

Replacing The Myth

My friends back home would kill me if I sent them emails resembling Barbara Harrison's travel journals in *Italian Days*. So in an effort to prevent them from lapsing into a boredom-induced coma while reading my emails (and, admittedly, to save myself a little time), I've become accustomed to sending them short, straightforward messages full of clichés and pictures. Up to this point, I've pretty much gotten away with such nonsense. Very few have protested much about my overuse of the word "beautiful," and no one has demanded that I be a bit more specific about why I had such an "amazing weekend." When I return home, however, and find myself face-to-face with friends I won't be able to fend off their questions as easily as I can now with a computer between us.

Avoiding questions due to time constraints is most accurately referred to as an *excuse*. I've taken full advantage of this excuse whenever questions arise that I do not know how to answer. For instance, I tend to avoid responding to any sort of question involving personal reflection. I don't really know what to expect of myself and who I will be when I return home, but I do know one thing: there are equally as many expectations for my feelings at the end of the trip as there were when I began. I can hear these expectations in every phone conversation with a friend or family member back home. These expectations make up the great myth of the study abroad experience. "What could possibly go wrong? Italy, home of great food, great art, and great men... what's not to love?" How will I possibly describe my experiences abroad when I return?

I've set myself up for this inevitable confrontation from the very beginning while on my flight to Italy. I decided that I would make sure everyone back home thought I was having the "best time of my life, 100% of the time." After all, wasn't that how I was expected to feel? I was embarking on the experience of a lifetime, and I was afraid to admit to even myself that it might be anything less than amazing 24 hours a day. Even my friends who had studied abroad had never warned me to expect anything otherwise. If I ever expressed any apprehensions about leaving home, I was repeatedly reassured with statements such as, "you'll be in Italy; what could you possibly find to complain about?"

Shortly after my arrival in Italy, however, the answer to this question became glaringly obvious—my friends weren't in Italy. I was in a foreign country, surrounded by students who initially seemed equally "foreign". The vocabulary I had learned in one semester of Italian at Madison proved completely useless amidst everyday life in Sesto and created a vast language barrier. Running even basic errands was a ridiculous experience. I actually made so many mistakes while in a particular *tobacchi* (the one at the corner of *via Cavour* and *via Antonio Gramsci*) that to this day I am still too embarrassed to go back there. But, nonetheless, I was determined to put up the proper front and not confess to those at home of any occasional homesickness. And once I learned that other students at the Villa were also affected by this burden of fulfilling certain expectations, I turned to those around me instead of to those I'd left behind. As I became more comfortable in my friendships here and in my surroundings, the emailing pattern was set; my friends back home would receive nothing from me but clichés and pictures.

Only now do I realize the complexity of the situation that I've put myself into. If I return home and continue to share only the best moments of my semester, I'll be perpetuating the Study

Abroad Myth.[†] And thus arises a dilemma: if I simply continue to pass the Myth along, friends of mine who study abroad in the years to come may go through the same period of uncertainty and frustration that I went through when I didn't initially love Italy "100%." I felt that I was in some way emotionally weaker than my other friends who had made no mention of homesickness. I also felt much less capable, as they had apparently immediately discovered all of the most worthwhile bars and restaurants and had no problems with navigating their respective cities. But on the other hand, will my criticisms of life in Italy have any legitimacy once I return home? Is the Myth truly a misconception? Or, is it reality? Already I feel as though the Tuscan sun has quickly faded whatever feelings of insecurity I originally had, leaving me with seemingly insignificant complaints.

My friends have always commented on the fact that I only remember the good moments in life and disregard the rest. So in an effort to keep my "complaints from fading," here are a few of the things I intend to share with them. I will not miss (in no particular order) the following: the terrible exchange rate; dirty trains; the fact that I am still to this day intimidated when walking past a group of Italian 14-year-olds; the lack of toilet seats and/or having to pay to use the bathroom only to discover there is no toilet paper remaining; terrible Chinese food; the freezing Villa; stray animals that roam everywhere; I can never remember which keyboard at the Villa does not, in fact, contain an apostrophe key until I'm in the midst of a writing assignment and am forced to change computers (for future reference, it's the keyboard in the reference library); and last, but certainly not least, I will not miss the Italian men.

