



SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Study Abroad



in Italy story

Marie Iannucci, Accounting major, studied abroad in Perugia, Italy, Fall 2005. In the first of a two-part series she recounts her experience.

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I think it is only proper for me to first introduce myself. My name is Marie Iannucci. I'm a senior majoring in accounting, with a smattering of minors, and a contract to work for Ernst & Young, LLP after I graduate this May. I spent the fall of my junior year studying abroad in Perugia, Italy, and I truly believe that choosing to study abroad in Perugia was perhaps the single greatest decision of my life.

I viewed study abroad as a personal challenge. I came to University Park fresh from North Penn High School of Lansdale, Pennsylvania. We jokingly refer to Penn State as "North Penn North," as each year my high school sends at least fifty people to main campus. It's hard to spend a single hour in town without running into high school friends. Never before had I spent a significant time in my life without being surrounded by familiar faces. The desire to develop myself into a truly independent person was part of my abroad objective. I had my heart set on studying in Europe during my junior year of college. Italy, in particular, was my choice destination as the vast majority of my family still resides in Italy, mainly in the countryside surrounding Napoli. I was nominated by my family as "a link to the old country," and set about weighing through my study options.

Typically, an American studying abroad in Italy has two choices, Rome or Florence. I decided I wanted something different from the normal, tourist experience, and researched into smaller accredited universities offered by Penn State's international abroad program. It was by mere happenstance that I stumbled upon the idea of Perugia, Italy. While everyone is familiar with Roma and Firenze, most have never heard of the city of Perugia. Internationally, Perugia is known for two things: amazing chocolate and its annual jazz festival. When I left America, I still had very little idea what I was about to encounter. Perugia, in my opinion, is one of the most beautiful, picturesque towns of Italy. Although, arguably, I think nearly everywhere in Italy qualifies as beautiful and picturesque. And coincidentally, Perugia was also the perfect town for a foreign student, like myself.

Prior to August 2005, I had never been overseas, and my first jetlagged steps in Perugia left me with an overwhelming feeling that I had mistakenly enrolled in study abroad EuroDisney. Another equally fair description of Perugia would be "the State College of Italy," although you would need to imagine Happy Valley being perched on the top of a moun-



tain in a 3,000-year-old Etruscan metropolis. As a town of approximately 160,000 residents, 40,000 of which are university students, the resulting mixture equates to a youthful, vibrant town that still manages to take a 3-hour afternoon break each day. A town large enough to provide daily fresh faces and the occasional tour group, it is still small enough that you will be greeted by name at the local grocery. Having grown up in pure Philadelphia suburbia, Perugia's close-knit town center was relief to my sense of Pleasantville-Italiano. Geographically, Perugia is located in the province of Umbria, nestled between the Apennine Mountains and the Tiber river basin. The settlement of Umbria predates that of nearly all other areas of Italy, including Rome, old enough that many details of its first people are lost to history. However, the province's namesake essentially translates to "dark fog" in the native Villanovan language. While sounding ominous, the ever-present Umbrian fog does wonders for the natural beauty of the area. Unlike State College fog, there was a truly mystical quality to the fog I often found rolling in through our living room window most mornings.

In Perugia, I studied at the Umbra Institute, a school founded for Americans, with approximately 200 students. The Institute was the bastion of our daily existence, with classes four days a week and countless field trips and excursions. The Umbra Institute





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Look for Part II of Iannucci's Report from Perugia: December 11th

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is, without a doubt, the most delightful school that I have ever attended. The staff is young, friendly, and willing to guide you through the tricky aspects of living in Italy (for instance, making a house visit to teach you about the cheese-grater like appliance Italians pass for a washing machine). The professors, who for the most part are extraordinarily overqualified, hail from around the world with an amazing and varied array of experiences. The Umbra Institute offers classes ranging from oil painting to advanced economics. Through the Umbra Institute, I had the opportunity to study at the world-renowned Università di Stranieri ("School for Foreigners"), to experience the chaos of learning Italian in a classroom with no common language between its thirty students. As a student of business, my courses at the Umbra Institute gave me a new perspective on the global marketplace and international business relations.

From a financial perspective, Perugia captured the love of my cheap heart with its low cost of living. I spent about ten euro per week on groceries, could buy a pound of Perugina chocolate for six euro, and one of the country's top-ranked wines for fifteen euro. And for a more definitive comparison, a 1.5 litre bottle of spring water costs approximately ten times more in Rome than Perugia. The Penn Stater in me took comfort in the fact that Perugia's gourmet-quality pizza (my two personal favorites being artichoke heart, and roasted potato) cost a mere euro. For those 4a.m. cravings, nutella-crepes were an obvious and more delicious substitute for Canyon Pizza.

Although studying abroad means a lot more than vacationing for a semester, I spent many of my weekends visiting family or seeing locations I had only before read about in books. Being a self-described history buff, I made many trips in scholarly interest. I learned about the thousand year Lombardi ruling dynasty while visiting Benevento with Zio Giovanni, a personal tour of Pompei by my tour-guide cousin Joseppina, and visited what now seems to be thousands of ancient churches. Others were out of mere curiosity and touristy obligation: Roma, Venezia, Firenze, Napoli. I spent Thanksgiving break in England (which apparently does not share America's thankfulness) and a week appreciating the orderliness of German life.

I found the key to successful life and traveling in Italy lay in knowledge of language and customs. A reason I chose to study in Perugia was its fairly complete lack of English. Contrary to the American perception of Italy, most Italians do not speak comprehensible English. Unlike Roma or Firenze who cater to American tourists, Perugia makes it fairly impossible to not make efforts at learning Italian. Italy has a quasi-love hate relationship with America, and I found that by showing my willingness to integrate into their culture, people responded much more

favorably to my presence (as a last resort, I would speak only in German and feign offense at the idea of being taken as an American). One of my favorite pastimes was sitting on the steps of la Cattedrale di San Lorenzo, Italian-watching. I made every occasion an effort to learn how Italians behave and interact, how to be Italian. In general, I made attempts to avoid English as much as possible, as you'll find Italians much more open and accepting when you speak their language. Prior to arrival in Perugia, I had completed Italian 001 at Penn State, and by December, I was able to convince most Italians that I was native.

Perugia definitely had its advantages over Penn State. Tired of living in downtown State College tenement? I lived in an 800 year old palace with gorgeous view of the city below. My street, Via dei Priori, although recently repaved, boasted three-millennia old cobblestones. Like most of Italy, Perugia tallied a nearly non-existent violent crime rate; nowhere in my life have I felt as safe walking home from a bar alone in the middle of the night. For 24 hours in September, Perugia hosts "La Notte Bianca," translating to "a white night," in which all stores and restaurants of the town stay open throughout the midnight hours for a day-long celebration. In the middle of October, Perugia hosts its world famous chocolate festival, in which the main street is transformed into a mile-long market for Europe's most delectable chocolate surrounded by the sheer madness of a hundred thousand hungry shoppers. I considered the Christmas season to be the most magical. The town strung light ornaments across all the main streets and open markets were held in the Rocca Paolina (a partially destroyed 16th century Papal fortress underneath the Perugia's main square).

Perugia will teach you about being true Italian, that there is more to Italy than spaghetti and tourist traps. Perugia is about learning a more civilized way of life; where there is no such thing as Tupperware, where being fashionably late is considered polite, where one can greet your friendly neighborhood vagabond by name, and where frail old women are the most vicious when in line at the bakery. You will learn there is more to the world than America, more to Italy than the Colisseum, and more to life than a daily routine. Perugia, to me, was more than a vacation, more than a semester away from Penn State, but a home to which I long to return.

End Part I

