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How was Europe? Did you have a good time? What was your favorite? Do you miss it? Are you glad to be home? These are all questions one is asked when they return from studying abroad. All great questions in moderation. Study abroad is a fulfilling adventure that I was lucky enough to have experienced. Italy was a breathtakingly beautiful country, offering coastline, architecture, simplicity, bustling cities, and adventure. Living in Florence for four months was quite the experience. My apartment was located in the heart of the city neighboring with the famous cathedral known to us as the Duomo, providing an once-in-a-lifetime view. Florence provided an excellent center point to travel the rest of Italy and Europe with ease. I traveled to 23 major cities in 7 different countries. It was amazing. I learned so much about myself when I traveled with people or alone.

My travels taught me that although traveling alone teaches you independence, I am definitely a group traveler. I need to be able to express myself vocally. I explored Paris on my own, while staying with my uncle's brother and his family. Even with being a large city, Paris was easy to navigate. I made it to all of the major sites and the French Open. While Paris was exciting and fun, I missed the companionship of someone to share it with. I am glad I usually had friends with during travels, and that my roommates in Florence and I became close because of it.

My first few weeks in Florence were a bit overwhelming and a little disorientating. Anytime I would go outside, I felt I was confused. If I left the cathedral, I became nervous that I would get lost and not be able to find my way home. I constantly thought things were either more complicated to get to or too simple. The feeling of disorientation and nervousness made me scared that I would never figure it out—partly due to me being directionally challenged. That feeling fully and completely left me after 3 weeks or so. By then I felt that I could safely, promptly, and confidently navigate a majority of the entire city. Streets are not always in a straight, orderly construction. This experience opened my eyes to the challenges of new, foreign cities. I learned that not all streets are

marked, some roads just end, and European signs are wacky. Florence is just a different culture that I was not used to, but greatly enjoyed learning.

On the weekends I left the beautiful Florence to explore other regions of Europe, I gained a taste of all the diverse cultures that the world has to offer. Valuable knowledge that is only acquired through exploring new places. A standout experience for me was simply when I would walk in the streets of the different cities. Each city has its own unique walking style based on their culture. Italy is very much walk, at a good pace, and not look at others. Croatia is all about leisure and the occasional glance at others. France is bustle and straight ahead focus. Bikes. Bikes. And more bikes is Holland. All distinguishable forms making the country memorable. It demonstrates how the world is full of different cultures. It was interesting for me, and I made the point to pay attention to the walking standards of each new place. It really says a lot about the lifestyle of the people.

Another thing I found interesting about the difference in culture of Italy was that they have organized, planned strikes. Train, public transportation, or even air strikes were common, something I was not at all familiar to. This decision by the people of Italy had a major impact on a few of my travels. What should have been a nice, easy 5 hour train ride, turned into over 26 hours of misery. My sister, her husband, and I were in Nice, France for the weekend and learned the night before our return to Florence that there would be a train strike the next day, meaning potentially no trains would run all day. We frantically looked into every single possible option to return to Florence. We looked at car rentals, buses, flights, other trains, rideshares, literally everything we could think to no avail. We got stuck in Ventimiglia, Italy for 9 hours. Eventually, we left and had 4 train transfers and countless hours worrying if we would make it home. Finally hours later, we arrived in Florence at nearly one the next morning purely exhausted. This decision by the train workers not only took away from our time, but thousands of others as well. A decision like this greatly affected my siblings experience and attitude of Italy as a whole—they would then continue to travel and have 2 more air

