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The Experience of a Lifetime

Since the age of twelve I had dreamt about travelling to the Eternal City; walking the busy streets that were filled with vendors, while enjoying a mouth watering cone of gelato and browsing the windows of shops that sold art supplies, books, clothing and shoes. I had fallen in love with the architecture I had read about in art books throughout my schooling and became determined to fulfill this dream. I viewed the concept of studying abroad as a very powerful method for students to venture outside of their own lifestyle and experience opportunities that the rest of the world has to offer. By travelling to a new country, one must learn to adapt and be open-minded to ideas that are unfamiliar to their own. In addition, such a vast array of knowledge is gained, not only about the new country but also their own culture, as they begin to question their experiences. I came to Saint Mary's after hearing of the Rome program and speaking to students who had travelled there in prior years and realized this was my chance.

I decided to study abroad in Italy during the spring semester of my sophomore year, originally intending to be away for the full year but quickly accepting the change in plans. Although the first half of the journey turned out to be incredibly rocky, mainly the flights travelling there, I focused on the many positive experiences that each new day held. Walking to and from my classes was a daily adventure in itself, because I never knew what kinds of people I would pass along the way, such as the street vendors hoping to sell me an umbrella when it became cloudy. I learned so much about the Italian culture in the short amount of time I lived there and in doing so was able to reflect on the customs and beliefs we, as Americans, hold. One similarity I found very interesting was witnessing the continuation of the same patriarchal

society, which I have grown up with, almost five thousand miles away from home. It was overwhelming to realize the fight for gender equality was so much greater than I had initially realized. There were many surprises along the way, but each one helped to strengthen me into the woman I am today.

At the beginning of my journey abroad, I felt insecure and saw myself as yet another tourist entering the beautiful city, while sticking out like a sore thumb. This idea changed, however, the more I understood the Italian culture. Some days I felt like giving up on trying to fit into the culture because, let's face it, I was an American standing in the middle of Rome without any previous experience in this culture and completely unsure of what to expect next. Then, a tourist would come up to me with his or her pocket dictionary open and ask me for directions to la Fontana di Trevi or Via del Corso in a very distinct accent- not one shared in the Italian language, but rather some other European country. However, sometimes Italians would even walk up to me asking for directions as well. These instances would make me smile, as I offered them as much help as I could, because I realized how much knowledge and experience I had already gained.

There were many differences I found between the Italian and American cultures. My idea of fashion was dramatically changed over the course of the four months I was studying outside of the United States. In America- especially South Bend- I was accustomed to seeing girls in Ugg boots, North Face fleeces and designer handbags, whereas Italy, serving as one of the greatest fashion capitals in the world, offered designer everything at very high prices. Women were more often than not wearing knee high boots- either black or brown- to match the dark clothing of the season and always looking very presentable. This appeared to reinforce the idea

of Americans being lazy, because so often college students wear sweats or pajamas outside of their room or throw their hair back and go. On the other hand, however, this could be viewed as a certain type of freedom and lack of judgment that comes with being a part of our culture.

I was able to travel outside of Rome multiple times, giving myself the opportunity to experience multiple cultures. I learned that Europeans are very resourceful and only purchase those items that are necessary for the day, such as food, rather than the gluttonous American mindset of 'stocking up' for the week, causing so much to be wasted. The European lifestyle appears so much simpler than ours. Lodging, for example, was yet another difference I noticed. The idea of a five star hotel in America is huge, lavish, and expensive, whereas European hotels of this level remain very simple to the United State's standard.

The concept of family was very surprising to me as I travelled throughout Europe. In Rome, especially, the high cost for a couple to wed is incredibly high and therefore greatly limits the number of marriages that society sees. It is very common for unmarried couples to live together, have children, and create a lifestyle of what is viewed in America today as the standard family. There are both positive and negative effects to this decision, my Italian professor explained, because financially marriages are not always beneficial, but there is an obviously lower divorce rate and less pressure of commitment, therefore keeping families together longer.

My study abroad experience impacted me on such a deep level that I am not sure what my perspective on life would currently be had I not had the opportunity to undergo this life changing event. Returning to the United States excited me, because I missed my family, friends, and the familiarity of the culture that I was accustom to, but it also greatly affected me in terms

of the reverse culture shock many students face. I had learned more about my culture and lifestyle than I ever could have by remaining home surrounded by it, and by being away for four months I had a stronger appreciation for the freedom we experience on a regular basis, not to mention the unlimited space our nation offers. Rome has changed my life forever and I am so thankful I was able to make the journey toward fulfilling one of my oldest and most desired dreams. I would recommend this experience to any student interested in deepening their cultural understanding of either their own country or of another.