

Semester Abroad Reflection

Savannah Kemper

Lorenzo de' Medici University

Florence, Italy

Fall 2024

One of the requirements for my major, Language and International Business, is to spend a semester abroad in a country where my target language is spoken, studying and immersing oneself in the culture of the chosen focus language or country. My chosen language focus is Italian; therefore, I studied in Italy for the Fall semester of 2024. Having been to Italy on a family trip 10 years ago, I knew exactly where I wanted to study: the iconic, beautiful, endlessly fascinating city of Florence. It had been my favorite among the cities we visited so long ago, Venice, Florence, Siena, and Rome, relatively centrally located and without the intense bustling city feel of Rome. My choice of program was made easy for me as there was only one option in Florence, the Lorenzo de' Medici University. With their expansive and incredibly amazing-sounding course list, I knew I would have the most fantastic time. My family was fortunate to travel to Italy for my younger sister's high school graduation trip the summer before my intended semester, spending a week in Florence before staying in the Amalfi Coast for the rest of the trip. Having already been to Florence, we explored the city with a more local eye, imagining what my time there would be like, what restaurants I would frequent and where my classes and apartment might be. I was told that Clemson University students would all be housed together in a block of apartments, so I was excited not only to have somewhat "built-in" friends and make new friends in general but also to form friendships I could take back home with me as well. Unfortunately, this was not the case. In addition to not being housed together, the administration would not allow any information to be given out about the other students in the program. I found this incredibly disappointing and isolating as I saw other students and parents of students on Facebook groups receiving complete lists of all other students from their universities, their contact information and sometimes even where they were living. Upon realizing I would essentially be on my own upon arrival, I sought ways to reach out to other students in my same program at the university in Florence. I did this by posting my social media to the Florence Fall Abroad 2024 Facebook group, encouraging others to reach out. I was lucky enough to meet a girl from New York who, after receiving a detailed list of all the other students in her program and their roommates, did some classic Instagram research to find that her roommate went to Clemson. A funny but welcome coincidence! Despite living on the other side of the city from me, she and her roommates became some of my closest friends and travel companions for the entirety of the semester.

Before beginning my program, I was asked to list some goals I'd like to achieve during my time in Italy, both academic and personal. The first of these goals was to strengthen my Italian language skills and understanding. Being fully immersed in a country and culture with a different language for four months will definitely allow for that, in addition to taking classes taught exclusively in that language as well. During my time abroad, I took great care in speaking as much Italian as possible, ordering at my local café, asking for something at the market and participating in my Italian classes. I also worked on my understanding by reading the signs around the city on my walks to and from class, listening to the announcements on the trains and in airports, and even attempting to eavesdrop on the conversations of nearby tables in restaurants.

Now, I can participate well in my Italian classes at Clemson and am even teaching my dog some Italian commands as I try to speak a little Italian in my apartment. The second of my goals was to gain a broader perspective of not only Italian business but also European business culture and practices. As my major is International business at its core, I found that it would be essential for me to gain experience in and understanding of international business culture and not limit myself to solely Italian business practices. The bespoke travel planning internship I participated in during the semester worked to expand and enhance my Italian business experience as I performed site visits at local restaurants and hotels, communicated with tour agencies and worked with local accommodations experts to provide incredible luxury Italian experiences for our clients. Additionally, the global business class I took helped me better understand international business practices and nuances by discussing specifics of Italian economics, business practices and political environment while connecting these concepts to the practices and economic and political climates of various other countries. My final goal for the semester was to simply grow as a person, expanding my worldview and cultural consciousness. I pride myself on my worldview, having grown up traveling and being raised by extremely well-traveled parents who took great care in raising children considerate of the world outside their small southern hometown. I always enjoy learning about cultures different from my own and was incredibly excited not only to have the opportunity to be immersed in Italian culture but to have easy access to countless other cultures, as it is so much easier to travel between European countries than back and forth from the U.S. I am proud of the fact that I spent nearly every weekend during my semester in another country or part of Italy, and I feel like I can proudly say that my worldview was absolutely expanded. In addition, I am confident that I grew as a person; as I detailed previously, I learned to overcome adversity in several different instances throughout my experience in Italy, problem-solving, and simply being more open to new and exciting experiences.

