

The Little Abroad Student That Should

“All right, everyone; take out a pen or pencil.”

No one moved. *Is this guy serious?*

“Come on, now, don’t be shy. Dear friends, this is of utmost importance. The following are six *roo*-bricks that you must bear in mind for the journeys that await. It would serve you well to heed them, yay-nay?”

“Yay,” everyone mumbled in solemn affirmation, displaying a mere fraction of the man’s enthusiasm. But this was no fault on our part; it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to match his mannerisms. His speech, an affected mixture of British, Canadian, and opera, sang loudly throughout the large room; his large, somewhat crazed eyes looked out at us intently; his even larger, disproportionate hands moved frantically in all directions. Many could not contain their laughter for the man’s ridiculous flair for the dramatic—he acted as if he was about to tell us something that would change our lives for eternity. Nevertheless, because Dr. Ralph Williams is arguably the most revered professor at the University of Michigan (this side of Merla Wolk), we obliged. As if we understood perfectly what he was saying, we casually scribbled down the following:

- 1) To create the self
- 2) Going native
- 3) Getting real; only connect
- 4) Refigure, not recap
- 5) Of discos...and infirmaries
- 6) You can’t go home again

I was too distracted by Dr. Williams’ antics (such as the last word actually being pronounced “a-gane”) to fully comprehend his six points individually. However, his overall message to me and the other students at this U-M General Study Abroad Orientation was clear. He—a former study abroad director himself of, coincidentally, the U-M Florence program—was educating us as to what we *should* accomplish in our travels abroad. What he said to us was what

we were *supposed* to do in order to have the true study abroad experience. He was, after all, an authority. We were lucky to be able to gain such invaluable information, weren't we?

Perhaps. But then again, how could he possibly have known what would be good for *me* in my trip overseas? For that matter, what made anyone—orientation speakers, friends, and even family members—think that they knew what I should do overseas? “Oh, Florence? You should definitely see all the art that you can.” “Make sure you travel everywhere.” “You need to make friends with the Italian locals.” Sure, their intentions were undoubtedly good, but did their advice really benefit me or prepare me for the overseas experiences that I would ultimately have? Or did all of it just create unnecessary expectations that would inevitably result in disappointment? In order to answer these questions, it's probably best to try and see what I've actually come away with during my time in Italy.

So take out a pencil, everyone. Here, specifically for the U-M/Wisconsin (Thirty Minutes Outside of) Florence Program, are my own six “rubrics.” Hell, call them whatever you want to; I don't care. Just make sure that you write them down. After all, they may change your lives forever.

* * *

1) To create the cheap and easy trip...Good luck.

One of the pearls of wisdom I received most often from various former study abroad students pertained to travel around Europe. Predominately, these pieces of advice involved the words “RyanAir,” “EasyJet,” “cheap,” and “easy.” This advice got me excited for many reasons, amongst which was the possibility of seeing my girlfriend—who would be studying abroad in Seville, Spain—relatively often. When I looked at a map of Europe and marveled at how close everything was to Italy, I expected that I would be traveling all the time, to as many places as I could. I mean, that was what I *should* do, right?

But my experience traveling around Europe has generally been far from what I and any normal person would call “easy.” And when it has been relatively easy, it has not been what I and

any normal person would call “cheap.” For starters, Easy Jet does not fly anywhere from Italy except relatively northern places like London, Paris and Berlin. (Maybe they call it Easy Jet because it’s so “easy” to see that it can’t really help you get anywhere.) So with no other cost-effective options, I have resorted to spending many frustrating hours on the RyanAir website—with London as the only cheap excursion that I have to show for it. And even the thrill of the inexpensive ticket quickly wore off when I found myself spending literally 100 U.S. dollars just to get to my hostel. I owed my gratitude to a killer cab ride and the fact that “London” Stansted Airport, like virtually every other Ryan Air airport, is not really in the city at all, but over an hour and a half away (in case you were wondering, Ryan Air does not include this minor detail on their website).

