



SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

Spring 2012 Vol.6 #6

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I'm rushing to stir sugar in my Starbucks coffee, already late to class. As I struggle with my plastic to-go lid, I can't help but think back to Milan, and compare the scenes. A year ago I would have been casually sitting in a café across from my school, leisurely enjoying my cappuccino and brioche, along with cheerful conversation among friends. Sprinting to class, my only wish is to click my heels and transport back to *la dolce vita* and my adventure of a lifetime.

The City of Milan is a hidden treasure in the land of cliché European towns. From cute cafes to major department stores, Milan has something for everyone and surprises at every turn. I had no idea I would be sipping a *caffè americano* in the morning watching business people stroll to work, browsing the racks of La Rinascente by day, and cheering in celebration with the city at night over AC Milan's win.



Maggie and her sister at the fountain in front of the castle

Milan's nightlife is like no other city in Italy. There is always something to do. I discovered this the first

week at orientation. IES Milan exposed us to spas, dinners and bars. They showed us the way the Milanese started evenings at *Aperitivos*, which are wine bars that served complimentary buffets. We went to one called Noon where we were rubbing shoulders with soccer stars such as Alexandre Pato. But nobody bothers these celebrities, because every other guest is just as chic and important. After this orientation I knew I was in the right place for me.

The best part of studying abroad in Italy is, of course, the food. Milan embodies the unique combination of local secrets and franchises. The best on-the-go food for students could be found on the same street near the city center. Luini's was a local favorite for panzerottis and across the street was Ciocciolti Italiani, a famous franchised gelateria. When you're



Parco Sempione

about to go crazy from endless pasta and gelato and lack of exercise, tucked behind the Sforza Castle is the gorgeous Parco Sempione. The park is magical in

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the springtime, with walking paths, ponds, and a bar that is lit up at night. There was an outdoor track around a small stadium where I liked to jog- it was the only place I ever saw an Italian break a sweat. It's also the perfect way to picnic with friends or play some pick-up soccer.

Another great aspect of Milan is its prime location for travel. Located in northern Italy, it is close to continental Europe and has a large central train station and international airport. I spent most weekends seeing the places I've only read about or seen on TV. Some of my favorite trips were the IES field trips, such as skiing in the Alps, which was a great bonding experience. Milan is very cosmopolitan but it is not a "touristy" city. Everyone is there for business or school. Locals don't have a negative prejudice towards Americans, nor do they cater to us. It wasn't uncommon to be stared at, particularly on the subway. Staring isn't considered rude in the Italian culture, it's just their preferred style of observation. If you're polite, most



Maggie in front of the Duomo

Italians are polite back, and love to ask you questions. Many know some English, especially the younger

ragazzi. When asking for directions, we had the best luck talking to a student around our age. Overall we were treated with genuine interest. The experience of fitting in to the Italian culture was the biggest opportunity to grow. You have to learn how to "figure it out" when things suddenly weren't so easy. But IES was there to help with anything and everything always worked out - *va bene!*



Fashion Week in Milan!

The benefit of studying abroad becomes apparent when the lessons come alive around you. The Da Vinci art class was challenging, even for someone who likes art history. But it's worth it to stand directly in front of "Il Cenacolo" (The Last Supper), one of the most profound creations, in a city "not known for art." There are also a few other aesthetic and historic gems to appreciate. The impressive Duomo is one of the largest in Europe, there are many small museums to visit, the Sforza Castle that glows with elegance at night, and the famous La Scala opera house.

My favorite class as a marketing major was Managing Fashion and Luxury Brands. This was

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about communication and branding of famous fashion houses. For this class, museums came in the form of actual shops on Monte Napoleone, Milano's version of 5th avenue. From field trips to Swarovski Crystal, invitations to French Connection's launch party, and outdoor fashion shows in the Galleria, we saw first hand how class and culture came together. I lived near Brera and Corso Como, very trendy fashion districts, and it was part of daily life to go to the Marc Jacobs Café for lunch, or the Just Cavalli club at night. Designer's brands in Milan offer "lifestyle experiences," not merely stores. Even if you're not interested in "working in fashion," this class was a great way to understand the personality of the city.

Learning about EU politics in the classroom also took on a new importance. Learning about the past and current world from a European perspective was an interesting shift. One of the most valuable lessons from being abroad is being able to see things in a new perspective and culture. You realize there is not a "right" way but many different ways of doing things. The day you begin to understand and accept some "strange Italian habits," you realized you've grown on the inside as well.

It's scary coming from a suburban town and the "bubble" of Happy Valley to a large city in a foreign country where I didn't speak the language. I was worried about going through a 3rd party program, knowing only one or two other students. Looking back, that's what shaped my experience the most. Because IES Milan was a small program, everyone became really close. Between frequent field trips and small classes, the four months were a big bonding experience. We found that other kids going to Milan usually had the same interests and reasons, so it was easy to make connections.



The Penn State Students in the IES: Milan Program (Maggie is the fourth in from the left)

Through this adventure, strangers became friends, and friends became family. I still keep in touch with my *famiglia* whenever I can.

Leaving campus for the day, I'm glad I dressed up a little; it's the Italian way after all. I decide to stroll slowly on the walk home and enjoy the pace. I may no longer be in Europe, but now and again this *Americana* can still cling to the essence of Milano on the inside.

