

Studying abroad in Florence, Italy has completely altered and reshaped my outlook on life. Such an experience has impacted me on innumerable levels, and has broadened my scope of knowledge and understanding, touching my life on a level more significant than any textbook, film, or professor could achieve alone. Not only was I able to build upon my body of knowledge pertaining to culture and art, but furthermore, I am now more fully able to understand and relate to people of various cultural backgrounds and heritages.

When I first embarked upon such a journey, I had yet to fully grasp the colossal impact such an experience would have upon my life, my priorities, and my future. Now, looking back upon such an experience, I cannot help but feel overwhelmed with feelings of pride, enrichment, and accomplishment. Through such an adventure, I gained priceless memories, which will inevitably paint my memory forever. Moreover, I have grown and matured in a special way which I truly believe could never have been achieved if not fostered and inspired by the uniqueness of such an experience.

I believe it is both rare and priceless to have the tremendous opportunity to fully immerse oneself in a disparate culture over a span of four months. My study abroad experience gave me the chance to view Florence through a unique, inimitable lens. I was able to view the streets with my own curious, inquisitive eyes. I was able to experience the city's culture through the captivating stories of Florentines which spanned over generations of people and time. I was able to relive the history of the ancient city through the knowledge and wisdom of my professors. I was able to eat, taste, touch, smell, hear, and feel the powerful culture of Florence which surrounded me. I was able to fully immerse myself in a city in which every church, piazza, restaurant, and cobblestone street seemed to awaken my senses in a new and sensational way. I was not forced to experience the city solely from the distant overview of a tourist; I was able to become a part of the city, to submerge myself in its roots. Through such an experience the city of Florence came to occupy a special place in my heart; a city I love and admire with the deepest of passion.

Throughout the course of my study abroad experience I was able to meet and interact with people of unique and distinctive cultural backgrounds from all over the world. I found myself enthralled by their extraordinary experiences and inherent zest which they seemed to possess for life. I frequently inquired about their unique heritages in the quest to internalize the distinct qualities which made their cultural roots so special.

As I walked around the city of Florence I found myself surrounded by little pizzerias, small boutiques, and "mom and pop" style restaurants. The quaint streets and shops of Florence had managed to retain their antique character; their culture has not yet given way to the vastly commercialized modern landscape of contemporary society. Large corporations and skyscrapers do not yet adulterate the city's time-honored streets. Within the borders of the entire city, I discovered the presence of solely two large billboards. Such a sum seemed astonishing when juxtaposed with innumerable advertisements which adorn the facades of New York architecture.

The absence of large industries and “big businesses” in Florence perplexed me. In the absence of large corporations, what constituted a “good” job? I wondered if there was a place for the corporate employee within Florence, and if there was, did they make more money than the old man who owned the small pizzeria down the street? As a marketing major, I wondered if my specialized sector of business even existed within the context of such a city.

I sought to uncover the answers to such inquiries, asking several of my Italian friends what a “good” job was in Florence. They each responded with a disparaged expression, advising me that I must distinguish the differences between the Italian and American cultures. Perhaps my friend Christian answered my question most eloquently when he said, “You must understand that there is no definition of a “good” job in Italy. In our culture, a job is not what is important. In America, upon meeting a new acquaintance, the first thing a person typically divulges is their name, followed quickly by their professional title. Here, in Italy, we disclose details of our family, our friends, our hobbies, or passions, and only thereafter would we mention our job. Here, it is the person, not their job which constitutes their worth and status within society. Our professions constitute only a portion of our beings. A man who owns a small pizzeria has a “good” job, not because of his daily salary, but rather, because he owns a shop where his friends and family can come to visit and chat; a special piece a family’s heritage which can be passed down from generation to generation.”

Stories such as Christian’s can truly come to highlight the worth of such an experience; an experience which reshaped my outlook on life and what truly constitutes happiness. I believe that it is all too often that we become “stuck” in our own lives. Stuck in the same routines and the same schedules; stuck in society’s narrow definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, of what is prestigious, and of what truly constitutes worth in one’s life. Studying abroad provides an opportunity to experience new outlooks, views, and perceptions of life. It provides one with the opportunity to step back and re-evaluate one’s life, goals, and ambitions. It allows the individual to view the world through their own distinctive lens.

While studying abroad I sought to fill each day with adventure, knowledge, and excitement. I constantly visited museums, churches, and historical sights. I spent countless hours simply walking down Florence’s quaint streets, enjoying the vivacity and passion of the Italian culture. I could not fathom spending a beautiful afternoon watching TV or surfing the internet at a café; I knew my time in Florence was limited and wanted to fully take advantage of such an opportunity.

If nothing else, I have taken with me the value of life itself; the gift of life which is truly fascinating, capricious, and magnificent. Now that I am back at home, I realize the importance of living each day to the fullest, taking risks, and enriching one’s life with new experiences. I believe that we often take life for granted; unable to fully internalize that life’s timeline is not infinite. Inevitably opportunities and experiences will pass us by. Opportunities we may never be able to get back. Studying abroad has truly reignited my zest for life. I have come to realize that whether we are milking a cow in Storrs or walking down the halls of the Uffizi gallery, each new experience is powerful and

invaluable. My semester in Florence, Italy has truly ignited me with a desire to fill each day with new and exciting experiences. The Italian culture truly taught me the importance of living life with passion. And it is now, for the first time, that perhaps I truly understand the importance of “Carpe Diem”.