Virtually all other flights to places I’ve actually wanted to go have been unreasonably priced. Living in (or near) Florence, whose airport is smaller than some American parking lots, has not helped much. In fact, Josh and I were so excited that we found a cheap plane ticket that we actually had a serious discussion about going to Hamburg, Germany (neither of us speak German or knew before that Hamburg even existed). Even if we had ended up taking that trip—our good sense thankfully kicked in—we most likely would have had to spend the night at the popular accommodation of London Stansted Airport’s floor. That’s right—one of the added benefits of Ryan Air’s inconvenient and unaligned flight times is the opportunity to be a homeless person for the night. Oh, boy!

So what did I do after the London/Ryan Air debacle? Despite all of the people who told me that I should go anywhere and everywhere (folks who probably would’ve gone to Hamburg), I resolved to go to a few places that I actually had the personal desire to visit—namely Barcelona, Greece, and various places within Italy don’t entail the hassle of flying. As a result, I’ve enjoyed them all. No overnight stays in airports, no flights to places far away from cities, and definitely no Hamburg. I have no regrets about where I haven’t traveled, and I don’t plan to have any.

Except maybe one—there are many former-abroad students-turned-amateur-travel-agents that I need to thank for their wonderful advice. And rest assured; they will be thanked properly.

2) *Going native—it's pretty much impossible.*

Ralph's Williams' rubric of "going native" coincided with my main goals in coming to Italy: to immerse myself in the culture, improve my language skills, and generally live and feel like an Italian. My expectations for this were high; I had previously had a wonderful experience abroad—in a small Spanish town comparable in size to Sesto Fiorentino—in which I eventually came to feel like part of a native family and even part of the community. My Italian heritage made me almost certain that I would feel an even greater connection with Italy than Spain.

Unfortunately, however, I have very rarely felt a strong connection with the country. Living in the Villa Corsi-Salviati and constantly speaking English with sixty other American students has severely limited my ability to immerse myself. In Florence, during the twenty five or so times I have actually managed to go there, too often I have been treated like just another tourist. I have been constantly harassed to buy merchandise, yelled at in English, and scoffed at for daring to call myself Italian just because my grandfather was (though I was almost arrested once because the security guard thought I was shoplifting a pair of sunglasses. What a thrill it was to be treated like an authentic Italian criminal).

For this aspect of my abroad experience, I have learned to just do the best I can. When I ask someone in Italian a question, for instance, and they respond to me in English, I am sure to fire back in Italian. Despite being literally walled off from the rest of Italy, I have managed to improve my Italian speaking skills. I have even attempted to blend in with the Italians by purchasing a pair of items I have never owned—a leather jacket, and a pair of sunglasses not purchased off the street or at a gas station. Even with these steps towards "Italian-ness," I have come to grips with the fact that I have little control over how native Italians perceive me, and I should not let them affect my enjoyment of being in their country.

3) *Getting real-ly close to 70 others: Americans, Italians, a dog, chickens, and a House Fellow.*

Last semester, one piece of advice I particularly remember receiving came from a girl in my Italian class who had spent the previous semester with the U-M (Just Outside of) Florence Program. When I told her that I too was going to be living in the Villa Corsi-Salviati, she wrinkled her nose and told me, “I got really tired of the Villa. It’s so claustrophobic. Make sure you make friends with Italians, because I got really sick of the other Americans.”

Even before hearing this, I was not looking forward to having to meet a whole new group of people. In fact, the whole obligatory process of it—introducing myself, feigning interest, forgetting people’s names—was what I was most dreading about leaving my life at home. Sounds strange, doesn’t it? You would think that I would have had other, more pressing concerns that come with moving to a foreign country (e.g., the language barrier, getting lost, homesickness). Plus it’s not as if I am generally an anti-social person. But leaving the comfort zone of a social life two and a half years in the making was downright annoying. I was a junior, for chrissake, not a freshman. In fact, my first night at the Villa—during which I silently watched twenty five people I didn’t know sip two-euro wine and talk as if they’d known each other for years—reaffirmed these anxieties. *Four months isn’t that long*, I remember consoling myself...*Right?*

Of course, I soon came to realize that, at least for me, one of the best aspects of the program has been the opportunity to meet so many new people. This is not to say that I have never longed for some personal space, but I have gotten to know many people at the Villa more intimately than I ever would have thought. (Some have even gone as far as to call it a family.) Regardless, I know that everyone at the Villa has had a major impact in shaping my experience here—probably even more than Italy itself.

