

ARRIVAL

The journey from Boston to Florence was something completely new to me. I was accompanied by my friends Phil and Emily, so I wasn't completely alone. Departing Logan Airport in the evening, we landed in Amsterdam, where the sun came up. None of us slept on the plane much, so we had basically skipped sleep that night, and were starting the next day.

After a quick 2 hour flight, we arrived in Florence. Heavy fog and rain greeted us as we descended to land. The airport was small, so a bus shuttled us from the tarmac to the terminal. Everyone always hypes up the process of going through customs, but we grabbed our bags, and walked straight through to the lobby. Three other students from my architecture program were abroad here. Phil, Emily and I met Jamay, who flew separately to Italy, in the airport lobby.

This was the first place we saw all of the other students who were studying abroad with API.





FIRST MORNING IN FLORENCE

Our apartments were not ready for a few days, so we stayed in a hotel, which was unexpectedly luxurious. Phil and I ate our first breakfast in the hotel dining area on the top floor. The sun was just coming up when we sat down, which gave us our first glimpse of the city that we would be in for the next 4 months.

I didn't care for much of the breakfast food, which included some runny eggs, al dente pasta, and juice that almost tasted like cranberry. Luckily the pastry made up for it.

ROAMING THE STREETS

Our second day in the city greeted us with blue skies, something that we would cherish as the winter weeks continued. We had been stuck in the hotel the day before, learning about the city from our program directors, and stuff we would need to know to buy food, and get around.

Phil and I took a self guided tour around, passing by the famous Duomo, many window food shops, and then along the Arno River. Everything here was so different from home. Cobblestone streets were filled with people all speaking another language, and the architecture was much different as well.





UNUSUAL WEATHER

The weather the first week was spectacular. A bit chilly in the morning, but sunny most of the day. The statue above was my daily view from my apartment in Piazza Santa Croce. I shared a room with Phil, and the apartment with 4 other guys. Left: Looking up the Arno River.



PIAZZALE MICHELANGELO

Piazzale Michelangelo was a scenic overlook northeast of the city, which provided amazing views of Florence. The plaza at the top was filled with vendors, street performers, and plenty of tourists. We were far enough away from the city that the noise from the cars was just a sound in the distance.

Sunsets were a particular treat here, as the city nestled between the river and mountains in the background produced spectacular colors and views.



FLORENCE AT DUSK

As the sun was going down, a haze formed on the horizon, and the lights of the city revealed themselves as the day turned into night. The Duomo stood out from the rest of the urban landscape, with its dome and cathedral lit up against the lower buildings around it.



DAY TRIP TO PISA

Pisa was my first day trip of my Europe experience. The rail system in Europe is much bigger than back in the States, so it is relatively easy to get anywhere by train. Figuring out the train schedules was a different story. After a one hour ride, we were at the central Pisa train station. The leaning tower of Pisa was on the other side of the city, so Phil and I headed out, having to go without GPS, since we only had basic phones for emergencies.

We found it while only getting slightly lost, and met back up with Emily, Jamay, and some of their roommates. I was looking forward to going up in the tower, but it cost over 40 Euros, and there was no way I was spending that much. After posing for the usual photos of either holding the tower up or pushing it down, we toured the neighboring basilica, and then headed back into town for lunch.





WEEKEND IN ROME

As part of our tuition, API brought us on several weekend trips to places around Italy. Our first trip was south to Rome. Bus was our method of transport for all of these places. It was the most affordable option, but not the most comfortable. After three hours, we were arriving in a bigger version of Florence, with a different type of architecture.

