

*Here are a few reflective essays, written by students, who participated in the Study Abroad Program at Lorenzo de' Medici, in Florence, Italy, during summer 2011.*

*We hope you enjoy reading their stories!*



## Stefania Flecca

To be honest, I'm not sure where I should begin in writing this. This essay, an essay to describe and relive my month's experiences in Italy, seems almost as daunting as my fifteen-page Shakespeare papers. To be at a loss for words is somewhat uncommon for an English major, but I find it becoming a reality more and more as I attempt to write.

Ever since I was thirteen, I knew that I would be studying abroad in Florence. My older sister had done the Florence study abroad program at Lorenzo de Medici through her undergraduate institution, and from then, I knew that it was something that I also wanted to do. When I finally arrived at Monmouth, I discovered that Monmouth also has a Florence, Italy program, with their cooperating university being, none other than, Lorenzo de Medici. It was fate. I planned my freshman year, so that I would be able to study abroad the summer before my senior year at Monmouth.

Although my sister had had a similar experience, my family was originally from Italy, and I was comfortable with the language, I still did not know what to expect out of my trip to Florence. The minute we touched down in Florence, however, I felt eerily at peace and at home. Our apartment was huge, in a safe location, and above all, absolutely gorgeous. We unpacked immediately and went to explore the beautiful city I had heard so much about. The twenty-minute walk from our apartment to the centro storico, or the historical center, of Florence was filled with zooming mopeds, screaming Italians, and small bakeries whose scents filled the warm air. That night, after the amazing welcome dinner we had with all of the Monmouth students, a few girls and I, maps in hand, continued to explore Florence. We stumbled upon the center tourist point of the city, the Duomo, and we were all left speechless. The cathedral is nothing like anything I've ever seen before; it towers over the city and all of the statues carved into the façade of the building stare down at you as if they are trying to tell you something. It truly takes your breath away. That night, we also got our first Italian gelato and saw the Ponte Vecchio, or "Old Bridge", which is another huge attraction in Florence. I was giddy with excitement and for all the new experiences I would have with the new amazing people I met. Florence, as I quickly learned, is filled with so much history and moving art, no matter what religion you are. I highly recommend a trip to the famous Uffizi Gallery to see Botticelli's *Primavera*, L'Accademia to see Michelangelo's *David*, and Santa Croce to see Galileo, Michelangelo, and Machiavelli's tombs.



Travelling is a huge component of a study abroad experience. Seeing cities beyond the literal historical walls of Florence was very important to my friends and me, so we began planning trips as soon as we arrived. This can easily be done on your own or through student travel groups based out of the city. The most popular student travel group for Monmouth students is Bus2Alps, a company that plans full weekend trips as well as day trips to towns and cities close by. My first weekend, I went to Assisi and Lake Trasimeno with the entire Monmouth group and Siena with two of my close friends. Assisi was the most moving trip for me. We got a full tour of la Chiesa di San Francesco, The Church of Saint Francis, and were even able to see the tomb of Saint Francis. Assisi is an absolutely beautiful town, with views that did not seem real. Siena, a town no more than one hour away by train from Florence, was another small and beautiful town. It had such a sense of tranquility, due to the quiet, empty streets. It was an amazing depiction of real Italian life, which is sometimes difficult to see in a large city like Florence.

The next weekend we did a four-day trip to the Amalfi Coast with Bus2Alps. We visited Capri, Sorrento, Positano, and Pompeii. We took boat rides, cliff jumped, swam in caves, and got to sunbathe on the black sand beaches of the Mediterranean (which is actually quite painful on the feet!). A lot of the Monmouth students went on this trip, so it was a great time for us to get to know people from our school as well as people from all over the world. One of the most important tips about traveling in Europe is to simply have no fear. Our third weekend, we decided to do three day trips, which is extremely strenuous. Although we knew we would be tired, we decided to do Pisa on our own, Venice with a group called Florence for Fun, and Cinque Terre with Bus2Alps. This weekend was the epitome of “making the most of every second”. We got to see so much in a bunch of different ways, which gave us the confidence we needed to be comfortable travelers. Travelling throughout Europe, specifically Italy is extremely easy. The train system, called Trenitalia, has trains to all of the major cities and towns for fairly cheap. You can book these online or at the train station, Santa Maria Novella. We did this for Siena and Pisa, and we did not have any problems at all. In fact, they were two of our smoothest trips.