These new relationships have in fact helped me gain new knowledge that I wouldn’t ordinarily have obtained. For example, I have acquired a newfound appreciation for Frisbee, hackey-sack and soccer—none of which I had even remotely enjoyed before. I have also developed

the tolerance to listen to the same song fifteen times in a row (the *Boondock Saints* theme, if you have never been lucky enough to be on the downstairs computers with me). I have not only become comfortable sharing a bathroom with two girls, but also talking freely about it. In addition to all of this, I have learned that “Mou” is the proper nickname for “Shreya,” that there exist people who actually appreciate being called an “evil leprechaun,” and that the name “Mavourneen” cannot possibly be spelled nor pronounced correctly by anyone but me (well, perhaps a few others, but not many). I can say with confidence that all of this would not have come to pass if I had not been thrust into the unique social situation that I had so dreaded.

4) *Relaxation, not rumination.*

Before I came to Italy, I was told many times how study abroad life was generally more laid-back its (often hectic) on-campus counterpart. I remember my friend Abby, who—like my disgruntled Italian classmate—spent a semester on the U-M (17 Euro Cab Ride from) Florence Program, laughing at me when I asked about the classes. “Classes? Don’t worry about *classes*. The professors understand that you’re in Italy. They’ll give you work, but you really shouldn’t worry about it.” I nodded, but I remember thinking to myself, I’m still going to worry about it. I have a GPA, graduate school, and my future to worry about. I won’t lose sight of the fact that it’s still college. Why should my mindset be any different just because I’m in another country?

Not surprisingly, I soon realized that Abby was actually right. It’s not that I’ve slacked off over here, but I did see rather quickly that the professors here have, for the most part, understood that we are not studying in the United States (despite all of our grumblings about the attendance policy). I have managed to keep my priorities relatively straight—as evidenced by my opting to write this paper now instead of playing Frisbee—but I have also learned not to stress myself out unnecessarily (something I am now realizing I probably do too often at home). This newly laid-back attitude has also helped me through various transportation mishaps and awkward Italian

interactions. Perhaps this is even a sign that I have embraced the Italian “art of inhabiting the earth” that Barzini describes.

Of course, I cannot claim that all of my priorities have been left completely intact. The other day I actually expressed frustration that I couldn’t start watching *Garden State* as soon as I wanted to because I “had to” go hang up flyers for the next “Club Room 8” party. Yes, it’s a tough life that I lead here in Italy, but somehow I’m managing to get through it. It’s almost over, I keep telling myself. One day at a time.

5) *Of being confined to a villa...and insanity.*

My disgruntled Italian classmate certainly alluded to the detriments of living in the Villa for so long. She did not warn me, however, that not only I, but also everyone else would all go somewhat insane. But we have. Believe me, I would know—I’m a psychology major. Whether this is due to the ever-increasing smell emanating from downstairs or the maddening adventures in trying to get the printers to actually work, I don’t know. What I have figured out is that if you take sixty one college students, subtract some luxuries like personal space, consistently-available food, heat, and stores that remain open throughout the day, you come out with some pretty bizarre events.

