

Work Study Grant Experience in DEI Abroad

Marola Anes

Introduction

Each semester, ISI Abroad offers students the chance to apply for a Work Study Grant. These grants provide funding for qualifying students in exchange for a small project that can be easily performed by students while abroad. These projects not only enhance the study abroad experience and afford students extra funding, but also provide a valuable service for the Institute and help improve the program for future participants.

One of the more popular work study projects available focuses on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as it relates to the education abroad experience. In Spring 2024, ISI Florence awarded a grant to Marola Anes, a first-generation student from Penn State University. Having limited resources, Marola felt very privileged to have the opportunity to study abroad and was interested in learning how her own ability of adapting to new cultures would be helpful in navigating her 4-month semester abroad. Her projects focused on her own personal growth as a first-generation student abroad as well as exploring Italy on a budget.

Nina Peci, DEI Work Study Advisor, ISI Florence

Studying abroad was always a dream of mine but I never thought it was achievable as a first-generation STEM student. I am endlessly grateful for all of the support I received in fulfilling this dream. I'm an immigrant from Egypt and a second-year biology student at Penn State with the awesome privilege of studying abroad in Florence this past semester. As a first-generation immigrant student, studying abroad in Italy had both its advantages and challenges.

First, let's take a look at the advantages of studying abroad as an

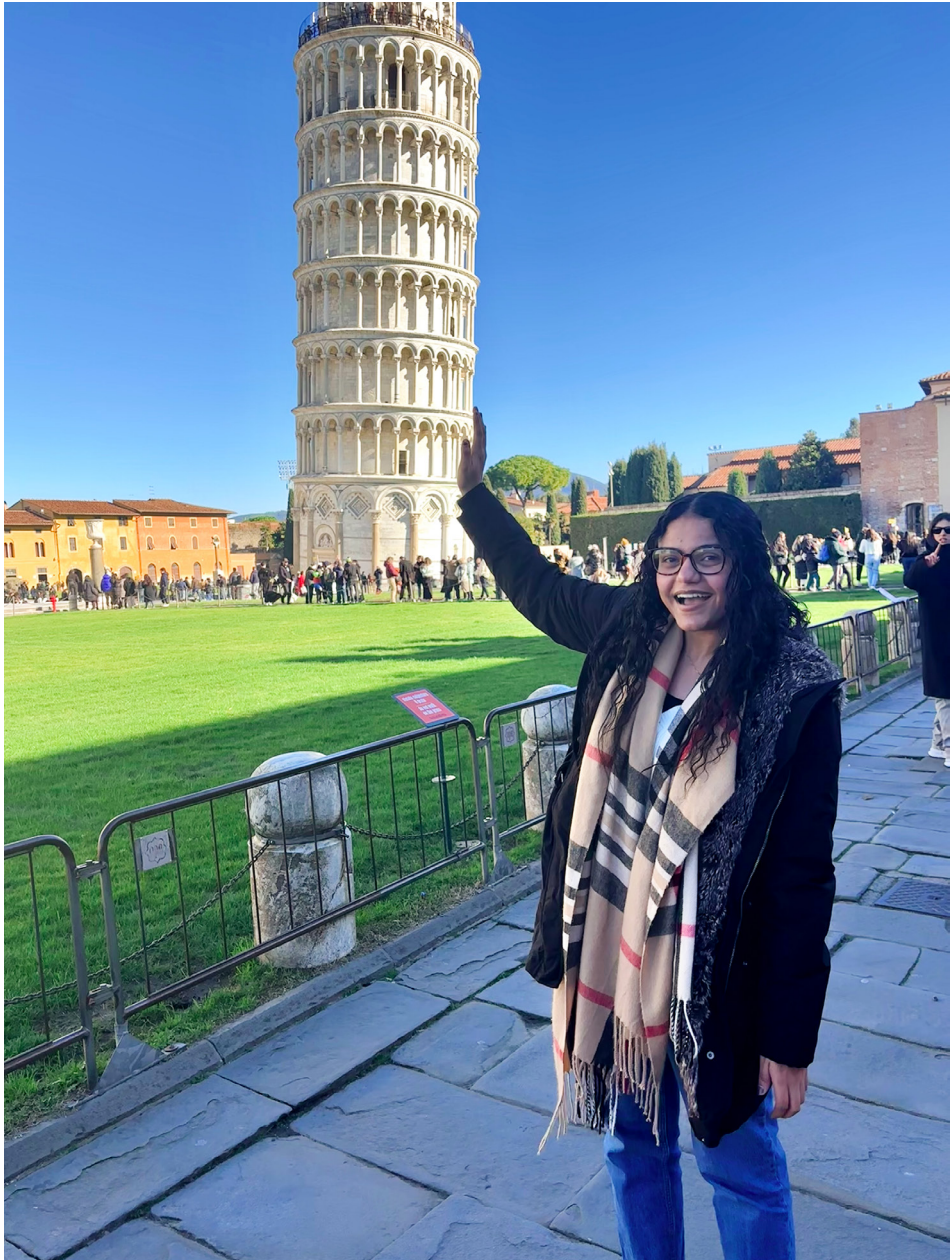
immigrant student! I didn't experience the initial culture shock that most people go through when they first arrive in Italy. Since Italy is so close to the Middle East, I think it shares many cultural similarities and traditions. Examples of some similarities include the way people greet each other, value of family, food, and the warm hospitality. I found this especially true in Southern Italy; it was so awesome going down there because it felt so nostalgic.