My few days in Florence were an adventure. It was during this time that I found out that Clemson students were not housed together, and while I had requested a single room, that was not guaranteed, along with the guarantee of random roommates. So I woke up my first morning in Florence in a hotel a block from the university offices, checked out, stored my luggage and headed off to get my housing assignment. Thankfully, I got a single room in a fourth-floor walk-up not too far away. I came to love the location as it wasn't entirely central, but close to the train station and where the bus picked up and dropped off for the student trips, as opposed to my friends who lived at least a 30-minute walk from anywhere. After meeting my roommates, who were absolutely lovely, I met up with my friend from Facebook for dinner along with her roommates, one of which happened to also go to Clemson, one happened to be the girl I was behind in line at the housing office and the other was from the same town as some of my family. As I have previously mentioned, we all became instant friends and my travel companions.

I tend to be the epitome of type A, the planner, and somewhat well-traveled. However, despite this, due to all of the difficulties that arose in even getting abroad, internship searching, class schedule arranging, and the sheer number of approval hoops I had to jump through, where I wanted to go while I was abroad never had the opportunity to cross my mind. I always answered, “Well, I haven’t really thought about it yet,” whenever someone asked. That is part of why I was so grateful for the friend group I made so early on. For most of the trips, I painstakingly booked them on my phone because I would walk into their apartment to a table full of girls and laptops and a “Hey Savannah, wanna go to Croatia?” and several other variations of that. To which I always replied, “Of course! Why not?” and that was essentially how I went to 10 different countries during my time abroad. Most of these were weekend trips led by organizations specifically for students studying abroad, so you just had to pay, and everything was handled, even the extra excursions you just had to “add to cart.” To go into detail about all the places I went would make for a thesis-length reflection, so I will start by listing where I went during my time in Italy. My first trip was a day trip to three of the five towns in Cinque Terre, Manarola, Riomaggiore and Monterosso al Mare. I then took weekend trips to Split, Croatia, München, Germany for the first weekend of Oktoberfest, a couple of day trips to Rome, a day trip to Milano for a Halloween party, Sorrento for an event for my internship, a quick pass through Brussels, Belgium, before going to Amsterdam, Netherlands, Copenhagen, Denmark, Oslo, Norway and Stockholm, Sweden for fall break, and a couple more weekend trips to Interlaken, Switzerland, Budapest, Hungary, my solo trip to London, UK, and lastly, Sienna. Unfortunately, if you ask me which of these fantastic places was my favorite, I simply could not tell you. I loved each place for its unique attractions that the other didn’t have. I loved Cinque Terre for the cool Mediterranean on a hot day, Croatia for the ziplining and swimming off the party boat, the entire Oktoberfest experience, the food, architecture and history of the Scandinavian cities, paragliding and the geography of Interlaken, the food and architecture of Budapest and the solo traveling in London. While I was usually only in one city in each of these countries and for a very short time, I tried to fully experience the culture and everything these places had to offer while I was there. This meant trying many different kinds of food, like beer goulash in Germany and the surprisingly good reindeer stew in Norway. I pride myself on trying to live life to the absolute fullest and am truly happy with everything I was able to do, see and try while I was abroad. I was only in Florence for two, maybe three, weekends the entire semester. I really put some miles on the new weekend trip suitcase I had gotten! There are plenty more experiences from these trips that I would love to share, so if you read this or see a photo from one or more of my experiences abroad and would like to know more, do not hesitate to ask me; I had the most amazing time so be prepared for me to chew your ear off!

Now, I want to reflect on my time in Florence. My whole life, I grew up in a small town and went to college in a small town, Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina; that’s how you know it’s small. I have only really visited cities for short times as vacations, and suddenly, I found myself living in the heart of a city. That alone took some adjusting, despite being in a

