remembering most of the words. This wasn't helped by the fact that Italian and French are so similar and I often get them mixed up. He told us for this train ride, we would be his daughters and he would protect us. It was nice to hear because my roommate was especially nervous about who we would be staying with overnight.

Little did we know that he was in the wrong carriage, and an hour later he was moved to his right one. To celebrate our empty sleeping room, we watched Miracle on 34th Street. Right after the movie ended we stopped in Florence where we had 4 more people join our little room, and we all settled in for a good night's rest.

Our train arrived an hour and a half late, and we jumped off and walked immediately to the Jardin des Plants where we had a yummy picnic lunch before walking around a little bit. We got to explore another side of Paris, the less touristy side, on our way to the Luxemburg Gardens. The residential area was quiet and beautiful, not at all like the bustling areas around the Eiffel

Tower or Notre Dame Cathedral. The Luxemburg Gardens are the place to play for Parisians in the spring and summer, but in the late fall it was mostly bare with the exception of people on walks and birds everywhere. The area was still gorgeous and you could see why people loved coming to it.

Afterwards we checked into our hotel before heading back out to sight see. Since we only had two days in Paris, we had to make the most of our trip. First we stopped at Notre-Dame Cathedral where we walked inside, saw the nativity scene, and took too many pictures of people putting up the large Christmas tree outside of the church. Next we went to my favorite stop, the Shakespeare and Co bookstore. This is the place that Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and the rest of the lost generation wrote their novels as ex-pats in Paris. Then we walked around the Latin Quarter and then to the Ile-de-Louis, which is the much quieter island next to the one Notre Dame is on. We had dinner at a fabulous little creperie before walking past the Bastille on our way home. Instead of going out like many young students in Paris, we snuggled up in bed and watched Christmas movies, excited to have the season begin.

Our next morning we woke up and headed to the Galleries Lafayette to do a little shopping, both Christmas and personal before we caught our train to Brussels. The mall was all decorated for the holidays, which cheered us up since Italy hasn't begun the season yet. When we arrived in Brussels after a short train ride, we were surprised to see that everything was decorated for the holidays.

In Brussels the air actually smells like powdered sugar and sweetness. Compared to Rome, which doesn't smell very good, Paris and Brussels both smell like baked goods and sugar, something we much prefer. We headed first to the Comic Strip Museum which should have been renamed the Tintin Museum. Apparently Belgium has quite a few famous comic strip artists, including the man who created Tintin and The Smurfs, which both had movies in theaters this year. The museum was fun and different after all the art museum and churches we had spent time in during the last two months.

After the museum we went and saw the Manikin Pls, which is a fountain of a young boy peeing. I wish I was joking but people there are obsessed with it. We even saw sculptures of him in chocolate as we walked around. We had dinner at a waffle place where I perhaps had the most delicious and expensive waffle of my life. It was worth it because there isn't really breakfast in Italy. My new favorite type of Belgian waffles is ones with maple syrup and whipped cream; it's absolutely amazing.

After dinner we started walking around when we stumbled upon a Christmas festival right next to the Church of Saint Nicolas. We saw a light show at the town center that included lights on the town hall, a giant Christmas tree, and a nativity scene with very lifelike wax figures. Then we walked along the booths which included Christmas ornament shops, many bars, and a few clothing boutiques. There was a Ferris wheel, other carnival games, and an outdoor ice skating rink. It was magical to walk through and made me so excited to go home for the holidays. Before we caught our train back to Paris, we grabbed some hot French fries, which were invented in Belgium.

Saturday morning began with us waking up, quickly eating two croissants, and heading to the Louvre to meet up with my best friend Cathy who is studying in Dijon. After a giant scene in front of the pyramids greeting one another, we went inside the museum. We spent three hours in the museum looking at all the French, Italian, and other European paintings since we were a little strung out on Greek, Roman, and Etruscan vases from our last two months studying them every day. We saw the famous Mona Lisa and some other famous works, but they were not our main attraction. I had never been so happy to see paintings by Pissarro, Monet, Manet, Picasso, Renoir and Sibley, since impressionists are quite the opposite of ancient art.

Next we went to the famous Tulleries Gardens and spent a little time around there before having the most amazing lunch at a little café on our way to the Eiffel tower. I've never had a better Croque Madame in my life (a Croque Madame is French bread with ham, an egg, and melted cheese on top).

We had bought our tickets in advance for the Eiffel Tower since we didn't want to wait in the long line and because we were going to the very top. I hadn't gone up at all last time when I was in Paris, so this was going to be something new for me. It was an amazing experience just for the view alone. It was so beautiful and not at all frightening. I have some amazing pictures from the top that I'll always keep.

Next we went to the Petit Palace, which is one of the buildings constructed for the world fair. It's an art museum now, and we saw a wide selection of art, including pictures of Paris from the 1860s to present. We walked along the Seine River to see the different bridges including Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in the city. As we walked Cathy back to the train station, we grabbed crepes from the cute little restaurant we had dinner at on the Il-de-Louis on Thursday night. Before we went to bed, we packed our bags up to leave Paris to head back to Rome.

Over the past two months, Rome has somehow become a type of home to me. While everyone else has felt homesick I haven't at all. I guess that may come from growing up all over the United States and having family in so many different parts of the country. For me, home is in many places. I can say London felt like home because of all the memories when I visited there as a little girl with my parents. I can say Washington D.C. where I lived when I was younger is my home too because I have friends and memories there as well. Chagrin, where I've lived for 14 years minus the time spent at Saint Mary's, is my hometown, and while I miss all the people and holidays there, I can't say I'm actually homesick. Saint Mary's College is just as much my home because it's where my life has been the last year and where I have countless friends.

While I can't wait to go home for the holidays, I'll be sad to leave the place I've lived for three months. I'll always have these memories to cherish because I've had an amazing time here. Studying abroad is an experience I'll never forget and I never want to. So much happens when you live in a foreign country. You grow in ways you never thought possible, you make new friends, and you also learn what little random things are important to you back home. I have exactly 19 days left in Italy and I'm going to make the most of them.