

# Beyond

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n.2

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# Expectations vs. Realities:

## An English Summer Camp

Laura Guay

Florence is a truly magnificent city bursting with historic charm. It is a place where you can enjoy beautiful walks, food, and museums. But if you really want to avoid being an average tourist, you must interact with the locals. I have been fortunate to have spent three summers in Florence, accompanying my dad on his teaching endeavors. I tried to break the traditional tourist lifestyle by going to the market every day and forming relationships with the vendors. In fact, my family and I became such a regular face over the course of those six weeks that the vendors remembered us from year to year! If you ever find yourself at the *La Botteghina dell'Augusta* stand at the Sant' Ambrogio market ordering some pasta, know that I probably had that same pasta at least a dozen times. Yes, it was a little excessive, but the vendors helped me work on my Italian, and we thanked them for feeding us by making them an American staple: chocolate chip cookies. Although my Sant' Ambrogio market experience will always hold a special place in my heart, after the second time in Florence, I promised myself that, if I happened to find myself in the city again, I would find some sort of volunteer experience or work experience where I could regularly interact with locals in situations outside of the market.

With the help of my dad's former student living in Florence, I found the opportunity to volunteer at a summer camp for Italian kids learning English several kilometers outside of the city center. I decided to apply for this position after considering other volunteer options, such as cleaning the streets of Florence, working at a daycare, and volunteering with the ambulance service. After realizing that I would probably not enjoy hearing the sound of the ambulance siren more than I already did on a daily basis, I Skyped the woman who founded the camp, known as "Inglese for You." I remember our conversation was so relaxed and her desire to learn

more about me and my personal aspirations was so genuine, that I began to anxiously await my arrival in Florence.

For the first three weeks in Italy, I was able to adjust to the lifestyle we had assumed the previous two summers, continuing to strengthen the relationships I made with market vendors and creating an internal expectations list for the camp, where I would be working for the final three weeks. As someone who had little background in the Italian language – I often tell people that “I can get by at the market” – I was nervous that it would be difficult for me to help plan activities at the camp. However, although all of the other counselors were fluent in Italian, I discovered that the founder of “Inglese for You” was a woman from New York who married an Italian, and my two other colleagues were Americans from Texas and Ohio who both taught English lessons to local Italians and worked at the International School of Florence.

The location of the camp was at a *Casa del Popolo*, essentially a community center, in Osteria Nuova. I knew there was a restaurant, but other than that, I did not know what to expect. The first day I saw the *Casa del Popolo* was the day before camp started, when the other counselors and I set up for the first theme: “Exploring the U.S.” Outside, a lot of older locals as well as the restaurant owner and waiters (with whom we would become well-acquainted over the course of those few weeks) were sitting in chairs set up under an awning. Then, I saw an enclosed area down some steps where there was a trampoline, a playground, and a beautiful view of Florence. This area served as a perfect space for many of the camp events that would soon follow. Inside, there was a game room on the left, a restaurant on the right, and straight ahead, there was an auditorium with a stage. After we had finished preparing everything for the next day, the camp director drove us back into the city, and from that day on, I knew this was going to be the immersive experience I was looking for.

The next day, I remember waking up early in order to make sure the bus would not make me late for my first day of work. Only one bus left from the final stop where I had to switch to go to the camp. One of the other counselors told me that I am not Italian until I had run to catch

a bus. That day, I officially earned my “Italian” title. Learning the bus routes and seeing the same people every morning and evening on their way to and back from work made me feel like any other average person on their way to work.

I worked for three weeks at the camp, and each week, we had a different theme. The first week was “Exploring the U.S.,” the second week was “Harry Potter,” and the third week was “Coding Camp.” The themes were great fun, especially when I ran the Junior Ranger activity during the U.S. week and the spells class during the Harry Potter week, but the parts that will stay with me forever are the memories from the relationships that were formed. As previously mentioned, I was not certain about how to start talking to the kids. Since the camp was targeted at kids ages six to twelve, so I assumed they would not know a lot of English. They knew how to respond to some of the questions I asked, but, after a while, their blank stares worried me. As with any new task, I had some awkward moments, but I eventually got into a groove of explaining in English, performing the task as an example for them, and then asking one of the other counselors how to say something in Italian as a last resort.

The amount that the kids taught me and the amount I learned from them (not only about language, but also about culture and forming relationships) was unexpected. It is amazing how fast relationships develop when you spend eight hours a day (more on Thursdays, when we would set up tents and stay overnight) with the kids and fellow counselors and interact with them in play, work, and meal environments. Moreover, I was shocked by how much the kids trusted me even though I was not speaking their language. There were definitely some young children who were not confident in their English abilities, and whom I considered shy, but they would still run up to me and give me these great big hugs, sometimes even competing for who could give me the longest hug. I realized that, although language is necessary to form a deep relationship, kids are smart and can determine someone’s character and how comfortable they are just through instinct.

Still, I struggled sometimes, as I desperately wanted to communi-

cate a specific point with some of these kids. I learned to get past the language barrier to some extent by interpreting the children's hand gestures and tones of voice. I would then either respond in English or nod in agreement with them. In fact, I convinced one little boy that I could understand what he was telling me until the last hour of the last day of the second week of camp. Over time, I also grew more comfortable disciplining the children. When they did not respond to English (as they were required to do), all I had to do was yell, "*Basta*," or take away a toy, the universal sign of disapproval.

From the camp songs, the journal activities, the sports (including countless water balloon fights), the kids' energy gave me something to look forward to every day on the bus ride to Osteria Nuova. During those three weeks, I learned more Italian than I had in the other four plus months I had spent in Italy. I would return to the market or even the streets of Florence and be much more capable of understanding what people were saying. I think it was good for these kids to go to a camp and listen to native English speakers, but it was also good to motivate me to learn another language.

Sadly, the final lesson I learned was about the permanence of good-byes. It was likely that I would never hear another hello from them. It was so hard to leave the *Casa del Popolo* the final day, because I knew that I was now beginning my own life and would not have the opportunity to accompany my dad on all of his study abroad courses. As a result, I will no longer be able to take advantage of those situations and turn them into something that can impact my life so profoundly. Still, as I settle back into my dorm at Penn State, wearing my tie-dye "*Inglese for You*" shirt and looking at the photo album the director of the camp gave me, I know I will always have those happy memories to relive as I await the next journey in my life.