The last weekend, we traveled to Rome with Lorenzo de Medici. The two professors who accompanied us, Franco and Stefano, are two of the smartest men I have ever met. They were so knowledgeable about the city and had everything planned for us, which allowed the students to just enjoy the weekend and take in the classic beauty of Rome. This is the one trip I would recommend to students to do with Lorenzo de Medici. Rome is a huge city, and there is A LOT to see and the school does an amazing job of getting students inside the most important places and allowing them to spend time at landmarks they've learned so much about. Overall, travelling is something every student needs to do, just remember that there are many different outlets to travel. Just because you are comfortable with one group does not mean you need to sign up for

every one of their trips. Take a risk. Travel on your own with your friends. Take a bus to a different part of town. I promise that these types of activities will open your eyes to a completely different world.

As for classes, I took one of the more serious classes in comparison to my peers, but I loved it. I took a six credit Advanced Italian course with two students from UNC, a high school student from New Jersey, and a woman from Russia. This was one of the most eye-opening experiences, because we spoke four hours of Italian a day and it was the only common language in the room. It was difficult, yet beautiful, to have to rely on a language that is not the one you are most comfortable with. Taking this class in Italy allowed my Italian to be practiced everyday and although I've been speaking Italian ever since I was born, I'm more comfortable with the language now than I've ever been.

The professors and faculty at LdM are so accommodating and most of them speak English. Something that I push highly, however, is getting to know the language. Leaving Italy only knowing the words, "Ciao" and "Grazie" is simply unacceptable. Get to know the language. Get to know the people of the country by using THEIR language and assimilating to THEIR culture. Even though many of the people in Florence speak English, I can promise that you will get much more (and often better service) out of your trip if you learn the language and what the customs of that city are.

As the days of my trip went on, it became more evident why students and travelers alike become so connected to their travel experiences. By the fifth day, I felt a connection to Florence that I still do not even feel for my hometown. It was a kind of protective, child-like connection, as if the city had a maternal hold over me. By the end of my experience, I realized that this was because Florence had helped me grow as a person, to become more independent: all the things a mother helps her child become. As my friends and I sat on Ponte Santa Trinita, a bridge that overlooked Ponte Vecchio, eating our last gelato on our last night together in Italy, I realized that this trip really had changed me. Suddenly I realized that I was a completely different person than the young woman who stepped off the plane at the beginning of July. Italy to me wasn't about finding a beautiful Italian husband or the perfect leather jacket, but rather about finding myself in a time when I needed it most. The beauty of the city taught me to find the beauty in myself.

Finally, I would like to share with you, whoever my audience may be, the words that I wrote in my notebook the last day of my trip as I looked at Florence from the top of the Duomo. With the wind whipping my hair and the warm, sweet Italian air in my lungs, I wrote: "And after being here and living this lifestyle, I don't think I could ever go back to who I used to be. I am forever changed by Firenze. Suddenly, nothing else matters. Not money, not boys, not my future, but right now. This moment. I'm completely at peace. Finally a calm, tranquil peace with myself."

## Amanda Pollifrone



The month of July that I spent in Florence feels like a dream. It is hard to recollect the experience as a whole. Although it has only been a little over two weeks since I am home, Italy feels one million years away. I feel as though the experience was so surreal, breathtaking, and life changing that I can't exactly sit down and absorb it all at once. If I could explain to anyone the way that I feel and how different my life is now because of Italy, I would.