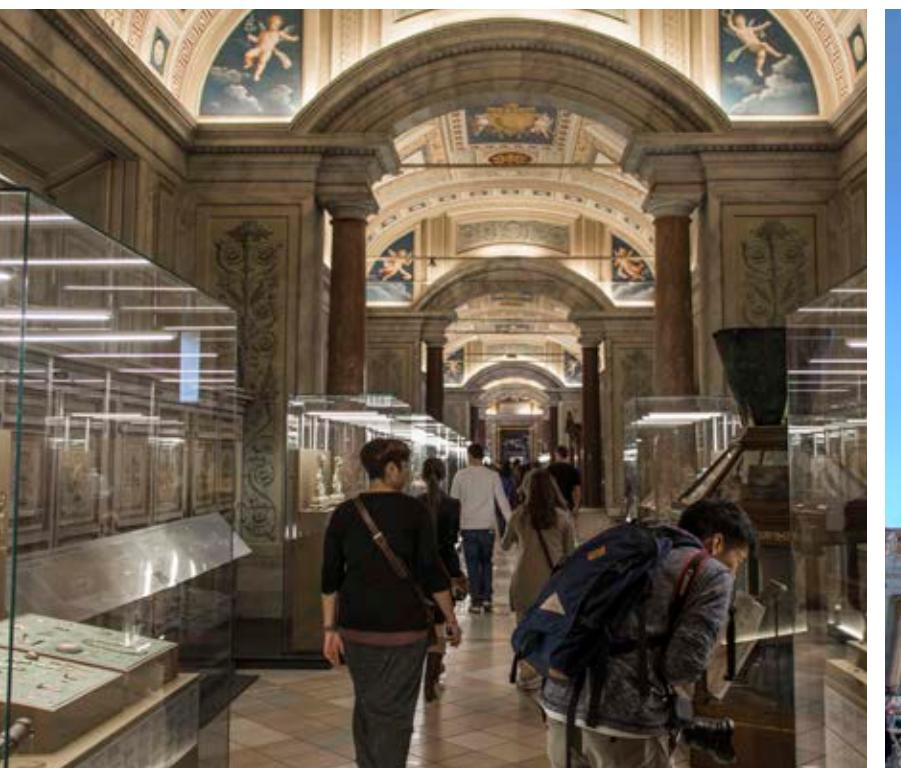
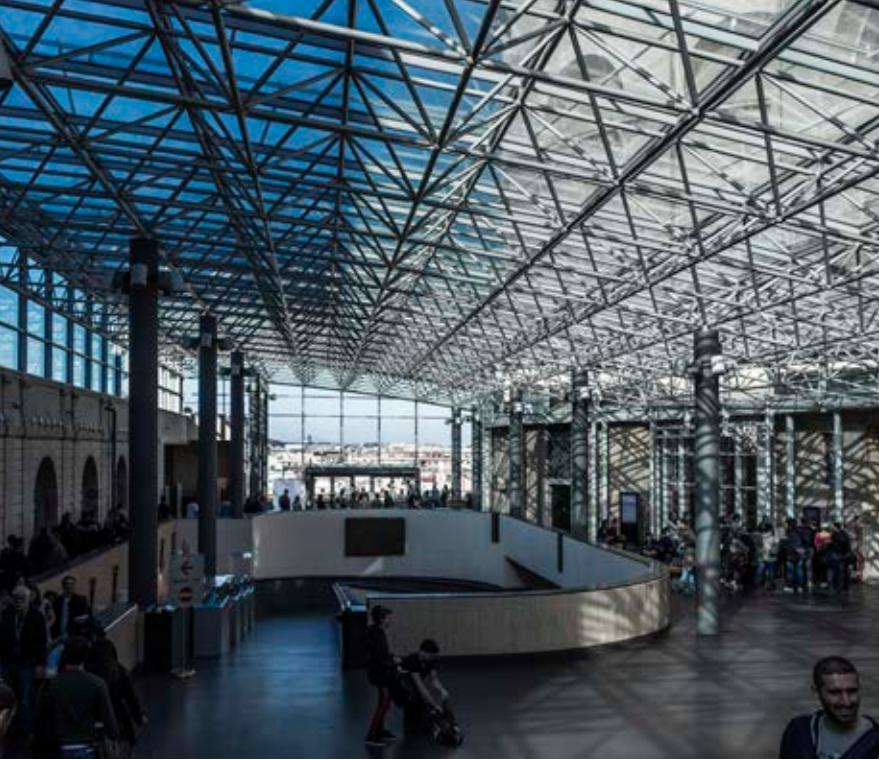
We were led around the city by English-speaking Italian guides, getting the usual tourist kind of tour. Even though Rome is around the same latitude as Massachusetts, its position in the Mediterranean means the weather is much milder, with the temperature reaching 60 to 70°F in the middle of February.





THE VATICAN

The most iconic section of our visit in Rome was the Vatican, where St. Peter's Basilica is. We started the day at the Vatican Museum, were I got to see the Sistine Chapel, and Michelangelo's murals on the ceiling. St. Peter's followed the museum, and the place looks bigger in real life than in photographs. I did not get to go up to the top of the dome, but I got that chance on a later visit.





THE COLOSSEUM

The Colosseum was the one monument of the trip that I enjoyed the most; even more than St. Peter's. Being almost 2,000 years old, it shows its age. There was no way to get down to the bottom of the amphitheater, where the walls of the exposed hypogaeum were visible.





IT'S NICE TO BE HOME

As much as I enjoyed the weekend trips of the famous cities, there was nothing like coming back to my apartment in Florence and having a chance to relax. The bus rides were long and cramped, so I made sure that every trip on my own didn't include a bus as the main mode of transportation. I also cooked more than I ever did back at home. I ate out occasionally, but it was expensive. Below: A home cooked meal that my roommates and I cooked together. With six of us living in the apartment, we would take turns during the week cooking for each other. Not many kids in our program were able to pull this off with the same success.