There is a great deal of evidence for this. Raise your hand, for example, if you check your email, on average, fewer than five times a day. (One, *maybe* two people can triumphantly claim this). Or if your heart doesn’t start pounding after even hearing the word *dolce* (I’ve witnessed my fellow “villains” clap and literally cheer with glee in response to the carting out of tiramisu). I personally am no exception to this epidemic, as I cannot deny passing the time by kicking around a piece of stale bread in my room, helping transform my room into the villa “night club,” or playing a recorder during soccer games. And quick: which of the following has my free-spirited roommate *not* been seen wearing as an article of clothing—a fanny pack, a rainbow “Pace” flag, or an Esselunga™ bag-turned-diaper? (If you answered (d), all of the above, you just may have won a free stuffed beaver!) Apparently there is also a “chalkboard bandit” on the loose—I can only hope

we catch him/her before it's too late (whatever that means). Think the adults at the villa are the exception to this madness? Try not one, but two forty-plus year old *professors* (one already has a broken ankle, for crying out loud) along with the villa secretary playing in a *Lord of the Flies*-esque soccer league—with their own students. Think Ralph Williams would be a willing goalkeeper?

I'm not sure anyone expected this kind of lunacy to come about. Perhaps it can be attributed to Barzini's "fatal charm of Italy:" this boot-shaped country's power to make people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do at home. Whatever the cause, it has certainly made being in Italy more enjoyable. Now if you'll excuse me, there is a game of "tag" waiting for me.

6) *You can go home again.* *In fact, on April 29, it's going to happen, whether you like it or not.*

When Dr. Williams said that we could never again go home, he of course meant it in the figurative sense. That is, his point was that after having these new experiences abroad, we would never perceive the world in the same way again (or something to that effect). Nevertheless, the truth is that I am actually going home very soon. As much as I can kick back here and live my Italian life, the reality of returning to my real life in the U.S. is inevitable. And as if I didn't realize this already, I have found myself—while writing this—scrambling to find both a summer subletter for my off-campus apartment and classes for the fall term, in addition to worrying about jury duty (the City of New York has summoned *me*, of all people, for May 10th) and the removal of my wisdom teeth.

At the same time, I can't say that I am not excited to return to some aspects of home. Having my own room, being able to do laundry when I want to, eating a hamburger, and riding in efficient transportation have, at times, been difficult to live without. I am starting to realize that while I have enjoyed my time here in Italy immensely, I don't think I would like to live here permanently. The American way of life is the one in which I was raised, and, for all its flaws, is the one that best suits me. Even if that means never playing soccer with any of my professors again.

*Finally, what you, dear study abroad student, “**should**” do.*

Back in January, during one particular Constructing Italy class, I stated that I was going to go see as much art as possible, because I should as long as I’m over here. Prof. Wolk asked me what that meant—what does it mean that you “should” be doing something? My initial reaction was defensive: well, Merla, I *should* be doing something because it is what I *want* to do. I *want* to travel to many places, see a great deal of art, and witness great places over here because it will enrich my experience.

But as I look back on the semester and think about what I’ve done here, I realize that this self-protective response was not correct. It is now clear that what I thought I wanted to do—what I thought would improve my experience—largely stemmed from other people’s expectations of what an abroad experience was supposed to be like. Instead, I should have realized that all of the advice that people gave me came from—understandably—their own overseas experiences. Ralph Williams’ proclaimed love of everything Florence most likely came from many personally fond memories. Similarly, it is likely that the girl in my Italian class found the villa too claustrophobic and/or “un-Italian” for her to have the overseas experience she would have liked.

Thus, my “rubrics” are not to be seriously taken as authoritative rules at all, but as mere examples of one person’s—my—study abroad experience. It has been, despite any advice I received or any direction I was pointed in, uniquely my own. I have come to realize that it doesn’t work to try and force myself to appreciate something just because someone else loved it or “packaged” it for me, or to make myself do things for the simple reason that I was advised to. My only regret concerning my time here is that I did not come to this realization earlier. I probably could have avoided most of the “is this it?” kind of feelings that came about from constantly evaluating everything I saw or did (e.g., not being floored at first sight of the Duomo) in light of what I was “supposed” to be doing, thinking, or feeling.

So, are we in accord? Come on now, yay-nay?