

Beyond

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

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Design and layout

Nina Peci

Contacts

E-mail: npeci@isiflorence.org

www.isiflorence.org | www.umbra.org

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Abroad and Beyond

Dominique Bringham

I am no stranger to travel. Truthfully, I have been very fortunate to grow up in a family that values international experience, a family that is quite international itself: my mother was born to a Mexican father and a Filipina mother, and my father's parents were English and Belgian-French in origin. They were the products of international living as well, so I suppose it was only natural that they sought to bring those experiences to my brother and me when we were old enough to appreciate them. The ends of my school years as a child were marked by mad scrambles to pack two months' worth of clothes, and I would return to classes in August with the Spanish sun kissed across my face. This lucky trend has continued throughout my life until this past August, when I graduated with a master's degree and no longer have the good fortune of school holidays—sadly, now that I am no longer in academia, I must *work* for my holiday.

All that said, it came as no surprise to anyone in my family that I chose to study abroad in my university years, spent at Arizona State University. Almost all of my family members spent some time during their schooling studying abroad, and it was a foregone conclusion that I would do the same. Having earned a scholarship that could be applied to study abroad programs, there was no price barrier to spending a semester or even a year in a foreign country. If anything, it turned out to be (at the time) more affordable for me to live elsewhere for an academic year, which is what I had planned to do. I could say quite honestly that my first two years in university were organized from the outset to allow for a year abroad—my course load was above the average necessary for me to keep my scholarship, to the point where I might have graduated a year early had I not decided to study abroad.

Being the massive university that it is, Arizona State offered a wide range of programs to choose from; the last time I checked, I believe there were over two hundred available courses and programs, ranging from

short summer excursions of a few weeks to the year-long sojourns like the one I ended up taking. Having spent much time in Europe in my youth, I was interested in exploring other options, and my love affair with Japan and Japanese culture pushed me to consider studying in Asia as an alternative. I had even taken two years of Japanese to prepare for the possibility. The fact that I had the chance to choose is certainly not lost on me. While I had planned studying abroad into my university experience, a number of my friends were unable to do the same, but I will come back to this shortly.

My decision ultimately took me to Florence, where a few of my aunts and uncles had studied before me. They promised me a good experience, and I knew from my time in Europe previously that the European Union is unique in the amount of traveling that one can do while there. The wealth of disparate cultures in Europe allows for visitors—tourists, students, and immigrants, short term or long term alike—to explore their wants and desires more thoroughly. My journey to Italy did not seem such a strange decision to me, and after visiting Spain periodically throughout my life, seeing family in France and the United Kingdom, I felt that Italy would be familiar enough that I could settle in to life there without much difficulty.

Of course, holidaying abroad as a child, unencumbered by more adult concerns, is quite different from a study abroad experience, just as studying abroad is quite different from immigration. I had been to Florence before, but juggling the studying experience at ISI Florence with adjusting to a new country was one I had not encountered before. It was not so much the coursework that I found intimidating – if anything, my schedule was incredibly light in comparison to what I was taking back in Arizona. Nor was it being so far from home—previous frequent travel has rendered my definition of *home* to quite a fluid state, and I chose to go to university in a city that is eleven hours away from my home town by car. No, it was the sense of boundlessness that comes from existing outside the normal state of study and living. Study abroad is not like attending ordinary university. It is not for the faint of heart. It is a hyper-charged period of time in which a student's mind is exposed to a multitude of viewpoints from a multitude

of locations. There is the perception of limitlessness, an excitement that permeates the entire experience that comes with feeling joyfully out of place.

One of the things I most enjoy telling new friends about my study abroad experience is how our first orientation days were filled with those awkward meet-and-greet, ice-breaking moments. The playing field was leveled among us all, and we shared the common bond of wanting to travel. We all came for various other reasons, of course—ISI Florence organizes a phenomenal number of specialized programs—but that was the core of it: travel, international experience, newness. Florence became our home base, to where we could retreat after a weekend spent investigating the cold of Scandinavia or the heat of northern Africa. Our central location in Italy provided us with a means of going back in time, not just in history books but in the architecture, art, and language of the country itself. It was a playground of knowledge and experience.

In fact, I believe this feeling of boundlessness was referred to as *Disneyland Syndrome* by one of our orientation speakers. I heard his talk twice, once in fall semester and again in spring, and I cannot agree with the analogy more, even after leaving ISI Florence and continuing my education back in Arizona. This sense of excited fervor was not only a chance to see and feel and do new things, but it also was the first instance in which we would learn restraint, good judgment, and proper planning. We had to learn that being abroad, being part of a new culture, is a privilege that must be treated with the appropriate respect. We represented our country, more so than the television shows or products that flowed from the United States to Italy. It was a sense of responsibility that felt more grounded than when holidaying or passing through on the way to someplace else. Our purpose was to study, but the impact we made with our presence could affect how Italians viewed our country forever.