A STROLL IN CASCINE PARK

One of my classes was a photography studio. I had a good set of camera skills already, but this would give me a chance to improve them even more. The class was small, with only eight students. Phil and I met a girl named Holly, who was living with one of our friends from UMass. The teacher quickly favored the three of us, as the rest of the girls in the class were not that smart.

Cascine Park was a green stretch of land along the Arno River, that served as a great subject for our landscape photography session.



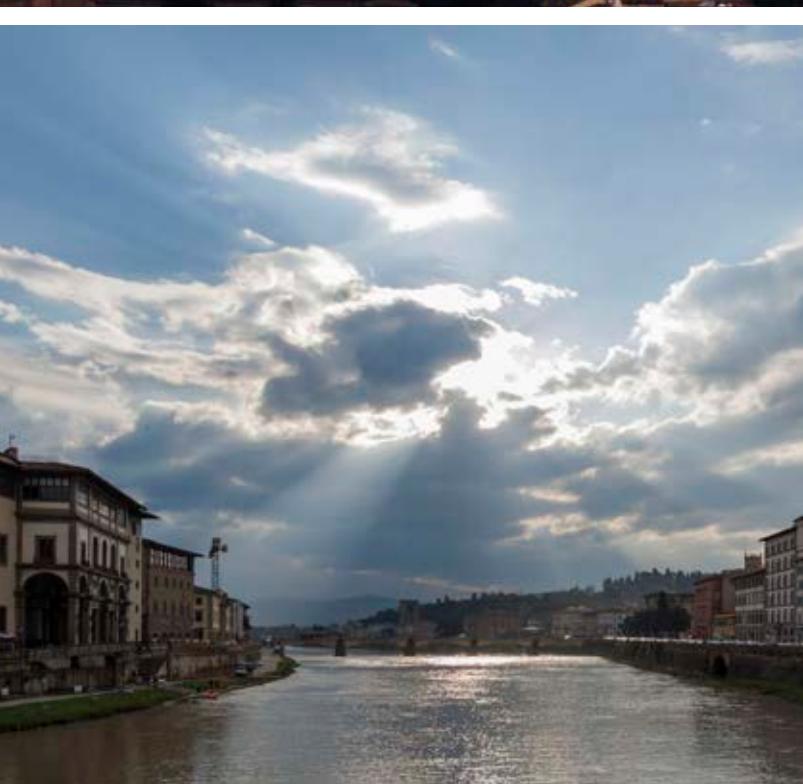
A WALK IN THE WOODS

The photography studio I was in had several assignments that required going out and capturing a variety of scenes for a photo collection. One of my collections revolved around the theme of a journey. I took an early morning walk across the river and up the hill around the area of Piazzale Michelangelo.

There was a medieval church surrounded by stone walls at the top of the hill. I walked up a steep path, through a still sleeping street of houses, and made my way around the church. A coniferous forest ran along the walls, and when the wind picked up, you could see the pollen falling off the trees. Luckily, I'm not allergic to this kind of pollen.

After rounding the hill, I was back at the scenic lookout, with just enough time to capture the sunrise before heading to class.





ANTINORI CELLARS

My art history class took a trip out to Antinori Cellars. Less than an hour outside of Florence, this winery had recently completed construction of its new building. The architecture was amazing, as most of the building was built into the hillside, with grape vines growing on the roof. This technique also helped to keep the wine cool as the ground temperature kept the building cool.

The deepest rooms into the hillside were where the fermentation tanks and wine storage were located, with the lobby, shop and hallways opening up to daylight, with views out to valley. This was a special place to visit, since the modern architecture stood out from the rest of the traditional buildings in Florence, and the rest of Italy.





COLLE DI VAL D'ELSA

The winery trip ended with a stop at this small hillside town. A glass elevator brought us from the new town at the base of the hill up to the old part of town at the top. Panoramic views greeted us from the overlook of the city.



A DAY IN VENICE

As the title says, we spent a day in Venice. One day is not enough to tour this dense city. This was a trip planned by our program, so travel and hotels were all planned for us. In order to get out to the island, we drove out on a two mile bridge, and then took a ferry around to Piazza San Marco (image to the right). The majority of the island is only accessible by boat or on foot. Even the fire department operates from boats.

What I enjoyed the most was the irregularity of Venice, every corner revealed a new and unique arrangement of buildings and canals that I've never seen anywhere else. We paused for lunch at a popular street vendor selling a plate of varied fried sea food, paired with wine. Some of the cooked creatures were unidentifiable under the breading, but I ate them anyway.

