

FROM: 2008 Scholarship recipient Brittany Luckham

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To The County of Santa Clara, CA.USA/Province of Florence, Italy, Sister-County Commission:

The night before my long flight to Italy, I packed up all my necessities with anxiety yet I was also incredibly excited. I had no idea what to expect, who I would be living with, or how I would feel about living in a foreign country. The next day, I said goodbye to my family, all of them with tears in their eyes, but I could not help but have a huge smile on my face. I knew that the experience of a lifetime was right in front of me.

I landed in Florence, Italy on September 2, 2008 exhausted but ready for whatever was about to be thrown at me. The next two days, the faculty of Syracuse University in Florence showed us around the main points of the city and introduced us to our new lives in Florence. Our school, the Villa Rossa, was beautiful and was located in Piazza Savonarola, just a ten minute walk from the Duomo. At the end of the week, the lists for the participating host families and the students that would be living with them were put up. Everyone gathered around the list as if seeing the name of our host families would give us some clue as to who they were. Thankfully, Syracuse provided each pair of roommates with a description of the family, what street we would be living on, and what local transportations were available within walking distance of our houses; then came the time for our scheduled meetings with our host families. I was so nervous and sat among the other students, all of us watching each family that entered and debating which family was ours. Finally, my name and that of my roommate were called. I was introduced to my host mom, Silvana, and was received with a huge hug and the traditional Italian double-cheek kiss.

Mamma, as we called her, is in her late 60s and has two older children, both of whom lived outside of her house. She does not speak any English besides “sugar,” “spoon,” and “boyfriend” which made the first few weeks a little difficult when trying to communicate. Before studying abroad, I took a year of Italian, thank goodness, because without that background I would have been completely lost in Mamma’s house. Living with Mamma was one of the main reasons why I ended up falling in love with Florence. When I applied for the scholarship from Santa Clara County, I discussed my interest in a full immersion into Italian culture, and that is exactly what I got in my abroad experience.

For the first month and a half that I was abroad, I spent my weekends traveling around Italy with a few weekends in between that I spent in Florence. I had asked students who had been abroad before me to tell me all about Florence, and I found that not many people could answer me. Most students spent so much time traveling that they really never experienced Florence. I made it my goal to know Florence like the back of my hand before I left, and I can now say that I accomplished this goal. I visited all of the major museums; I saw Michelangelo’s David a total of six times because I found that going alone and sitting beside this masterpiece was not only intellectually stimulating, but also spiritually calming; I climbed all 463 steps inside the dome to the top of the Florence Cathedral; I was given the opportunity to visit the terrace on top of

Orsanmichele which overlooked the city's main landmarks; I made my way up to Piazzale Michelangelo across the Arno which has the best view of the city; I sat among the pristine bushes of Boboli Gardens; I created intricate stationary at a paper shop; and of course, I become a gelato connoisseur.

Within Italy, I was able to visit most of the main cities of the country, all of which provided me with unique experiences and allowed me to improve my Italian speaking abilities. I traveled to Cinque Terre (the five lands), which are five cities that line the ocean but have hiking trails between them. I hiked all 9 miles of the trails and it was one of the most breath-taking experiences of my life. I visited Rome, the capital city, where I was able to see Scavi, the excavation of St. Peter's tomb that lies stories beneath the Vatican, the actual site where Peter was believed to be crucified, some of the world's oldest pieces of art in the Vatican museum, and the ancient Roman ruins of the Forum and the Colosseum; I braved a train strike and went to Perugia, which most tourists never hear of but is home to some of the best chocolate around; I celebrated my birthday in Genoa, a port city that has influences of modern art and various international cultures; I visited the typical tourist cities of Venice and Pisa and went wine tasting in the Chianti region. Through school offered trips, I was able to see the timeless beauty of Ravenna's mosaics; St. Apollinare in Classe which does not draw a large crowd but is one of the most beautiful churches I have ever seen; Arezzo, Monterchi, and Sansepolcro which house most of Piero della Francesca's works and frescoes; and Mantua, a historical city once powered by the Gonzaga family that holds Sant' Andrea, one of Albert's monstrous churches that contains a relic of Christ's blood. The incredible experiences that I had traveling throughout Italy were envied by everyone I knew back in the United States, so I created my own website with a personal blog and all of my pictures, complete with a calendar so everyone could keep track of where I was.