I was the girl who was terrified to leave home. I was nervous about leaving my friends, my family, and my boyfriend. I really didn't think I was going to survive a whole month but I knew in the bottom of my heart that studying abroad was something I've always longed to do. I can tell you with pure assurance and confidence that going to Italy this summer is one of the best decisions I have ever made. For the first time in my life, I let go and truly lived in the moment. I absolutely could have stayed longer and I wish that I did. If you are anything like me and hesitant about the length of time, try to stop your fears. Just do it. While you are in Italy, take in every single moment that you have because in the blink of an eye, it'll be over, and all that will be left are your memories. Trust yourself, be friendly, and smile. Breathe in the air and remind yourself every single day of that month how lucky you are to be in Italy. If you ever have a moment of missing home, remind yourself that in just four weeks, you will be wishing with all your heart that you could be back in Florence.

I highly recommend that everyone travel throughout Italy. I went to Cinque Terre, Venice, the Amalfi Coast (Sorrento, Capri, and Positano), Rome, Pisa, and I even went horseback riding through the countryside of Tuscany. All of it was such a beautiful and amazing experience. Pictures and words could never describe how moving it really is to see some of the most lovely and well-known places on earth. Aside from traveling, never forget to appreciate how wonderful Florence is. After some time, I got so used to being in Florence that I didn't even feel like a tourist, and I sometimes forgot to appreciate the beautiful city. You will pass the Duomo every single day during your stay in Italy. Always look at it and realize where you are! I miss the Duomo being the landmark that helped me find home.

I also suggest to everyone to keep a journal! I know that it may be annoying and even a little corny, but it is definitely worth it, I promise! I bought a journal there and tried my hardest to write in it every day. I'm so happy I have it now because the days in Italy were so packed and busy that everything really begins to muddle together. As I've also said before, the whole experience is so overwhelming that it is hard to remember

everything exactly as it was. I appreciate the journal so much now and I know that I will even more in the years to come.

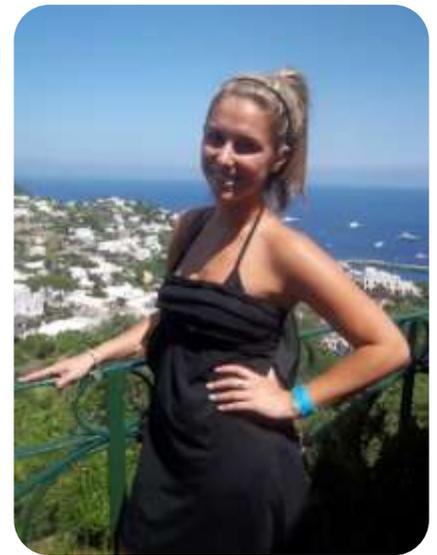
I was lucky enough to take two elective classes, Pairing Food and Wine and Jewelry Making. The professors were absolutely wonderful and they tried so hard to make the classes memorable and fun. I woke up every morning excited to go to class. If you can, really try to take the Food and Wine pairing class. It is not something you would ever want to miss! The food was amazing and the class time was at night so I was able to save money on dinner.

On the very last day in Florence, my friends and I climbed the Duomo. We were all a little sad and foggy because we couldn't really comprehend where the whole month went or how time flew by so fast. When we reached the top of the Duomo, we overlooked the whole entire city that held the most memorable month of our lives. This was really a picture-book moment for all of us. I'm sitting here now and I have the chills as each of the memories infiltrates my mind. I'm already jealous of whoever is reading this essay because you really have no idea of the experience that is awaiting you. Do not hesitate; just go! You will be so happy and thankful that you did. I know that I am.

## *Kristin Gaul*

This may be one of the hardest essays I have had to write because my study abroad experience this summer in Florence was so amazing it is unexplainable. It was one of those things that was not real to me until I was at the Florence airport coming home. My whole time there I kept saying to myself, "I cannot believe this is real". This was one of the best months of my life and I am so grateful to have been given this opportunity. I wish I could share every detail to everyone about my experience however I advise anyone who is interested in studying abroad to take this opportunity while it's presented to them and make it something of their own.