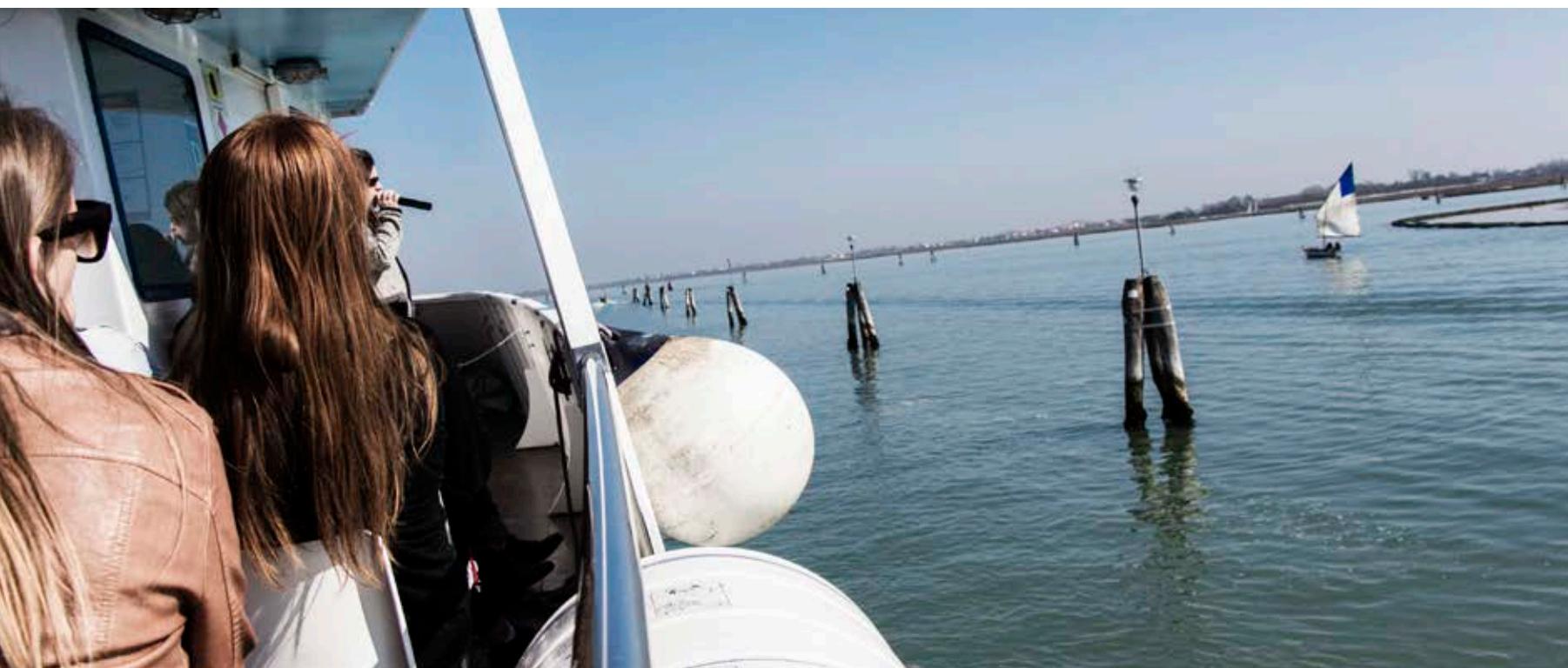
To finish off the day, Phil and I paired up with two other girls in our program to split a gondola ride. No matter how expensive it is, you just have to do it.





MURANO & BURANO

We visited these two islands the next day, off to the west of Venice. Murano is famous for its glass making, and we got to see a demonstration on how to make a glass horse. Just like Venice, boats and walking are the main methods of getting around. Burano is known for its colorful houses, in shades of red, orange, yellow and blue. At the end of the day, it was back on the bus to return to Florence for classes the next day.