After my fall break, and a brief relaxation period with my family, I began my travels outside of Italy. First, I fly all the way to Dublin, Ireland, which is now one of my favorite cities on earth. It was a culture shock being outside of Italy and in a country where the native language was English. I found myself saying "grazie" and "per favore" which was followed by laughter from the Irish. It was in Dublin that I came across some of the nicest people I have ever met. I was stopped 5 times by locals as I was wandering the streets of the city because they wanted to welcome my friends and me to Dublin and give us clues as to where to eat and what places to visit while we were in town. I found myself completely embracing the Irish culture and I was really disappointed when I had to leave.

Next, I visited Paris, France where I climbed the Eiffel Tower, perused through Louis Vuitton, walked down the Champs de L'Elysee, enjoyed the savory taste of a nutella crepe while walking down streets covered in twinkly lights, and of course, I dabbled in the many shops and boutiques that were on every corner of the city. Although I admittedly expected stereotypical rude French citizens, I received the opposite. This experience taught me to avoid having expectations no matter where I go and to just take everything in. Although I do not speak a word of French, I tried really hard to learn a few key words because I did not want to be looked at as an ignorant American. I even successfully maneuvered my way through the French metro system alone, a feat I was very proud of.

Following Paris, I went to Barcelona, Spain, the craziest city on the planet. I knew absolutely nothing about the city and was open to all the possibilities that were given to me. I ended up running into a lot of students from my home school, and they showed me a typical night in Barcelona, complete with one of the largest bars I had ever seen and a 3 story dance club that holds over 4,000 people. I met some interesting people, to say the least. Although the night life is what Barcelona is known for, I wanted to actually see the city. So, the following day my friends and I got a tour from a local, who showed us some of the unknown secrets of Barcelona, including a small café that Pablo Picasso used to visit daily prior to him being famous. Because he was poor, Picasso would pay the café owner with drawings on the back of menus, which are now hung throughout the café.

My last travel experience was probably my favorite. I went to Prague, Czech Republic where I was able to stay for four and a half days because of a holiday weekend. It was December when I went, so the entire city was covered in Christmas lights, and Christmas fairs lined every major street. The first day that I was there, my friends and I took a 6 hour tour, which seemed absurd at first but was the best part of the trip. A local woman took us around New Town and Old Town, the Old Jewish Ghetto which was one of the largest in Europe, and Charles' Bridge which is lined with incredible statues of New Testament stories. The second half of the tour was by boat, which took us around the outside of the city and pointed out government buildings and Charles University. Finally, we were given a tour of Prague Castle, the largest Castle on earth that overlooks the entire city. On my last full day in Prague, my friends and I took a trip to a small town called Kutna Hora which is just outside the city. The town is known for a small church, but not just any old church. The entire inside of the church is decorated with human bones, including a huge chandelier in the center that is made of every bone in the body. It may sound terrifying but it was the most amazing thing to see in person because, if I had wanted to, I could have touched the bones.

Even though I had the most amazing experiences wherever I went, my initial sadness when leaving these places quickly left once I returned to Florence. This city was truly my new home, and I grew to love every bit of it. As I sit here writing about my experiences, I cannot help but miss Florence. I became a Florentine while I was there and fell in love with the things that short time visitors seem to hate. I will miss the crazy Italian drivers, the mopeds that nearly hit me every day, the men who have no shame in you knowing that they are staring at you, the gypsies that followed me and cursed me if I did not glance in their direction, and the lovely presents that dogs left on every sidewalk. Most of all, I will miss my Mamma. She is an amazing woman, and she taught me so much during the four months that I lived with her. I still talk with my Mamma because she has become a second mother to me. I love her with all of my heart and cherished every moment I spent with her.

I am so grateful for the scholarship that I received from Santa Clara County because of the many opportunities that the money provided me. I was able to travel to some of the most amazing cities in the world and was able to experience things that some people can only dream about. Without it, I would not have had enough to spend on traveling and although staying in Florence the entire time would not have been entirely bad, getting to experience a variety of cultures was absolutely amazing. I will remember every moment I spent abroad. Thank you so much for everything.

Sincerely,  
Brittany Luckham  
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