

THE HOYA

Tuesday, February 15th, 2000

Hoyas Abroad

FEATURES

Non Sono Americana

Italy Intimidating Even for 'Certified Globetrotter'

Occasionally one undergraduate student studying overseas will write about his or her experience abroad. This week Claire Zulkey, a junior at Villa de Balze, in Florence, Italy continues:

By Claire Zulkey
Special to The Hoya

Okay, I admit it. For a 20 year-old, when it comes to traveling, there are times when I believe myself to be, as people sometimes say, "the man."

I can figure out where to stay, how to get there, what to see and what to eat, meanwhile carrying all the possessions I need in a tiny EB-tek backpack. Of course, if you knew me at all, you would know full well that I am actually a complete baby and somewhat incompetent. However, for creative purposes, let's just pretend that when it comes to getting myself around Europe, I really do think I am, as the kids like to call it, "all that."

But anyway, when I am feeling fully confident as a certified globetrotter, it is usually while I'm on my "home turf," here in Italy.

I am absolutely horrible at learning languages, but after two and a half semesters of blood, sweat and yes, actual tears (as well as lots of practice ordering food in restaurants, which is so vital and rewarding in the end), I've become fairly proficient. Note that when I say "proficient," I can casually converse or ask directions, but before anyone comes asking me to translate Dante from the original vernacular for them, I still sometimes answer the question "How are you?" with "Yes."

But when I can use Italian, it's pretty groovy. For instance, this weekend was a sense of pride to me - I led my best friend around Rome, cramming down her throat as much beauty and culture as she could take. The whole time, I didn't use a map, just kind of felt around and asked normal-looking people (i.e. those who weren't trying to sell us laser pointers or propositioning us) how to get to the Coliseum, the Pantheon, whatever. My Italian got us around fairly well, as well as helped get us a nifty hotel room and reward us with lots of food and wine (like I said, ordering in restaurants is important.)

And it felt good. I'm sure that anytime anyone goes abroad, it's an amazing experience, but the satisfaction is compounded when learned language skills are finally applicable. You begin to forgive your foreign-language teacher for making you sit for hours listening to language tapes or participating in what may

be tentatively labeled as "skits."

There are, however, times when the natives can make you feel like your attempts to learn their lousy language is just an insult to their ears.

Consider this scenario:

Me (In Italian:) Excuse me please, but where is the Metro Station?

Italian Guy (In English:) You're American, right? As in, "Stupid American"?

Me: Yeah...

Guy (Obviously exasperated and annoyed by my presence, in English): It's two blocks down and to the right. Can you understand that?

Myself (Ego torn in half): Um, yeah. Thanks.

Guy: Whatever.

Well, maybe it's not quite as harsh as that, but that scenario, or some version of it, does arise from time to time. But sometimes your American-ness is simply thrown in your face, and it stings a little.

Why is that, after all?

In a sense, the prevalence of American culture can be comforting and helpful. Again, back to this weekend: my best friend, who doesn't speak a word of Italian, made it by herself via train from Pisa to Florence. She was worried about the endeavor, but I offered her two nuggets of wisdom. Primarily, there are some really, and I mean really dumb people out there who have made it successfully through Europe. Secondly, everyone speaks English anyway. She made it there safely, and ironically, we met each other in front of the McDonald's at Santa Maria Novella station. McDonald's, second only to the actual American Embassy as far as American symbols in Italy go, is where I said goodbye to her after the weekend, as well.

But in other cases, sometimes it's not so cool to be from the "Stati Uniti." This weekend, we got ripped off ridiculously by cabbies, were harassed by men dressed up as gladiators in front of the Coliseum (not as fun as it sounds), and were spurned by the clerks at Benetton. Poor us, I know, but it is still no fun to feel stupid.

Which brings me to this topic: What makes a person look American? Neither my friend nor I has blonde hair, nor did we sport our North Face jackets. We didn't walk around with tour books, cameras or money belts evident either. Well, okay, granted, we were carrying around big foam rubber hands that read "Number One Yankees Fan," and singing "Stars and Stripes Forever" at the top of our voices, but I didn't think that was so noticeable.

The spooky thing is that once you have been branded a dreaded "ugly American" one too many times, you start slipping into Euro mode. I come from an area where people refer to soft drinks as "pop" and watch Friends with the best of them, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't have a leather jacket and a cell phone. I know people here who try to actively pretend that they're not American by refusing to speak English with other American tourists, which is actually kind of a dumb move since they don't know Italian so well so they just end up

kind of a dumb move since they don't know Italian so well, so they just end up looking like jerks. Whatever floats your Prada boat, I suppose.

I'm sure that everyone remembers a time when they were wandering around their home town back in the States and they felt bad for or needed to talk loudly and slowly for a visitor for another country who was lost. Maybe some of you remember laughing at them as well. It's weird to be in the other position, but that's how it is when you're abroad.

We may be the snottiest little princes and princesses of Georgetown or the most gracious and well-meaning travelers that ever were, but the fact of the matter is that we are guests. No matter how American (or for that matter, un-American) I may look, it's still something I've gotta face. Yes, I am the dumb tourist. But hey, give me a call on my cell if you want to talk about it. Meanwhile, I'm going to go comfort myself with some McNuggets di Pollo.

Top Stories | Sports | News | Features | About | Home

Copyright ©2000 The Hoya, All Rights Reserved