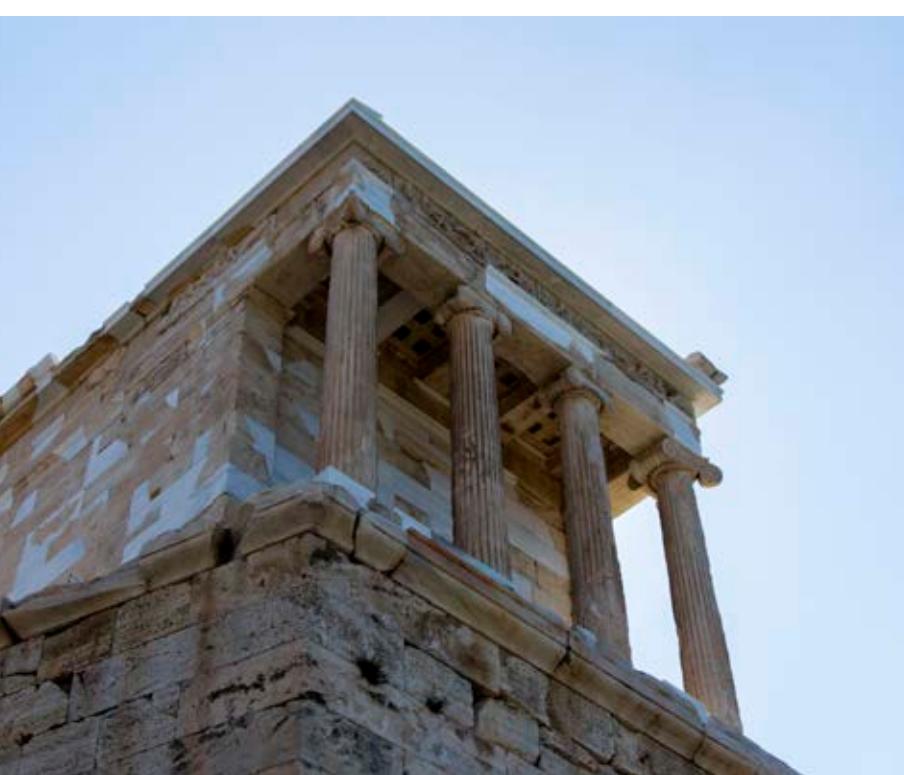
SPRING BREAK IN GREECE

During the week, I have no classes on Friday, so every weekend is three days long. This means that my spring break was 10 days long. Phil and I left Florence at noon to catch a high speed train to Rome, where we flew out to Athens. The airport is relatively new, and the subway took us the 30 miles to the hotel in the center of Athens. We were here for six days, so we had plenty of opportunities to see the local landmarks, and get to know the food.

The first full day after arriving, we toured the Acropolis, which is the site of the Parthenon, not to be confused with the Pantheon in Rome. Surprising to us, our student IDs got us into most museums for free, which saved us a lot of money. The subway system made getting around quick and easy.

We were fortunate that the weather was sunny and warm for all six days we were there.





THE HILLS OF ATHENS

Athens had several large hills rising out of the urban fabric below, looking like a green mountain in a sea of white. They offered great views of the landscape, and a chance to escape into nature while still remaining in the city. Phil and I took two hikes up to Filopappou Hill (left), one during the day, and one at night. On our day hike, I was surprised at how many solar panels there were on the rooftops. On our second trip, we went up at sunset, and stayed till the stars came out. Our return to the bottom was rewarded by a stop by our favorite row of restaurants.









ACROCORINTH

Corinth was a day trip we made by train. After questioning whether we were on the right train, we arrived in Corinth, and grabbed lunch before heading to the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth. Ancient ruins aren't really my thing, so we hiked up to Acrocorinth, an ancient hilltop acropolis built in the archaic times.

The two mile walk up the hot road wasn't enjoyable at all, but the views at the top were incredible. We only had 30 minutes before closing, so our visit was rushed, but it's someplace I could definitely go back to.