I enjoyed every moment in Italy. Our apartment was beautiful and I loved looking out my front window at the Duomo. I adjusted pretty well to the Italian culture because I left America with an open mind. I wanted to try new things and meet many new people. I was proud of myself because I definitely left my comfort zone and overcame many anxieties about leaving my family and living in a new country for a month. I never lived in a city so I was initially nervous about that, however I enjoyed it very much! I loved walking everywhere and seeing all the different food places and shops to go in. Living in a new city gave me the strength to be independent.



Classes were different than I had expected. Surprisingly, both of my professors spoke very clear English. My art history class was more on the challenging side because honestly I was only taking it as a requirement. I did however, enjoy going to see many works of art and visiting many museums. I was able to see many things that I wouldn't have been able to see without taking this class. Pairing food and wine class was amazing and I suggest everyone to take it! We cooked one or two courses each class of amazing foods that I would have never thought I liked.

Traveling on the weekends was amazing and I loved every trip I went on. We traveled with bus2alps for a two of the trips and they were great. They were young, down to earth people our age just looking to have fun! The other trips were through LDM which went smoothly and we normally got a few free meals as well. The places I visited while abroad were Assisi, Cinque Terre, Amalfi Coast, Venice, Rome, and Pisa. Venice we decided to go on our own just for the day. This was definitely an experience trying to navigate through an Italian train station as well as through different cities. It was tough but people are helpful and we were able to find our trains by asking around. Each destination was so different from the other and had great things to see in each. My favorite trip was Amalfi coast because I love the beach and the views were breath taking. It was something I have never seen before. Rome was also an awesome trip because you learn about the Colosseum throughout grade school so it was so cool seeing it in person.

The people I met and the places I have seen within this month are things I will never forget. The relationships I have built throughout this trip made it spectacular! We all got along so well and had such a good time together. They are amazing people and I am so lucky to have been able to share this experience with them. I cannot put into words how amazing studying abroad in Italy was and want to express to everyone out there interested in going abroad how rewarding it truly is to be able to do something like this. I will forever miss Italy and I hope one day I can go back and relive the memories Monmouth University allowed me to create there.

## *Andrea Dooley*



Visiting another country is considered to be an experience, but studying abroad is known to be life changing. Stepping off the plane after what seems to be the longest of flights, into a country that is nothing like your own, is so liberating, it gave me the chills.

It seems now that arriving in Florence is one big blur. With the excitement that overwhelmed me to the point where I barely remember landing, it was hard for me to believe I was actually there, with an entire month ahead of me. I distinctly remember the cab ride to my apartment, staring out the window as the crazy Italian taxi driver whizzed down the busy streets of Florence, and him mumbling as the vespas constantly cut him off. I remember thinking, “how am I ever going to find my way around this place.”

Arriving at the apartment, the building was everything I dreamed; four floors of vintage Italian, big wooden doors, and marble floors. The elevator, which would make even the least claustrophobic person sweat, served no purpose other than for our luggage. I suppose we thought that because we were in Italy, it made sense to walk up four long flights of stairs.

Our apartment, which consisted of four bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and two bathrooms, each with a bidet, or as my roommate liked to call them “gondolas”, was perfect for the eight girls who were going to live in it. The flat screen plasma in the living room was a nice addition, but not once was it turned on. We had our issues with the apartment, it lacked a dryer and a dish washer, and the washing machine had a tendency to turn clothes gray, but hanging clothes and hand washing dishes was nothing to complain about in a country so full of life.

The first week abroad seems like years ago. We sat through hours of orientation; too excited to listen to anyone or anything, so we had to learn as the days went on. We learned quickly though, since we didn't really have a choice. We learned that the center of Florence was a tourist trap, so if you wanted a really good slice of authentic pizza, you needed to go away from the Duomo. We learned that only flat, covered gelato was the real thing, and anything that was shaped like a mountain and larger than life, tastes just like it does in the states. We learned that you never pay full price for anything that is sold on the streets or in the markets, and taking a cab is a waste of money, for the fare starts as soon as you hang up the phone. Walking was

practical. It was never uphill, or hours on end, we were able to see the entire city just by walking to our destinations every day.

