

Unconventional Study Abroad in Florence

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To contextualize this piece, I feel obliged to give a breakdown of the CET Florence - Summer, Class of 2018. Of the 18 students in the program, I was the only international student. I was also the only "non-William" male student in the program. I guess this could make sense given we had three guys in the program. Needless to restate, my claim to adding diversity to this program is well-substantiated. However, I have never perceived this as a disadvantage. If anything, being an unconventional study abroad student adds to your value proposition as a friend, colleague, and member of the community since people are out there to experience the unfamiliar.

The first day of the program is perhaps the one that feels the most awkward, as people tell where they are from during the orientation. Then one kid ends the streak of "City, State" formation and tells he is from this overseas place. They naturally can't help but add a little intonation, as if they are trying to imply that the situation is not only a surprise to others but also to themselves. The inescapable truth is that those who feel dissimilar due to their social identities can feel insecure about their perceived difference, especially when they are in such homogeneous groups like study abroad classes. In reality, this is as big a deal as you make it. The ecosystem created by participants is highly inclusive; in fact, I only use this word for lack of a better expression since there is no separation engendered by one's identities to begin with. I personally found that people were either indifferent to or intrigued by my background; never has this been an obstacle in my experience with peers, instructors, staff, or people in the local community.

I wish I could avoid the cliché, but the best part of my experience was the people I have met. This was not limited to those in my program, or even my city. The yogi running an all-natural gluten-free gelato shop in Venice, the guy whose family had their panini shop for 5 generations, the custodian in Napoli train station... Every corner of every place I visited was abundant with opportunities to have exchanges with vastly diverse and interesting people. I firmly believe that my identities enriched some of these conversations beyond anything I could have anticipated.

As a piece of general advice, I would like to encourage any nontraditional prospective study abroad student consulting this piece to keep in mind the following during their experience: Good things often happen, bad things rarely happen. The setbacks and inconveniences pale in comparison to the enriching and fascinating aspects of studying abroad, regardless of your personality. And when less pleasant things do happen, the support network made available by CET, Vanderbilt, and peers is absolutely phenomenal.

The most important moments where my identities played a significant role were those I leveraged

them to connect with people of similar backgrounds. For example, I have spent a night at the train station after missing the last train to my destination, leaving me without a hostel reservation for the night. There, I met with someone from my hometown and we chatted for six hours straight as we waited for the first trains in the morning. In this sense, I usually felt like some of these connections I have made were even deeper than those enjoyed by most colleagues since it is less common to come across someone with my particular background.

Having discussed some of the more general aspects pertaining to the study abroad experience, I would like to take a moment to share my two cents on Italy. This amazing place has so many wonders to explore! I have spent most of my weekends travelling in Italy, including Sicily. Being an art history enthusiast, I felt compelled to check out pretty much all the museums on my path. Soon I realized that the cities themselves were so aesthetically pleasing that strolling the streets was no different than stepping into a museum. Despite exploring many cities like Rome, Venice, Pisa, Siena, Palermo, Catania, Salerno, Napoli, and San Gimignano, I couldn't find anywhere more enchanting than Florence. I would strongly encourage all prospective participants to take the time to fully appreciate their home base if they do end up in Florence.

Finally, the assistance and guidance provided by the program staff in addressing practical aspects of the program was flawless. I think this is of paramount importance as it allows students to focus on the more enriching aspects of their time there without distractions. However, CET went above and beyond by offering various activities for students every Tuesday, which fostered a sense of community among the program participants as we partook in enjoyable activities together in the local area. This was definitely one of my favorite aspects of the program.