

Living in Italy has profoundly changed the way I think, and I'm sure there are more ways that I have changed that I have not consciously realized. Yet even now, I am able to recognize three large changes in myself – that of healthy lifestyle, a different way to travel and engage in culture, and the understanding of both the historical and institutional culture that explains why Italy is the way it is. For the first change, about two months ago I started a couch to 5K fitness program. While I have not yet completed my 5K...

*“Congratulations, you have completed your goal of 2 miles,” says the programmed voice on my Nike fit.*

Today was an incredible day, reaching a goal I never thought was possible. For an out of shape asthmatic who has never run a mile without walking before, two miles feels like a huge accomplishment. And this change, the change to be healthy, is due entirely to a change in mentality from living in Italy. Walking more, the change of lifestyle, and eating healthier all started when I came here. I can assure you that it was not voluntary at first – my body and I complained about my site visits that were over a mile away. My calves hurt those first weeks, as I was not used to walking this much. And yet this, with my forced organic diet, meant that I was losing weight. For the first time in all of college experience was my belt size going down instead of up. This combined with the fact that I was finally sleeping eight hours, I felt better than any time I can remember. I have learned about healthy living and making healthier choices all around me here in Italy. My host mother has converted me to become a large fan of olive oil. Her healthy, yet tasty, organic dishes are now something that I am excited for each night, not something I am forced to eat. Eating better, walking and now running more, and sleeping more is not about the loss of weight for me – it is about how I feel better. I am able to stay awake in my classes and can just appreciate my surroundings much more.

*“You have 200 meters to go,” says the programmed voice on my Nike fit.*

Traveling in Italy is not the first time I have truly traveled, and I doubt it will be the last. Yet this experience has taught me how fulfilling, rewarding, and fun it is to truly engage in the culture. When I went to my annual physical after returning from India I had high cholesterol. But that is what you get for just eating dominoes and subway for lunch and dinner for 2 and a half months. Ultimately, my style of travel was not about immersion into culture at all. While I have had the good fortune to be able to travel, I did not always attempt to learn the language, I often frequented American chain restaurants, and I primarily hung out with Americans. And yet the forced interaction that Syracuse abroad requires and I was worried about, is precisely one of the things that I enjoy the most. Through my interactions with local high school students through LAC, or Florentines through Spazio Conversazione, or my host mom every night at dinner, I have been able to both hear the stories about how people live, and understand the culture in a way I never have before. It has given me the confidence to have random conversations with shopkeepers and talk to Italian tourists or waiters either in Florence or in Italy. This experience in Italy

truly changed the way I see immersion and its importance when traveling, and has allowed me to appreciate the richness of the Italian culture.

*"You have reached your half way point," says the programmed voice on my Nike fit.*

The first turning point for me in Italy was through my academics. One of the first questions I asked my Italian teacher was definitely rude and uninformed "So what do Italians do or make?" In America there is a pervasive image of a relaxed Italian culture and high unemployment- being the fault of the country and lazy people. In the United States I understand how there are institutional and organizational reasons that a gender gap or a racial gap exists. Yet, I never knew that there could be institutional and historical reasons for the unemployment or the conditions in Italy. Learning history here has not just been about facts, it often keeps in mind the bigger picture. It helps me to understand the complexities in life today. It helps me to understand Italy more. Understanding the history of Italy – the sensitivities and points of pride allow me to better understand not only current problems but the culture and the people I meet. This expansion in thought process has allowed me to be more opening, accepting, tolerant, and curious about people in Italy today.

*"Press start to get started now," says the programmed voice on my Nike fit.*

Quite honestly, when I thought about Italy I was very excited to travel and study here for the fun of it. For the adventure – I was seeking a more glorified vacation. Strenuous academics were not important to me. Engaging in the culture was definitely not on my list of things to do – unless that meant window-shopping and eating heaping plates of pasta. And I definitely did not intend to make this trip about becoming a healthier version of myself. And yet reflecting on this experience, these were the three things that stuck out the most as the most fulfilling parts of being in Italy. I did not expect to change to "realize I could make it" on my own – because I already knew that. I, in fact, did not expect much engagement at all. And yet, my experience has been so incredibly rewarding because of how engaged I am. For all of these changes to my life and more, I can only thank my good fortune and love of pasta that drove me here to experience a more unconventional transformation.