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Being Foreign is Foreign to Me

A year ago, I could never have imagined that I would be studying outside of the United States. I had dreamed of such a thing, sure, but my expectations were pretty different in comparison to reality. The truth of the matter is that studying abroad has been glorified and an idyllic, stereotypical experience is what prospective students are being fed. The advertisements act as though all you need is a passport, an acceptance letter from a foreign university, and anything you can fit in a suitcase. They make a point not to talk about the massive amounts of paperwork, the program costs and related fees, and things like culture shock. Now, my subjective experience with traveling is limited enough that I fell for the hype and was in for quite the wake-up call when I began the application process. Because of this, it was my initial understanding that I would fill out a simple application, obtain a passport, and be on my way. However, I spent months rigorously working to obtain and complete the necessary documents before finally being able to say that I would be traveling abroad.

At the start of this all, I pictured myself on the warm, sandy beaches of New Zealand or traversing the hills and castles of Ireland. I thought that I would be taking part in endless adventures and excursions with friends wherein I would be traveling to new and exciting places all the time. Eventually, my imaginary version of studying abroad became less of something purposed for academic development and turned into more of an elaborate vacation. This is not to say that my experience thus far has been lacking in any way, but rather that these things are not as prominent as once imagined. Something often forgotten by students going abroad, myself included, is that they remain students even at their host university, meaning that there is still an obligation to attend classes, study, do homework, and take exams.

Turku was not my first choice as far as universities go, but Finland held promises that other locations didn’t, primarily familiarity. Finland’s geographic location causes the weather to be fairly similar to that of Wisconsin for a good portion of the year, which is weather that I’m used to. Next, the university’s atmosphere is reminiscent of my home university’s in that most of the class sizes are pretty small and the university buildings are in close proximity to one another. But on top of that, I had connections. I had friends in Turku, one of whom studied at my home university, so I had a valuable resource to help me integrate as seamlessly as possible into life as a Finnish student. For that much alone, I count myself as incredibly lucky.

Since I rarely have the occasion to travel, I’m not used to being a foreigner, and studying abroad thrust me violently out of my element despite the similarities to my usual circumstances. There was a period where I was in denial about the whole ordeal and the idea of living in another country hadn’t really hit me. I’d like to think of this as the fantasy period, where your expectations haven’t yet met with reality. However, almost as soon as I arrived in Helsinki, I lost all sense of comfort, stability, and control. I was no longer in the same time zone nor was I in a place where I spoke the native language or was even somewhat familiar with it. What I once considered easy was now tedious and required extra planning. I even had to account for extra travel time on the off chance I got lost while going somewhere. What bothered me wasn’t the fear of getting lost or needing to ask for help; what bothered me was the idea that I may need to ask for help during a task as seemingly simple as going to the grocery store and paying for my items. It’s sort of like taking a test that you studied for and as soon as you get the paper you can’t recall any of the answers. You feel like you should know exactly what you’re doing, but you feel uncertain and hesitant instead. There’s an air of frustration that comes with this because you find yourself asking a lot of questions about everyday occurrences that you feel you should have the answers to, but you don’t.

One of the more jarring realizations I came to was that I was essentially living the life I was able to pack into a couple of small suitcases. Having my belongings in a room that I signed a lease for didn’t make my new apartment feel like a home, even a temporary one. I felt extremely out of place and disoriented, and this was a feeling that lingered uncomfortably for quite a while. I thought I was prepared to deal with the subsequent loneliness since I had brought a number of books and small games to occupy my free time, but I had grossly underestimated just how isolated I would feel. The time zone difference prevented me from keeping regular contact with my friends from home, and the distance alone was enough to make me feel disconnected from them. This, coupled with the fact that it took me a while to start making friends among my Turku peers, meant that I was spending an unusual amount of time on my own. At some point, I stopped knowing what to do with myself and resorted to killing time any way that I could.

In hindsight, what I experienced can easily be categorized as culture shock. However, this in no way diminished my vivid excitement and sense of curiosity regarding the things that I was experiencing. The novelty of everything was both exhilarating and terrifying. Though studying abroad is definitely not without its physical and psychological challenges, I have learned a lot about myself and my abilities over the course of my time in Finland. This has been more of a journey of self discovery than I originally bargained for, which in no way is a bad thing.

The initial sense of wonder and bewilderment towards the things around me has not faded, but instead grown into a deep appreciation. I started to find my niche when I started to mingle with my classmates and regularly attend volleyball. I was able to showcase my identity as a student and an athlete, and I no longer felt the need to identify myself as someone who was merely an exchange student. It was like I was making a home out of a place that didn’t quite feel like anything other than my place of residence simply by being the same person I was at home. I was beginning to see familiar people in familiar places and interact with them in familiar ways, which helped me build some semblance of a routine in my day-to-day life that I was comfortable with. It was nice to feel like an average civilian again, even though there’s something semi-exotic about identifying as a foreigner.

There are a lot of pressures revolving around having the optimal study abroad experience. At some point, it started to feel like I wasn’t doing enough, like I wasn’t utilizing my time wisely in order to maximize my experience. It didn’t take me long to figure out that your study abroad experience isn’t measured by the number of places you went or the incredible things that you did but rather the moments that were meaningful to you along the way. My moments became less about photographing everything and collecting souvenirs, especially because their purpose isn’t to allow for others to live vicariously through me, and more about experiencing places and committing sights to memory. Most importantly, I made a point to find something beautiful and extraordinary in every day.

Instead of lamenting that it wasn’t feasible for me to drop all of my responsibilities and spend all of my time traveling in and between countries, I’m going to cherish the experiences I’ve had. I have had the opportunity to be educated in one of the most prestigious academic systems in the entire world; I get to experience unique traditions and be fully immersed in Finnish student culture; and I will be able to say that I’ve survived Finnish winters, endured Finnish rains, and enjoyed a mild Finnish spring. Sure, not every day is new and exciting, but the point is that it never had to be. This is still an entirely new experience for me and I will leave it as a significantly different person than when I arrived. I have been given the opportunity to learn and grow as a person, and in the end that’s all that really matters.