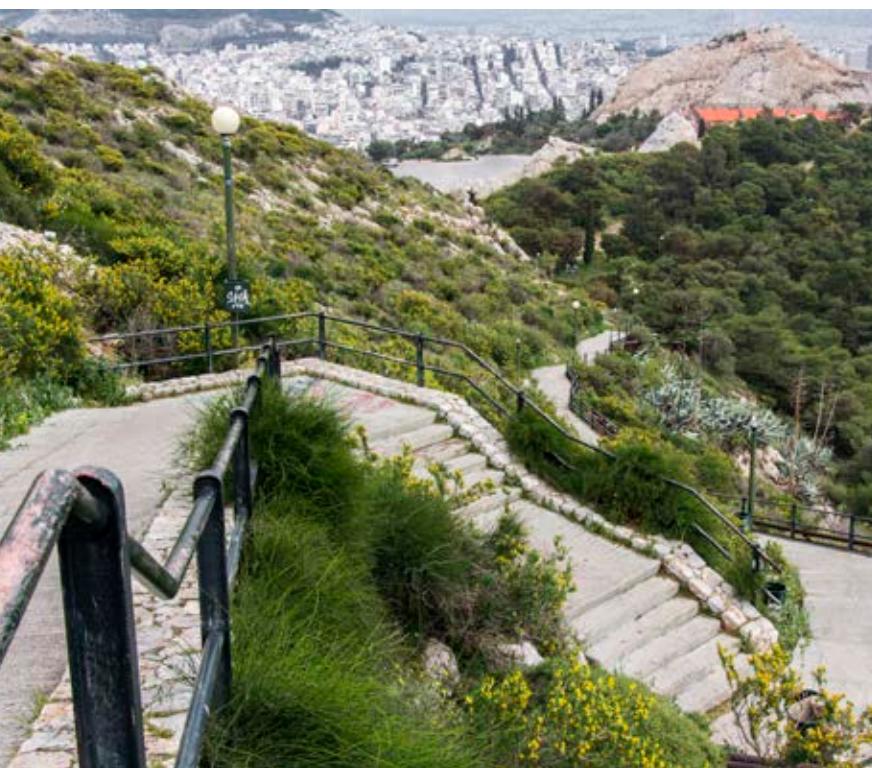






HILL OF LYCABETTUS

Athens has many hills around the city that rise from the dense urban environment below. They are an escape from the commotion and noise of everyday life, and a great way to see the city from above. The Hill of Lycabettus is a 908-foot hill with a restaurant, chapel and theater at its top. A zigzagging path wound its way up to the top, where we were greeted by a series of buildings that seemed open, but there was hardly a person in sight. Another interesting path led to the next peak, where Phil and I attempted to summit the rock precipice amid the barbed wire fencing. It was overcast and humid, but the views were amazing.





AEGINA

I ended up booking a ferry to the wrong side of the island of Aegina, but we managed to fill the time. I took the opportunity to walk along the coast, soaking in the sun and the waves, and thinking about my journey so far.



ABANDONED OLYMPIC COMPLEX

The most recent Olympic Games happened back in 2004, with the complex seeing major renovations for that event. Since then, many of the facilities have fallen into disrepair, even though many are still in use today. Vegetation was overgrown, and the concrete was stained from years of weathering.

The place was popular for cyclists and rollerbladers, especially for kids. Phil and I made our way around the buildings, and managed to slip by a few fences to get a closer view of this aging part of the city.



ATHENS TO BERLIN





TOURING BERLIN

We stayed over at the home of Phil's relatives outside of Berlin, and his aunt gave us a tour of the city on our first day. As opposed to Athens, where there was occasionally new architecture in a city of old, Berlin had some old architecture in a city of new. We saw a section of the Berlin Wall, the Jewish Memorial, Brandenburg Gate, and an old Jewish neighborhood. The subway system was by far the biggest I've ever seen, and we wouldn't have had any idea where to go if it wasn't for Phil's aunt. Besides for the intermittent monument or architectural marvel, the city was quite uniform and predictable.





VICTORY COLUMN

In the center of the Tiergarten, Berlin's largest and oldest park, was the Victory Column. This monument celebrated the Prussian victory in the Danish-Prussian War. Later military victories inspired changes to the original design to what it is today. Similar to the hike up the Bunker Hill monument, a narrow spiral staircase brings you up to the top, offering panoramic views of Berlin. We timed our visit perfectly, as we caught the sunset from the top of the viewing platform.







FUNKTURM BERLIN

The Funkturm Berlin is an old broadcasting tower viewing area was open to the weather, and the that now acts as a tourist attraction. An elevator tower was moving slightly in the wind, making brought us up to the observation deck, at a height Andrew nervous. The rest of the day was spent of 400 feet. The lousy weather limited our view wandering down random streets, finding an old of the city, but I got a nice group shot of us by cathedral with an organ being played inside. sticking the GoPro through the metal bars. The