Another advantage was that I already spoke another language, Arabic. I didn't know much Italian and not everyone spoke English, so I was able to rely on Arabic several times to communicate. Being bilingual was a skill I never thought would be useful when studying abroad in an entirely different country but I'm glad I was able to use it. Being bilingual also was convenient when learning Italian because some words are similar to the Arabic word.

One of the biggest challenges was navigating everything pre-departure like all the different applications and paperwork. It was really stressful gathering the right things and dealing with all the legal stuff with no one to really guide me through it, since no one close to me had done this before. It was also time-consuming and challenging to find and apply for scholarships to help fund my trip.

Another challenge in my semester abroad was experiencing racism but unfortunately, racism can be found anywhere and isn't exclusive to Italy or studying abroad. Taking on college as a first-generation student is an already daunting experience and then embarking on a study abroad journey makes it even scarier. I took on this adventure with a unique blend of excitement and fear, unsure of what to expect but ready to take on the obstacles, create lasting memories, and go through so much personal growth.

As I reflect on my journey, I am filled with so much gratitude for this amazing experience and all of the support I received from my family, Penn State, and everyone else. This was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience and I am so glad I took this risk and decided to see the world! It has to be one of the best decisions of my life and I will be eternally grateful



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for all of the things I have learned and gained in these past four months. To those who may be deciding on doing a semester abroad, I couldn't recommend it enough.

Discovering Italy on a Budget

Embarking on a study abroad adventure is exciting, but it often comes with a hefty price tag. From airfare to meals and daily expenses, the costs can quickly add up. As I prepared to explore both the delights of my host city, Florence, and the wonders scattered throughout Italy, I was determined to do so in a way that wouldn't break my bank account. For me, it was crucial to truly immerse myself in the culture of my host country rather than traveling to a new country every weekend. This approach not only aligns with my goals to truly experience Italy, but it's a lot less expensive and better for the environment. After all, what's the point of studying abroad if you don't immerse yourself in the local culture? I'm about two months into my program and I have compiled some of my favorite inexpensive and easy-to-get-to spots in Italy and a few travel tips I have discovered.

Starting off at the home base: Florence!

The museums and churches here are absolute must-sees, and many of them offer free entry or substantial discounts for students. Among my favorites are the iconic Uffizi Gallery and the beautiful Santa Maria Novella Church and pharmacy. Plus, mark your calendar for every first Sunday of the month because all museums offer free entry.

Wandering through the bustling streets and seeing the street performers, exploring the lively markets, and witnessing breathtaking sunsets at Piazzale Michelangelo have also become some of my favorite things to do, and they're all free!

The charm of Italy extends far beyond the walls of Florence, though. With an efficient and inexpensive train network, embarking on weekend or day trips outside of Florence is an easy task.

