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My Study Abroad

“Foreignness” isn’t what makes study abroad meaningful. Attention is. Not what you do or see, but what affects and changes you.

By [Rachel Toor](#)



Alena Selezneva

Two years ago, my best friend’s daughter, a young woman I admire as much as I adore her, told me she was considering a semester away from her highly rejective private university to study abroad.

Cool! Where in the world did my favorite kid want to go?

“Thinking about Spain,” she said.

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In my dulcet Auntie Rachel tones, I barked, “Are you freaking kidding me?”

She grew up with a deep awareness of her own privilege. She cares in attentive ways for both the people she knows personally and those who have been overlooked by society. Her parents have shown her the world and she spent the previous summer in Spain, working for her uncle and living on her own. This idealistic, progressive and adventurous young woman was, in my oh-so-humble opinion, going to squander a learning opportunity (and have her parents pay

fancy-pants tuition) to return to a place where she already felt comfortable.

I can't say I was disappointed, because I love and trust her. But the truth is, I was a little disappointed. Someone who usually embraces hard things was taking the easy road to get a Spanish-language-immersion experience.

This spring, exhausted and burned out, I had lunch on the campus of Augsburg University with President Paul Pribbenow. After a dinner with a bunch of other trauma-bonded presidents in Minneapolis, Sue Rivera of Macalester College told me she and her husband were going on a study abroad—familiarization trip to Tuscany with the Center for Global Education and Experience, which is based at Augsburg. These are designed to promote lifelong learning for curated groups of academic leaders. “They are thoughtful about that in a way that a mere vacation is not,” Sue said, having gone with CGEE last summer to Namibia. She then wrangled me an invite. Toby, my husband, who went to culinary school and who had spent some time cooking in restaurants in Italy a couple of decades ago, could come, too.

I said yes because it seemed, well, easy. I needed a break; when it comes to planning, I'm as incompetent as I am lazy. I had no institutional support and so had to pay my own way.

After I'd forked over a big chunk of change, I thought, *What am I doing?* To be clear, no one deserves sympathy for

getting to go to Tuscany for a trip called something like A Taste of Italy: Food and Faith. While I'm down with the first part, the second leaves me, um, cold. The training passed on to me by my father was that religion is the opiate of the people and there will always be someone who wants to put my people in an oven.

In the car from the airport to the castello, Joe Connelly explained the center's mission and I thought, *Oh shit. I came on the wrong trip.* I didn't need a tour of sites I'd already seen or history I could easily read or reread. CGEE's emphasis is in countries in Central America and Africa, exploring social justice, community engagement and the kind of experiential learning that gets students' hands dirty and cracks their hearts open. That Joe wore a baseball cap with the words "Do Good" on it said it all.

Early on, I kept wondering what we were doing in Tuscany. It seemed lovely but bland. I even found myself wanting to drop the course because, like many students, I hadn't read the ~~syllabus~~ itinerary closely enough to realize the argument would unfold inductively rather than begin with a bold thesis.

Instead, I spent days talking about Paulo Freire, pondering the preferential option for the poor, hearing about migrants in a country that wants to keep its doors closed, eating latkes and falafel in a kosher restaurant, considering the varieties of religious experience and being moved to tears by Padre Bernardo, the Benedictine abbot at San Miniato al

Monte, who talked about darkness and light, cosmology and Pink Floyd in the same sentence.

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What I began to realize, somewhere between my own rationalizations and the reality of the trip, is that difficulty or “foreignness” isn’t what makes study abroad meaningful. Attention is. Not what you do or see, but what affects and changes you. Who you go with and how the trip is planned makes all the difference. As with everything, fit matters.

During the tour, someone said, “If I thought this is what Catholicism was like, I would have been more into it as a kid.” For me, the experience was an always-necessary reminder in cultural and personal humility.

My father had a sabbatical when I was in fifth grade, and we spent months traveling through Europe. Back home, my parents subjected friends to slide shows with a running commentary. The funniest story was about getting lost in a small town. They asked for directions and were told, “You can’t get there from here.” Oh, those silly foreigners!

I thought about that phrase during a run when I saw something in the distance I wanted to explore but couldn’t easily reach. If I had asked for directions, I suspect someone may have said, “You can’t get there from here.” Too taxing and annoying for a resident to try to chart a complicated path for an outsider. That’s why we need local guides to show us places that we cannot get to on our own.

Many friends who travel widely talk in broad strokes about the baffling ways of locals. What’s lost is the nuance you only get by spending time with people who have to shop for food, get their kids to school and live ordinary lives. By putting yourself into the Birkenstocks of others, you begin to understand a place from the inside instead of merely observing it. Finding ways to get that experience is key.

The real goal of study abroad may simply be to teach students not to privilege their own cultural assumptions and to see how much they miss. It requires humility and a willingness to seem less knowledgeable. The idea of mastery is the enemy of growth. So I realized I was wrong to think the problem of study abroad was choosing somewhere too familiar. The missed opportunity is moving through any place, familiar or foreign, without curiosity or

cultural humility. You can do that in Florence, Italy, or in Florence, Alabama.

I should have remembered that the girl who calls me Auntie Rachel is one of the most empathetic and astute people I've ever met. In Spain, this only child lived with a family of nine who shared one shower. She cooked for them and cared for their children. I wouldn't be surprised if she fixed their computers and changed the oil in their car. I'm certain she learned things that will stay with her for life.

In our last session, the 10 of us travelers (all academics except for my husband) shared reflections on the trip. Someone quoted Mary Oliver: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

We did. We were. And now, well, here I am.

Rachel Toor is a contributing editor at Inside Higher Ed and the co-founder of The Sandbox, a weekly newsletter that allows presidents and chancellors to write anonymously. She is also a professor of creative writing and the author of books on weirdly diverse subjects. Reach her here with questions, comments and ~~complaints~~ compliments.

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