Life was different abroad, but different in the best kind of way. Never did I feel stressed, and never did I become anxious. It seemed like Italy was full of positivity. Everyone was happy; they really enjoyed every aspect of life. That was maybe my favorite part. I lived for one month completely and utterly care free. I felt timeless. If it were not for class, I would never know, nor would I want to know what time it was. I always felt that nothing could ever bring me down from the high Italy gave me.

In four weeks, I traveled to 14 cities in both Italy and France. Not many people can say that, but I am very proud that I can. Instead of staying home, going to the Jersey shore, and to work every week, I lived in Florence, swam in the Mediterranean, ate some of the best food I will ever have, and met people from all over the world. Studying abroad is a life changing opportunity that everyone should take advantage of.

## *Kristen Shedlock*

The biggest decision I have faced today is what I wanted to eat for lunch. Rewind to three weeks ago, it was which European city I wanted to tour next. I have been home for exactly a week now and even though I am glad to be surrounded by loved ones and familiarities, I want to go back to Italy already. It was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity and a blessing I will never forget.

Let's start with the city of Florence itself. The city boasts beautiful architecture, famous paintings and sculptures such as Michelangelo's David, the renowned Duomo, cobblestone roads, the Italian leather markets- all of which are literally at your fingertips. Walking across the Ponte Vecchio, rubbing the Florentine Boar for good luck, meeting in front of the beautiful Duomo, looking at all the real Italian leather, all just becomes daily routine. It's surreal; you're surrounded by all this beauty that America just doesn't have. By week three you almost have to remind yourself to soak it all in because seeing all these beautiful sites almost becomes too normal.

It's strange to believe how much I miss Florence! I miss meeting new people, learning new things about the city, exploring new places daily. It is a small city compared to other Italian cities, but I loved it. One thing you do a lot of is walking. Between exploring the city and going to classes everyday my friends and I averaged walking about 7-8 miles daily, but you really don't even realize it. It



also helped to burn off all that pasta and pizza!

Aside from Florence, my friends and I visited 13 other cities, I know, it's a lot! We really squeezed as much as you could possibly squeeze into this experience. The first weekend we went to Assisi with the Monmouth group as a whole, and then went to Cinque Terre the next day. Both of these Italian cities are beautiful, but very different. Assisi is located by farmland and it is a magnificent, steep, city made of cobblestone. There we toured the Basilica of Saint Francis. Cinque Terre is a gorgeous city on the Mediterranean coast where we hiked, toured, and enjoyed the sun.

One weekend we visited the Amalfi coast through a tour group called Bus2Alps. I would say that this is definitely a trip you should do if you travel to Florence in the summer. We left for this trip on a Thursday night and stayed through Sunday. The first day we were there we went on a boat tour around the island of Capri, saw the blue grotto, then relaxed on the beach and did some shopping. The next day we went cliff jumping and swam in caves in Positano and then relaxed on the beach. Finally we finished the trip up on Sunday by visiting Pompeii and took a tour through one of the most well preserved cities of ancient times.

That week we also went to Pisa one day after classes were over. It was a really easy trip; you just had to hop on a train, which was only about 5 euro, and you were there in no time. We walked around, took some funny pictures pretending to hold up the tower, got some souvenirs and we were ready for our next adventure which was Rome the following weekend.

Rome was a two-day trip that we actually booked through LDM. Rome was a complete sightseeing weekend, and it was really very fascinating. A lot of what I saw, I had already seen in movies but it is completely different being up-close and personal. We saw the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel, the Coliseum, St. Peter's Basilica, the Trevi Fountain, the Pantheon, and the Catacombs, along with much more. I got some great pictures there, and even greater memories.

I definitely recommend anyone considering studying abroad to definitely go for it. Even if you just do it for a month it is great to venture out and see different parts of the world, meet new people and experience different things. You may get homesick here and there but it is only a month out of the rest of your life. Try to do as much as possible while you're there, and do not worry about home, everything will be just the same as when you get back.