My academic experience at ISI Florence was such that I could focus on my cultural ones. As stated above, I found my particular course load to be rather light in comparison to the one I had in the United States, but as a result, I was able to spend more time on traveling Italy and Europe as a whole. With a trusty backpack and a few adventurous friends, through-

out the year, I managed to visit seven new countries, sample dozens of regional cuisines, and snap an easy 16GBs' worth of photographs. I hesitate to say that studying abroad concerned less studying than I anticipated—it did not—but I must admit to the fact that the *studying* aspect of my academic year was not one that ever gave me much trouble. My courses were chosen out of a desire to learn new things that were sometimes radically unrelated to my degree (English Literature) and therefore more a source of free interest than academic rigor. This is not to say that my experience was the norm, of course. ISI Florence provided program tracks for the purpose of intensive study in architecture, sustainability, and food systems, and since I studied there, these programs have attracted more and more attention for their superb standards. I was simply in the position of not needing university credits or any particular courses to finish my degree, and so I could enjoy my time in Italy as a cultural growth experience more than as an academic one.

When my study abroad year came to a close and I returned to Arizona to complete my literature degree, I was already of the mind to return to Europe, first as a member of the workforce then to continue my education in a graduate program. Working in Europe began for me first in Italy, once again with ISI Florence but in an administrative capacity as student services intern, and then progressed to teaching English in Cartagena, Spain through the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture. This short stint of two years spent in the working world put academia into perspective for me as a sort of haven, one that I was rather eager to return to with the promise of a graduate degree just on the horizon. Being in a classroom, facilitating and participating in discussion, held far more appeal to me than organizing events or giving grammar lessons, and so it was not long before I was applying for my master's degree at the University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands.

The distinctions between studying abroad at ISI Florence and engaging in my graduate studies at the University of Amsterdam were immediately and starkly apparent. As I have stated, my time spent in Florence was one devoted more to cultural growth than to intense academic study, but

the same cannot be said for the years I spent in Amsterdam. Of course, one looks at the purposes behind the programs and sees the differences easily enough. Studying abroad, in the ISI Florence sense, was an academic program of disparate experiences, exploratory in nature. My cohort came from across the United States with a variety of reasons for participating in the program. We all sought out cultural experiences in addition to (and sometimes in spite of) our academics. Following the program's completion, we returned to the United States to complete our degrees and graduate into the next phases of our studies or enter the workforce, as I did.

My graduate study, in contrast, was built upon the premise of direct and intensive work in a single subject with the end goal of producing a publication-worthy product. It was an international cohort, as well, with students from the United Kingdom, Austria, Lithuania, and more, all of us aiming to dig deep into one discipline – though, of course, our angles of attack differed depending on our theses. I found that working on a master's degree was unsurprisingly more grueling than spending a year abroad during my undergraduate years. My time was spent buried in books, articles, and discussion readers, rather than planning any international trips, and while my social life did not suffer, it certainly was not as robust.

The decision to travel to Amsterdam for this master's degree was based on a number of factors. During my study abroad time at ISI Florence, I'd been lucky enough to visit Amsterdam for a weekend trip and found the city so beautiful and rich in history that I wanted the opportunity to live there at some point. The price of a graduate education at the University of Amsterdam was significantly lower than in the United States, even as an international student, though I had the benefit of being an EU citizen and therefore qualified for European tuition. The quality of the education on offer at the University of Amsterdam was excellent, placing the university's humanities programs in the top 100 in the world, and I found the diversity of the student body quite attractive. Making the move once I received my acceptance letter in the Literary Studies Research Masters was an easy decision.

Studying for a graduate degree in an international environment, as



Amsterdam. (photo: kirkandmini, Pixabay)

I've stated previously, required a different mindset from studying abroad. The demand on my mental acuity and dedication was much higher and deservedly so. Course loads were heavier and conversation revolved around the next assignment and discussion topic rather than our weekend plans. After two years outside the academic environment, returning to such intensity was something of a shock to me, and I struggled to acclimate again, which was not the case with studying abroad. There was a pressure to produce that did not, for me, exist when I was at ISI Florence, but I believe this was to be expected. All of us chose to participate in graduate education for the purpose of deepening our knowledge in particular subject areas with particular people.