Pisa

You have to go witness the gravity-defying Leaning Tower of Pisa in person; and don't forget to snap the iconic photo of you holding up the tower! While you're there, be sure to explore the nearby Baptistery and Duomo, which are both impressive attractions all conveniently located in the same area. Pisa itself is a picturesque, small town that can easily be explored in a half-day. I went in the off-season so most shops were closed but I'm sure it's much livelier later in the season!

Lucca

Lucca, the city of 100 churches, exceeded all expectations. From its delicious food to its budget-friendly prices and stunning architecture and buildings, Lucca was genuinely impressive. It was also filled with vintage markets, and great shopping spots amidst its historic streets.

Viareggio

I had never heard of Viareggio, but I'm so glad I stumbled upon this hidden gem. Viareggio is an adorable coastal town within Lucca and is home to one of the biggest *Carnevale* celebrations in Europe. We visited during the first weekend of *Carnevale* and it was truly exhilarating; the energy was infectious and unmatched. I highly recommend visiting Viareggio during *Carnevale* season for an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime experience. The warm hospitality of the locals was the perfect finishing touch to our experience. My only regret from this trip is that we only stayed for a day instead of the entire weekend.

Venice

Venice is truly one of my favorite destinations! There's an undeniable appeal about the city that captures your heart from the moment you arrive. Plus, you should go visit the one-of-a-kind town before it sinks. Easily accessible by a 2-hour train ride, Venice is perfect for a day trip or an entire weekend. While there, be sure to marvel at the jaw-dropping Saint Mark's Basilica, which may be my favorite building ever. Venice

radiates energy at anytime of the year. Also, be sure to visit the bright islands of Burano and Murano and don't miss the beautiful glass-blowing masterpieces.

Milan

Milan is a captivating world of its own, brimming with endless adventures. One of my favorite experiences in this beautiful city, was ascending to the Duomo terraces, where you get a 360° view of Milan's landscape. Enjoy Milan's renowned fashion shops and historic landmarks as well as its vibrant cultural scene and delectable cuisine. Window-shopping and admiring the beautiful architecture of San Babila's luxury shops was also a highlight of my trip to Milan. Don't forget to enjoy all of the markets and street food here and spending an evening in Piazza Duomo is a must as it is full of energy, music, and dancing.

If you are in Milan for the weekend, I recommend spending a relaxing, picturesque day at Lake Como. It's less than an hour away at less than €6.

Verona

Verona was so charming, colorful, and energetic! Walk through the stunning house that inspired Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and marvel at the beautiful architecture and artwork. Verona is also filled with lots of intricate churches so be sure to stop in and be amazed. A highlight of my day trip was climbing up to San Pietro's Castle for an amazing view of Verona where there is an incredible restaurant once you get to the top. The Arena was also so amazing to see and go inside. Verona truly had me in awe at every turn and I think it has been my favorite spot so far. I highly recommend making the short trip there.

Orvieto

Orvieto is so lovely and not a place many people know about. It's a small hilltop town in Umbria filled with the friendliest people, the most

beautiful views, and so much history. So many cats too! It was very inexpensive and we got to do a lot of once-in-a-lifetime activities like touring Etruscan caves, having dinner in a cave, and going down into the famous St. Patrick's Well. Orvieto is very high on my favorites list and I was so pleased to have discovered this hidden gem.

Some travel tips I have gathered:

- **Book trains as soon as you can!** The longer you wait to book your train, the more expensive it will get (it can get up to €70-80). I found this especially true with Milan. Keep in mind this doesn't apply to regional trains because those are all the same price at all times.
- **Student discounts!** So many places offer an awesome student discount. You can get into museums, churches, etc. for just a few euros. Many restaurants and *gelatarie* also offer a student discount; so, be sure to ask. Airfare and trains also offer reduced prices for students so always look it up before paying full price.
- **Use public transportation!** Italy has an awesome public transportation system, so take advantage of it. Tickets are cheap and they last up to two hours each. This is especially helpful in bigger cities like Rome and Milan.

My journey so far has been nothing short of amazing and life-changing. I can't wait to see what the rest of this adventure brings and to create lasting memories. I hope you were inspired to discover new places and that this showed you that you can still travel around on a budget.