different country, across an ocean and in a completely different time zone. I loved how walkable Florence is. Everything I needed was a 15-minute or less walk away: class, the grocery store, everything, but as someone who loves to drive, getting used to walking everywhere was hard. In addition, Italians' concept of personal space and "sidewalk etiquette" was vastly different from what I was used to. At least, to my understanding, walking on the sidewalk in the U.S. is similar to driving; for the most part, you stick to the right side. However, in Italy, this is not the case, and people will absolutely just run square into you even when the sidewalk is entirely open. This was quite jarring and honestly frustrating as I prefer my personal space, so having people bump into me all the time, everywhere I went, was incredibly annoying. I have to admit, I never quite got over this and am thankful to be back in a place where people generally regard the unspoken sidewalk rules. Despite this, I did love wandering around the city; every building had a story to tell, around every corner was a piece of history; and I was appreciative of my Italian Renaissance class that opened my eyes to these little things. I also incredibly enjoyed my cooking class. It was taught in a state-of-the-art cooking lab inside of one the most famous food markets in Italy, the Mercato Centrale. I loved this class because not only did we get to cook, which I already enjoy, but we also got to practice knife skills and try things I would have otherwise turned away from, like swordfish and squid. A hardship I encountered came with my Food in Italian Culture class, which seems unassuming; however, this class was taught entirely in Italian by a professor who didn't speak much English. While I did, in fact, test into this class, I learned very quickly that my Italian skills were not nearly what I thought them to be. For the first time since I had switched my major from Mechanical Engineering, I, a person who prides myself on my academic prowess, felt like an idiot. For the first time since I had been in an engineering class, which was about two years, I felt stupid, and I was not in a position to fail out of the class. My classes this semester were so carefully curated to fit all the requirements that Clemson simply couldn't offer back home; failing was not an option, and walking out of class after the very first day, I already felt like a failure, which was scary. This class not only forced me to improve my language skills, which I hope I did as I passed the class, but also taught me that it's okay to lean on your classmates a little. One of them, coincidentally, also happened to go to Clemson, but this meant, after class, I would confirm with someone what I had thought the professor assigned for homework, take a little extra time making sure I did and understood the assignments and even trying to participate in class because it was ok that I didn't know every word I wanted to say, my classmates and my professor helped me. What I can say I learned from this class, aside from the history of lasagna and why Chianti wine is represented by a black rooster, is that a perfectionist doesn't have to be perfect all the time; that simply isn't plausible, and it's ok to ask for help when you don't know or don't understand. That doesn't reflect poorly on you or make you look stupid; it makes you look like you want to learn, and that's better than being perfect.

I would love to look back on my time abroad and say that it was perfect, but if you've learned anything from reading this, it should be that my experience was not perfect. Was it incredible and something I would recommend to anyone who asks? Yes, absolutely. Despite the

frustrations, having to work around the train strikes that seem only to happen when you need to get somewhere, the people running into you on an otherwise empty sidewalk, the crazy drivers, the creeps on bikes that whistle at you as you walk by, the seemingly endless tour groups and “tourist season,” the cramped buses, the overall lack of heating and AC and just being far away from the people I love, despite all those things, I had the best time. I made memories that will last a lifetime, that I hope to tell my grandchildren when I’m old for them to Ooh and Aah at and think I’m cool. Memories like laughing so hard, tears start running down my face at friend dinners, encouraging my friend who’s afraid of heights to go ziplining over a canyon in Croatia, seeing Budapest light up at night from the river like it’s Disney world, drinking water from Lake Brienz while kayaking because its the purest glacier water I might ever see, paragliding over the town of Interlaken, in the most insane alpine landscape I’ve ever seen, grabbing aperitivo with whoever is free, or getting some of the best feedback on a paper I have ever gotten. I couldn’t have gotten these memories anywhere else and in any other way. I can positively say I am a better person after this experience, a better friend, and a better traveler. Hopefully, I can apply the things I learned to my everyday life.

- You can see some pictures from these experiences and more on the Semester Abroad page of my website, linked here: <https://www.savannahkemper.com/semester-abroad>
- A screenshot of the best feedback I’ve ever received is attached below. It was regarding my final paper for my ITAL 4550 Italian Cinema and Literature class, which is available on the Academic Samples page here: <https://www.savannahkemper.com/academic-samples> and the course description is under the Coursework, Culture and Literature Courses: <https://www.savannahkemper.com/culture-and-literature-courses>

Re: Final Paper Inbox x



Edoardo Rialti <edoardo.rialti@lorenzodemedici.it>

Dec 2, 2024, 11:32 AM



to me ▼

Dear Savannah, I apologize for the brevity of my review but as you can imagine I am still a bit recovering from the operation but I still wanted to give you a personal reaction. Your essay is one that every teacher would like to read, certainly me. Vast and richly detailed, beautifully written, more than an essay on a single theme, it is a splendid horizontal expansion of a meta-cinematic element which thus becomes a way to retrace one of the fundamental axes of contemporary cinema itself with Antonioni's film as the pivot. Its quality is such that it is not necessary to cite this or that passage, it is the general breath that derives from it that is fertile and suggestive for the mind and eyes of the reader. I thank you and offer my compliments, waiting to express them to you in person.

A plus (because there is not A plus **plus** :)

Yours ER