

Reflecting on a Year Abroad  
KateVanDamme

For myself, studying abroad was an experience that seemed, at first, distant and too much to handle amidst the tasks of college life. I thought that, sure, it would sound good on resumes and amazing when I told my relatives, but for a long time it was just an idea being tossed around in my head. The reality of it all seemed a bit overwhelming to face; the language, leaving for a year, and (since my program was actually through Notre Dame) all the paper work and procedures I would have to endure to deal with classes, credits, loans, and registration. Filling out applications, attending meetings, and making final preparations still did not make this journey real to me. Even today, as it comes rapidly to an end, I look out my dorm window at the Alps, answer my phone in a foreign language, and *still* find it difficult to realize I have spent this year in Austria.

Fear occupied a large area of my mind last summer. I found it often quite comical that of my friends at Saint Mary's, I was the only one who had not attended the 'Study Abroad' seminars during freshman orientation, yet was one of the few actually leaving. I am from the area and was afraid to leave my friends and family for the first time. I am also Biology major and knew this year would only complicate major requirements and occupy valuable and expensive college time. (Thanks to the CWIL program and a combination of other Scholarships and loans my financial worries were put more at ease.) My mind seemed oddly blank of any expectations for the upcoming year and that frightened me as well. I am, however, extremely grateful these fears did not anchor me in the States, as this year has harbored and cultivated many of the most valuable experiences, relationships, and lessons in my life. The preceding anxieties were by far outweighed by the reality of this year; it has proven extraordinary and been filled with astounding experiences.

Americans, as much as we try, will never succeed at being discreet in a European country. Austria was also probably not the best place to integrate one's self when trying to use classroom-taught "Hoch Deutsch" (as they speak a heavy dialect). Needless to say I was looked at and treated like a foreigner this entire year. Of course I was a foreigner in Austria and probably deserved the strange looks, misunderstandings, and embarrassing moments I endured. As uncomfortable as these situations may have been they were important and I will remember them only fondly. Never having been viewed as a minority or foreigner before it was crucial that I experience the flip side of what I have been living in America. Of course it was not only the realization of how foreigners are treated and the difficulties they encounter that I now find valuable, but also the appreciation that will come with not being viewed as a foreigner once back in America. I think for any student who has studied abroad, the experience really amplifies the fact that we take much for granted at home.

Despite the fact of being an obvious foreigner, I still had wonderful opportunities to interact and relate with Austrians and Europeans. These relationships were scattered about an enormous spectrum and range from those with host families and teachers to those between peers and random backpackers in youth hostels. I got to know my roommate very well and traveled with her throughout Austria. I met students through the University's choir and dance classes. It was interesting to experience these hobbies in Austria, and it satisfied me to see that such simple things, like singing or dancing, could be shared between cultures; the language the directions are given in and the method of organization might be different from one culture to the next, but the core activity would stay constant. Our entire group worked closely with our Austrian professors, as many of them walked us through personal as well as academic challenges. The Austrian culture allowed them not just to be our professors, but also our friends. Host families were a

great source of culture. Even though I did not live with my host family, they played a huge role in my abroad experience. They eased me into the culture, took me on hikes, and introduced me to traditional Tyrolean events and establishments as well as those of their everyday life. I was able to meet their friends and participate in and observe their family celebrations.

The experiences I just described represent those, which were practically presented to our entire group, but to add a sense of adventure and independence to my year I undoubtedly had to create and seek out some unique experiences of my own. We had ample travel time and I used mine in a variety of ways. In the beginning I traveled with the other ND/SMC students. We did “touristy” things throughout Italy, Spain, France, and Switzerland. During these outings (as well as throughout a majority of the year) I learned much about group dynamics. I hope to hold with me the discovery that thought and reflection often prove more useful than speech and action. Later in the year my vacations had a much more business-focused aspect to them. Instead of traveling home over Christmas break I stayed in Austria and, with another student, coordinated a Christmas ski trip in the Alps for all the other SMC/ND abroad students that were staying in Europe over Christmas. We worked with a very accommodating ski lodge in a small town called Kirchberg and had a great turn out of about 60 students. Easter Break led me to Germany where I met much of my very extended family for the first time. Over this break I also worked in their Café. By this time I was feeling completely immersed in the German/Austrian/European culture. I knew and felt comfortable with their lifestyle and customs. It was over this break that I felt for the first time like perhaps I did not ever want to return to the States.

Luckily feelings such as these come and go with time. I found hundreds of the pleasant European lifestyle aspects alarmingly appealing: their respect for and focus on environmental protection, their observation of Sundays as non-work days, appreciation of quality over quantity,

and (especially in Austria) their laid back approach to life; these were just a few of the charming eye-catchers, but when born into the American mindset it is not easy to let go of the hard working, most efficient, logical method of living. The first couple months in Austria actually served as a disassembling period. Each of us had to let go of some norms and givens that narrowed our views on how to approach day to day life and then figure out how to reassemble ourselves to function in this country. As cliché as it may sound this “broadening of my horizons” was what allowed me to see (and even agree with sometimes) the American flaws. Austrians view Americans as complete workaholics. They view our lifestyles as determined by our work, while their work is determined by their lifestyle. Seeing this difference, I became mindful of the work-driven ruts we fall into as Americans. Our country is also viewed as extremely superficial. Our professors assured us we would find it difficult to make great friends instantly here, and it was. But that was only the case because the Austrians are extremely candid. If they suggest meeting for coffee sometime, they mean it. It is not just a passing “nice to say” comment. This honesty is something I found difficult at first but have grown to admire. Unfortunately, in my opinion, Austria, as well as other European countries, is rapidly becoming “Americanized.” However, even with the workaholic stereotype attached, America has many luxuries and advantages that I have come to treasure from being away for so long.

I have not yet seen a drastic change between the person I was before I left and who I am now, but I know a difference is present. I can rely that my independence has been strengthened and that my understanding and tolerance of other cultures has gained depth and undergone a sort of transformation. I was enthused to have been a plank in a sort of cultural bridge this year. It will be difficult to recap or reflect on the entire year in a few short statements when greeting friends and relatives again in America, but I hope that I will bring back enough stories, express

my outlook on enough, and hold on to the relationships I have built in order to radiate a bit of Austrian culture in America and to remember that this year abroad was in fact extraordinarily real.