

Expect the Unexpected

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My painting teacher thinks I'm weird. Granted, her assessment was probably prompted by the fact that I am painting a paper gelato cup filled with artichokes for my final art piece. While this arrangement may be unconventional, I chose it deliberately. It strangely represents my study abroad experience in Florence for the past three months: different from what I had anticipated, but still, at least to my taste buds, delightful.

I came into my semester abroad with soaring expectations. I thought my daily routine would consist of me frolicking amidst the winding roads of Firenze, nutella-flavored gelato in hand, as I stumbled upon artistic masterpieces at every turn. Although most of this scenario has, in fact, occurred during my time here, there were aspects about Florence that I did not expect, both good and bad: the decrepit condition of the buildings, the overwhelming kindness of my host mom, the looming purple cloud that resides over the city for January and February, and the surprising omnipresence of little, pet dogs. Once I reconciled my preconceived image of Florence with the actual, tangible Florence, I was able to fully appreciate how wonderful, not just the city was, but the entire concept of studying abroad in a foreign country.

We Americans are privileged. Although I wish that a semester abroad did not have to serve as the impetus for me to respect foreigners in the U.S. more, I now realize, being a foreigner myself, how comfortable and easy my life in the U.S. was. I took for granted my natural citizenship and all of the inherent benefits that come

with it. Growing up, I rarely considered how difficult some aspects of a foreign country might be to non-natives, such as the language, customs, and geography. As someone who did not speak a word of Italian before I arrived, even simple acts such as mailing a postcard, exchanging currency, and finding specific toiletries were initially difficult for me in Italy. I made a conscious effort to learn Italian as best as I could, and found that Italians were much more willing to help when we non-Italians did so. As a foreigner, I now know what it feels like to receive the occasional disapproving glance from Italians. I also know, however, that people respect you much more if you make the effort to learn about their culture, speak a little of their language, and embrace some of their customs.

While I am not trying to say that Americans should completely disown their nationality for their time abroad, students should make significant endeavors to understand the city they are in, and what makes the people in that city different. Florentines are loud, passionate, and fiercely proud of their city. They spend quality time with their family and friends, whether through nightly home-cooked meals or sipping cappuccinos together at local cafés. Unlike Americans, Florentines do not rush to work, and they certainly do not take their meals to go. They live in the moment every day, and build deep connections with their loved ones because of this. When I return to the U.S., I hope to infuse as much meaning into my daily life as they do.

I think every person should live in a foreign country for some part of his or her life if they are able to. It is a humbling experience; one that forces you to grow, whether you feel ready or not, and gives you a greater awareness of how other

people lead their lives. Too often we become so accustomed to our own routines that we do not think about other towns, countries, or even continents that share this world with us. Whether one comes out of his or her abroad experience preferring the United States, Italy, or none of the above, one thing is clear: studying abroad is an experience greater than all of the gelato in the world.