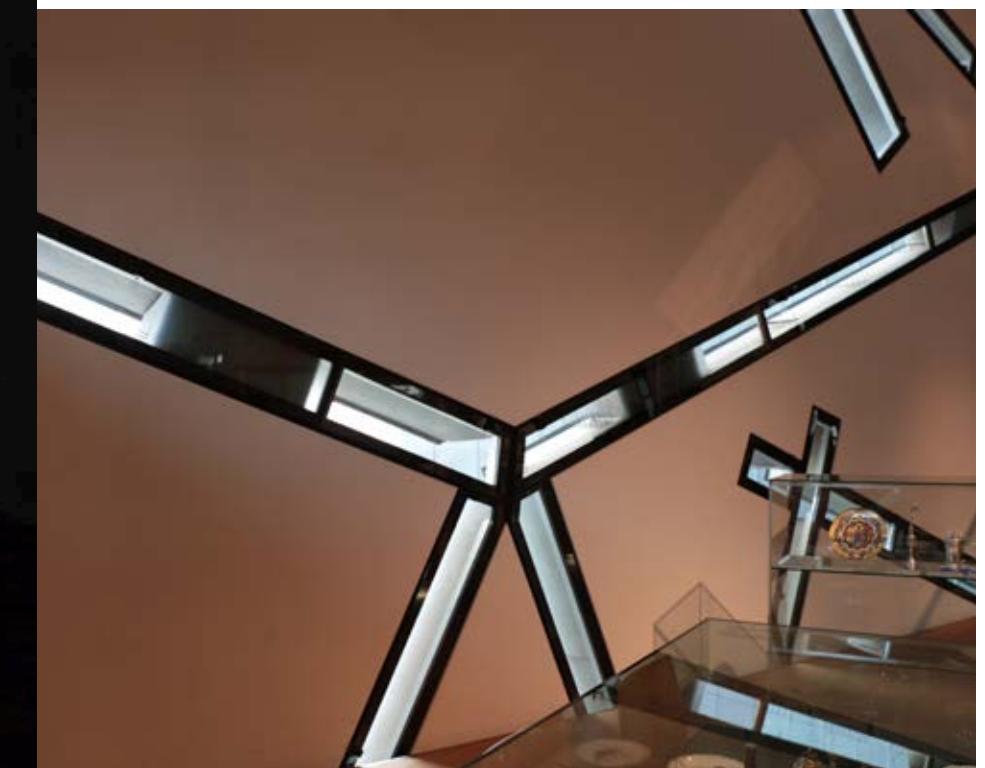


REICHSTAG BUILDING

Above the German parliament building is a glass dome that allows you to see down into the main chamber floor, while also providing panoramic views of the city. There was tight security to get in, but it was well worth it. Hanging from the top of the dome is a series of angled mirrors creating a multitude of reflections of the floor, depending on where you're standing. A ramp makes its way up the perimeter of the dome to a platform at the top, with an oculus that opens to the outside. The elevator had a mirror on both sides, creating an infinity mirror, with the view of the elevator cab that never ended.

JEWISH MUSEUM

The Jewish Museum is an oddly-shaped building whose entrance is via a tunnel from the museum entrance. As with most museums that are stunning architecturally, the building is more the focus for me than the exhibits inside. Intersecting corridors and diagonal windows made the trip through the museum a journey, with little connection to the outside. The most memorable exhibit was Shalekhet - Fallen Leaves. 10,000 faces punched out of steel lie on the ground in a void space of the building. When you walk across it, the sound of the metal clanging together echoes around the concrete walls.





SONY CENTER

The Sony Center was one of my favorite buildings in Berlin. A central fabric and glass canopy covered the forum space below, showcasing an amazing piece of structural engineering. At night, the canopy was lit in different colors that would change every couple of seconds, which made for some awesome night time photos.





POTSDAMER PLATZ

The area where the Sony Center is located is us looking down to the streets below. The area known as Potsdamer Platz. Across the street is around the Sony Center held many pieces of Panoramapunkt, the fastest elevator in Europe. public art and installations, one of which was the It bring you up 24 stories in 20 seconds, with giant LEGO Giraffe, I'd estimate to be around 20 panoramic views of the city. Similar length ride feet tall. It stood right next to the entrance of the as going up the library at UMass, except much Legoland Discovery Center, but I never noticed faster.

It's hard to tell, but the photo of the skyline above and surrounding buildings in the entrance to the was taken on a blue sky day. Either fog or smog subway that seemed almost as impressive as the is hiding the outline of the TV tower which can buildings themselves. be seen on the far right. This spot was another good use for my GoPro camera, where I was able to stick it through the bars and get the shot of



TRANSPORTATION

Berlin has an extensive subway system. It may not be the quickest form of transportation, but you can get anywhere in the city. What aided in the system's design was ring routes that connected many of the outer-lying stops. This meant you could travel around the perimeter of the city without having to go back to the center.



In front of the Ritz-Carlton, a five star hotel, was a series of nice sports cars, including Lamborghinis (left) and Ferraris. When one pulled away from the hotel, it was the best noise I've ever heard a car make.

Later that evening, Andrew and I visited the central train station for some light-trail photography.



DAY TRIP TO SIENA

Siena, Italy, was one of the trips that was included with our program. It lies about 50 miles south of Florence. It was mostly overcast while we were there, but at least it gave us a break from normal school work. Seen on the opposite page is the famous Tower of Mangia, a 285 foot stone tower built in 1348 that overlooks the Piazza del Campo, where the Palio horse race around the square takes place.

Other stops that day were to the Terme di Rapolano, a spa with natural thermal baths, and the hilltop town of Cortona, with beautiful views out to the Tuscan valley.



CASTELLO DI VERRAZZANO

The second day of our Tuscan Sun trip was to Castello di Verrazzano, a winery in the hills just outside of Florence. It was quite the journey getting to the site, as the dirt road was very windy, and a tour bus isn't exactly small. The property was owned by the Verrazzano family in the 7th century. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in New York is named after the navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano, who was born here. A tour of the facility was followed by a food and wine tasting. After a couple of wine samples I didn't feel buzzed, but incredibly tired, so much that I could have lain down and fallen asleep immediately.



STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Another assignment for my photography class was street subjects. This involved capturing spur of the moment interactions of people on the street that would make a suitable photos. I was hesitant to get into it, since it involves taking pictures of random people while not trying to seem like you're creeping on them.