[†] **Stud•y A•broad Myth** (stū'd ē ə-brōd m'ɪth) *n.* The preconceived notion/misconception that life in a foreign country is incredibly easy and incredibly fun, 100% of the time. One who believes in the *Study Abroad Myth* often tends to think that he/she will return home a transformed individual after experiencing many so-called epiphanies abroad. In addition to effortlessly obtaining fluency in the language of the country of origin, the said individual will return home with the answer to many of life's most important questions. Due to divine inspiration, one will know exactly who he/she is and what he/she wants from life. *Under influence of the Study Abroad Myth Susie had mistakenly believed she would be sleeping in past 6:30 AM on the weekends.*

In a way, I think the majority of Italian men deserve some sort of credit for being so unrelenting. But at the very least, they deserve their own paragraph. To this day I still get emails from my friends wondering about the men in Italy. And my reply? The same as it has been since day one; that Italian men were, are, and always will be shady and sketchy individuals. And sure enough, a short time later, in complete disregard to my prior email, I will be re-asked about the Italian men. Surely this was the week that I met an Italian who swept me off my feet, we eloped, and I have decided to move here permanently. My response: I'll be coming home as planned. The men are *still* shady and sketchy. I only wish that I could adequately portray Italian men to those at home. That two men passing in a "car" (or, more accurately, a glorified tricycle, clearly large enough to function only as the play toy of a small child) will never miss an opportunity to flirt with a woman walking down the street. Their approach: persistent honking and lines in broken English yelled out the window. This constant attention from such forthcoming Italian men is number one on my list of "Things I Won't Miss When I Leave Italy."

Constructing a list of things I won't miss was not a difficult task. In fact, these things practically rolled off of my tongue. But they're not substantial. Not a single item I listed, individually or collectively, is reason enough to persuade me to oppose the Study Abroad Myth. It's only when I look at the larger picture, of what I've realized from my study abroad experience as a whole, that I could come up with a better debate. From the pitfalls and most difficult parts of life abroad I've learned the most about myself. I've had to learn how to accept a constantly changing environment and the need for flexibility when dealing with all of the problems that inevitably arise while traveling. I've realized that homesickness is not a weakness and that it certainly does not pass with time. I do not miss my friends any less, but rather I've learned to cope with their absence and find a greater value in the exchange of emails and brief phone

conversations. Perhaps most importantly, I now understand that my life can never just fall into place in the course of one semester. But even small realizations of one's self can be equally as important as a new life plan. For instance, I've been able to realize the value I hold of traveling and friendships. These new awarenesses, more so than any of the pitfalls themselves, are what will maintain significance when I return home.

To make sure that I'm adequately prepared to field questions from the opposite side, I also created a list of "Things I *Will* Miss When I Leave Italy:" waking up every weekend in a new city, ready to spend the entire day exploring; ordering a bottle of wine (or three...) while at dinner with friends, then spending hours talking and enjoying the food while never feeling rushed by the waiter; my excitement over scoring a goal in Villa soccer; working on my Frisbee technique whenever I get the chance; vowing to return to the Villa on the 12:40 AM bus but somehow never really making it once I'm out; the St. Patrick's Day party on the Terrace; people-watching in Piazza della Signoria; bargaining at the market over a 10 Euro pashmina scarf; the terrific little *pasticini* (little pastries) from a *caff * on the corner of Piazza del Republico, the name of which permanently escapes me; dolce nights at the Villa; walking among the olive groves in Sesto; the little sense of victory over a successful use of the Italian language; and, of course, the great food and great art.

After creating my list of "Things I *Will* Miss When I Leave Italy," I could have filled the page with dozens of more examples. So much of my experience here is wrapped up in the smaller moments, moments that I'm afraid friends and family back home would either never appreciate or never fully understand. Without these moments, however, I don't know how I'll ever be able to find the words to effectively describe my time here. Unless someone has about four solid days (and the willingness) to sit with me and listen to all the little details of my trip,

there is no possible way to portray Italy as anything other than “beautiful,” and my semester as an “amazing” time.

Perhaps the reason the Myth has been propagated throughout the years is that the ratio of “won’t miss” to “*will*” is ridiculously one-sided. So many great stories and great experiences come out of studying abroad that any complaints pale in comparison. Although I may still continue to fill my emails with clichés and pictures (while still relying on the excuse of time constraints), when I return home I hope to be more honest about my experiences by sharing everything negative alongside the positive. To me, the Study Abroad Myth, innocent as it may seem, is indeed a misconception. Life for no one, much less in a foreign country, is incredibly easy. The Study Abroad Truth[‡], on the other hand, would be much more beneficial to tell students before they embark on their own abroad adventure. As part of the Truth, I want others to know that they should not feel bad if not every moment is a great and glamorous one. Although you are indeed embarking upon the experience of a lifetime, even life in Italy has its ups and downs, and to expect anything different would be setting yourself up for disappointment. Perhaps by spreading the Truth, I can in some way shift the expectations of studying abroad into something a little more realistic.

[‡] **Stud•y A•broad Truth** (stū d ē ə-brôd trūth) *n.* While life in a foreign country is for the most part incredibly fun, one should not expect everything to be incredibly easy. While one indeed may return with a better idea of what makes him/her happy, he/she is in no way assumed to come back with his/her life figured out. *Spain wasn't exactly what Jimmy had imagined, but thanks to an understanding of the Study Abroad Truth he never wasted time wondering if he was to blame..*