It was for this reason that I ended up shifting my own focus a quarter of the way through my two-year degree. My bachelor's degree in English Literature evidenced my deep love of literature and, more importantly, stories and storytelling. I came to realize that the medium through which story is told did not necessarily matter to me, but the origins, context, and impacts of those stories did, and I eventually decided to change research tracts from Literary Studies to Cultural Analysis. My colleagues changed from a seven-student group to a twenty-student cohort, who naturally came with their own perspectives and interests outside the literary sphere. The widening of my academic peer group and the increased exposure to varying content and academic interests ultimately influenced my own research methods for the better. Over the following year and a half, I learned about the projects of my fellow students, applied a dizzying number of theories to my own work, and came out of it with a final thesis on cultural and linguistic translation between the United States and Japan, using the phenomenon of *Pokémon* as the center of research.

The attention necessary to accomplish this thesis far eclipsed what I devoted my year spent in Italy to, but, as it was directed to one specific topic and endeavor, the attention itself was different. The study abroad model is not engineered to prepare students for PhD programs or high-level work environments, unlike graduate school. While there are elements of exploration inherent in graduate study—such as the de-

velopment of research skills, exposure to a broad range of theorists, and debate and discussion—the emphasis of a study abroad program falls heavily on personal growth. That being said, everyone’s experiences of both studying abroad and international study are different. My time at ISI Florence and at the University of Amsterdam was colored by intention, and I would not presume to know the intentions of every individual who chooses to travel outside their home countries to pursue their education. However, I will venture to make a few assumptions:

- Any individual who chooses to go abroad for the purpose of study is willing to go out of their comfort zone.
- Any individual looking to study abroad does so in order to discover some aspect of themselves that home study does not otherwise uncover.
- Any individual going abroad returns with a changed set of priorities, small or large.

I cannot begin to guess what the priorities of my colleagues in graduate school following our graduation this past June were, nor do I know how those students I studied with at ISI Florence were ultimately changed by their experiences. I would wager, though, that they remember their time in Amsterdam and in Florence with a clarity that may not be applied to the rest of their academic experiences. Study abroad and international study are not undertaken lightly, under any circumstance, and whether or not the ultimate goals of an individual are fulfilled, their experiences allow them the chance to formulate new goals and explore their identities in fascinating and sometimes frightening environments.

I have yet to return from studying abroad. Following my master’s degree, I chose to stay in Amsterdam to look for work and was lucky enough to participate in the Hyper Island Digital Innovation program. Hyper Island, a digital creative business school, focuses on preparing individuals and companies for the future, and thus far, my time in the program and the subsequent traineeship with a creative transformation company here

in Amsterdam have been radically different from both study abroad at ISI Florence and graduate study at the University of Amsterdam. Learning in the workplace is less forgiving than learning in academia and subsequently requires a different mindset. My priorities are ever-changing, aspects of my self forever emerging, and the limits of my comfort zone tested on a daily basis. While I cannot say where this traineeship will lead me, I admit that it has been a form of intensity that both makes me crave the academic bubble I left behind and rejoice in having left it in the first place. I might even call it a new, strange form of study abroad, albeit from a place of disciplines, academia being “home” and the creative industries being a foreign culture. With this in mind, I continue to explore my options and this new territory, looking for what I might bring back or what I might take with me to the next place, wherever that may be.

If I could tell anyone considering a study abroad program or an international study experience one thing, it would be to consider, deeply, what you want from the time spent abroad. Whether or not those goals and desires are fulfilled is irrelevant, but having those thoughts in mind at all is key to pushing oneself to building significant bonds and lasting memories. I return to Florence every year, and if I did not live and work in Amsterdam, I would endeavor to return here just as frequently. These places and the people I met there have made such a profound impact on my life that I cannot bring myself to let them go entirely. While I cannot recapture the excited fervor of my first orientation days at ISI Florence or the dedication of my master’s study at the University of Amsterdam—a PhD is in my future, but that is a whole different game—I can look back fondly and only encourage others to take the plunge. Do so sensibly and with intent, but do so. The chance to know yourself abroad is not one to be missed.

Dominique Brigham is a strategic researcher and copywriter at creative transformation company Nomads in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She holds a master’s degree in Cultural Analysis from the Universiteit van Amsterdam and spends most of her free time writing fantasy and science fiction novels or playing video games. Currently, she is co-authoring a five book fantasy series and working on a framework for a podcast around the concept of the unspoken conversations we all replay in our heads.