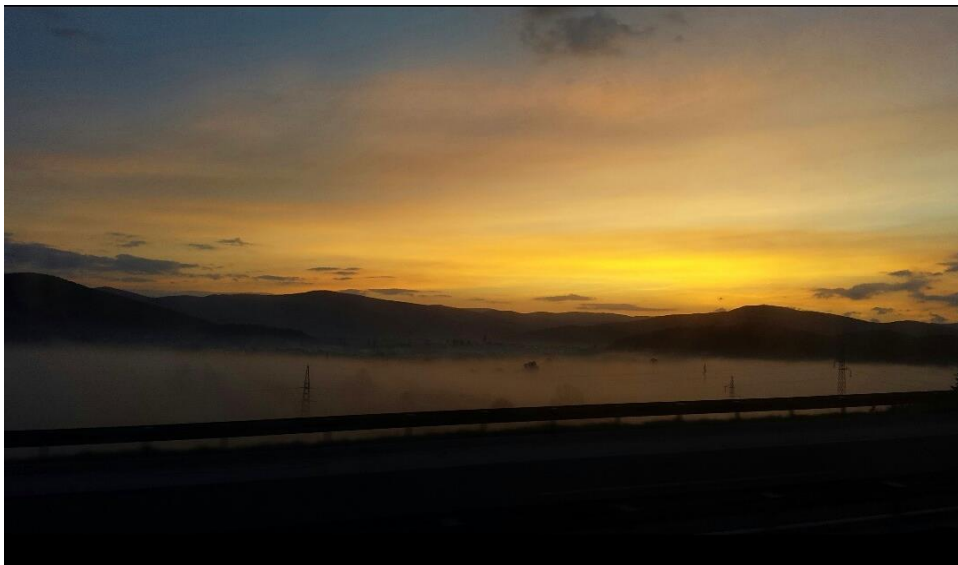
staff strikes. They left Italy exhausted, and I sent them off with 4 midterms staring me down. It was a long week, but we made the best of it and enjoyed the memories we made.

On another note, Italy was a time of change and decision making for me. During all of my adventures, my mind was constantly swirling with ideas for potential majors. Until April of this year, I had been undeclared. Being a 2<sup>nd</sup> semester sophomore, I was beginning to think that I would never figure it out. I have always known I wanted to work with children but did not wish to teach or be in a hospital. This past fall semester, I volunteered at Eau Claire's Boy's and Girl's Club and absolutely loved it. Having this experience, I knew I would enjoy volunteering in Florence as well. So, I signed up to volunteer at a local school to help the elementary students with their English. This volunteering was so fulfilling in so many ways. Just making connections alone with the kids made it completely work it. This experience spurred me to question my old boss at the Boy's and Girl's Club as to how she became supervisor of the club. Through emails, I found out she majored in Organized Communications and Leadership. After thoroughly researching the major and discussing with my advisor, I decided to declare Organized Communications with an emphasis on nonprofits. I believe this is what God wants me to do, and I am intrigued to see where it will lead me. Without volunteering in Florence, I may have never made this decision. Being at that school, reminded me of how much I love the feeling of giving back.

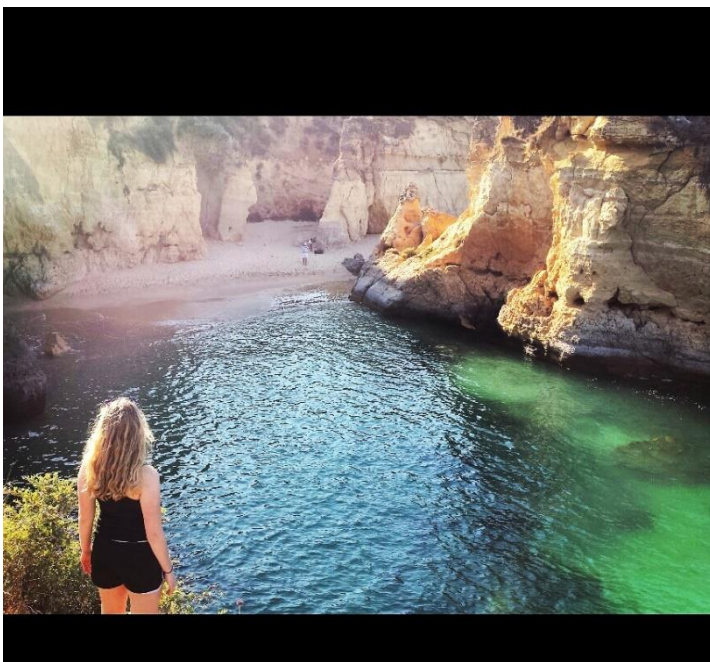
Italy. What an extraordinary adventure that was! It opened up my eyes even more to the great possibilities this world has to offer. Studying in Florence for 4 months is something that I will always refer back to, talk about, and relive all of the amazing memories. From eating delicious pizza to solo traveling to dancing until the wee hours of the morning to making friends with the waiters in the restaurant below us, Florence showed me what it is like to be outside my comfort zone and truly live.



*Florence. The city of possibilities.*



*A beautiful sunrise from a quiet bus on its way to Croatia for the weekend.*



*Lagos, Portugal. Relaxation, freedom, adventure.*