I found that the key was to take the photo quickly, and then keep moving, all while looking like you know what you're doing. Some of the subjects made eye contact, while others continued on with their day.



BACK IN ROME

Our friend Andrew, who was studying in Berlin while we were in Florence, made a weekend trip down to visit. He was only here for two days, so we had to make the most of it, which meant visiting Rome in one day. We took the earliest train, which cut the three hour car trip in half.

Phil and I had an advantage, since we had already visited, which made navigating easier. We brought him to all the major monuments, St. Peter's Basilica, the Colosseum, the Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, and more. Phil and I hadn't been able to hike up to the top of St. Peter's dome before, so that was a top priority for us.

Some new aspects of the city that we experienced this time were how crowded the subways were, but also how pleasant the above-ground tram system was.







A break in the ancient Roman architecture was the MAXXI museum. A contemporary art and architecture museum designed by Zaha Hadid, it uses a material that the Romans were familiar with, concrete, but in new forms. As with most of my museum trips, I'm more interested in the building than the art, and that was certainly the case here. Signs stating that photography was prohibited at the entrance didn't stop me from snapping a few dozen shots. On the train ride back to Florence, the business class seats were actually cheaper than regular class, which we could not complain about.

CINQUE TERRE

Cinque Terre comprises five coastal towns on the northwest coast of Italy. Primarily accessible by train, each town has its own unique feel in architecture, layout and views. We started our tour at Monterosso al Mare and worked our way east, ending up at Riomaggiore, before hiking back to Manarola. Colorful buildings were common in each town, as well as a harbor with a boat launch.

The most memorable part of the trip was the hike to Manarola, which involved a steep climb and descent over the hill separating the two towns. The views, along with the different vegetation compared to the U.S., made this my most favorite spot in all of Europe.

The last stop of the trip in Manarola was where the typical post card image of this place is taken, with the colorful houses perched atop the rocky cliffs over the Mediterranean Sea. I'd say my version came out pretty great.









TRAINSPOTTING

My final assignment for photography class was to put together a collection of 10-20 images to tell a story. I focused on a journey through transportation, and with all of the railroad activity going on around Florence, I set out to get some images for the sequence.

I found a small path (right) that led from the main train station along the tracks before connecting back to the street. If this was in the U.S., there would be a huge fence, or no path at all, so I was surprised I could get this close.





HIKING THE DUOMO

There were only three weeks left before I flew home, and I hadn't hiked the Duomo yet, the most iconic building in Florence. Emily, Holly, Phil and I joined up in the afternoon and waited out the line to get our chance at reaching the top. Like every cathedral, the journey up involves navigating tight and steep stairs of different kinds. You're greeted by an upper level view of the main nave, before ascending through the dome up to the viewing platform. I just hoped there wasn't an earthquake while we were in here, as the entire building is made of stone. The views were amazing, and the weather couldn't have been better, except for the next morning, when we hiked the bell tower.





LAST DAYS IN FLORENCE

Time was ticking down, with only a few days before getting back on the plane. Our architecture class was part of the Art is in the Streets, where students showcase their work on the streets of Florence (right).

My roommates and I went to the Boboli Gardens, which overlooks the city from across the river. I couldn't believe that I hadn't come here sooner, as it was a great place to hang out and escape from the city. On my journey back, I stop by the recently renovated Central Market to see the new shops and food options. Not that it mattered anyway, since I was flying home the next day.



FROM STUDENTS TO FRIENDS

Our architecture class was made up of four students from UMass, and five from Mexico City. Olaf was one, who became good friends with us (right).

I shared the apartment with five other guys. Three of us were from UMass, one from Rhode Island, one from New Jersey, and the last from Chicago. (bottom).

Three of my roommates with Danielle and Katrina on our last night in Florence. They were also studying abroad in our program, and we got to know them during the semester (opposite).



DEPARTURE

Just yesterday, it seemed, I was watching the same view as my flight passed over the Alps on my way to Florence. Barely sleeping more than two hours, Phil and I got up at 3:30 AM for our taxi ride at 4:30 to the airport. It was a 6 AM flight, and the airport was packed with students, mostly heading back to the States. Due to the completely disorganized check in system, we barely made our flight. But we did, and we were on our way home.



ARRIVAL, PART 2

One of my first sights of land coming back into the U.S. was Crane Beach and Plum Island before we turned south and landed in Boston. In Florence spring was in full bloom, but back in Massachusetts, the season was behind, so most trees were still quite bare. When it warmed up, I got to experience spring all over again.

Reflecting on the semester, it was a great experience living abroad, learning about the culture, food, travel and the architecture. Although I would not want to live there because of the differences in language and way of life, I can see myself going back and visiting some of my favorite places.

What I was most looking forward to was seeing my friends and family again. It's been a long four months, and I was ready to be home.

