

# Life at 16 Studying Abroad in Italy

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Today marks my 205th day abroad here in Italy. I've been here since the 31st of August, learning Italian and immersing myself in the classical world. Everywhere I turn, there are remnants of civilizations that came before. Reminisce with me as I go through what has been my life for the past seven months.

*Wednesday September 18, 2024*

We've been here for just over two weeks now. Today was the first day out of three on our first school trip of the year. Earlier today, some of us hiked three miles to reach an ancient Greek temple at the top of a hill while others opted to explore the town centre. I was a part of the former group. After two hours of sitting on a bus, I was eager to get my legs moving. The experience was ethereal; the knowledge that we were treading upon the same land as humans thousands of years ago fueled our tired bodies. Every step of the way I struggled to choose between looking at the earth beneath me and gazing at the incredible view beside me. The decision should have been easy, but it was not. Looking down at my feet would ensure my safety, as I would be less likely to trip - but how could I look at the dirt and rocks when it felt as though I could reach my arm out and simply touch the sun?

An arduous forty-five minutes later, we finally reached the top. Bent over with our hands on our knees, we panted, trying to catch our breaths. When we eventually lifted our heads, we could not believe the sight that stretched out before us. Ruins of a Greek temple stood high while the serene ocean swayed gently behind it. As if it were a magnet, the temple drew us in. Despite our still aching bodies, we ran toward it, eager to uncover the secrets hidden within. I ran my fingers along the stone, basking in the idea that, somehow, I was touching the same walls that Ancient Greeks had so many thousands of years ago.

With each day that passes I am slowly absorbing more and more of the world around me and getting to know the people that inhabit it. I know that, although it may seem like something of an

impossibility at the moment, in time all my peers and I will become a part of this town, forever ingrained in its story like all those who came before us.

*Tuesday October 29, 2024*

Every Tuesday, I go with three other SYA students to a nearby archeological site to help maintain the Etruscan tombs there. During the walk there, we speculate about what we will be doing that day as we split a small snack. The man that runs the place and guides us through the various tasks, Pietro, is very kind and is even willing to let us take home artifacts that we find. It has rained quite a bit over the past couple of weeks so our main task has been moving dirt from one area of the site to another to create stairs and to push some of the water out onto the road.

Today, I was shovelling dirt in one of the many chambers and placing it in buckets to be moved elsewhere. It was a straightforward process. *Drop the shovel into the dirt, point down. Shove it down with your foot, wedge it deep into the soil. Tilt the shovel towards you, Pick up the dirt. Drop it in the bucket. Repeat.*

I had gotten into the rhythm of things and had retreated deep into my thoughts when I noticed out of the corner of my eye something green. It wasn't completely out of the ordinary as there were a fair bit of leaves mixed into the dirt and the volcanic rock. Still, for whatever reason, I felt that it was strange and squatted down to investigate.

Upon gently brushing away the dirt, I uncovered what looked to be a fragment of a plate that had been glazed with a lovely forest green. I shot up, ecstatic. I couldn't believe my luck. I ran to find Pietro, forgetting about the shovel entirely and letting it fall against the earth below. My eyes were even wider than my smile as I stood, eagerly awaiting his evaluation.

"This is Medieval, five or six hundred years old," he confirmed.

And suddenly the dozens if not hundreds of mosquito bites I had received while working were gone. The massive spider web with the spider still in it I had almost walked into on the first day disappeared from sight. The pain in my tailbone from slipping down one of the slopes and falling

faded away. Never would I have expected to find, at age sixteen, artifacts hundreds of years old on an otherwise normal Tuesday afternoon at a site only a fifteen minute walk from school.

What's funny is that earlier in the day in Latin we had been translating *De Bello Gallico*, Julius Caesar's recount of the Gallic Wars, and discussing a moment in which he found booty. How lucky am I to be so close to the stories I have known for countless years? To touch and to help preserve the history I learn about in class? It's the little moments like these that make me truly appreciate the absurdity of the incredible circumstances I find myself in.

*Wednesday October 30, 2024*

Today, we went to Rome for fieldwork for the first time. Right when I stepped out of the metro station, I was overwhelmed by the Colosseum, which towered over me from across the street. For whatever reason, I decided that wearing a wool cardigan would be a good idea. By the time we got through the security checks to enter the Colosseum, sweat was running down my back in a steady stream.

When we finally reached the top after a series of winding staircases, my face went slack in shock. Ancient Rome had always been something of a legend. I knew vaguely that it was real, but it had always lived somewhere between that space of fact and fiction along with King Arthur and his round table of knights. In that moment, though, I could not deny the great structure in which I stood and the civilization which had built it. Looking down at the crater below me, I could almost hear the shouting of gladiators and the pounding of the hooves of the animals charging at them.

It was hot and stuffy and I could barely take half a step without bumping into someone else as it was peak tourist season in Rome. Still, I felt like I was in a trance the entire time I was there, my mind filled with images of scenes that had played out thousands of years ago. I could hear swords clashing against one another their loud metal *clang* ringing through stadium, causing the audience to roar in response.

*Monday February 10, 2025*

This past week, SYA Italy took a trip to Naples. On our way there, we stopped in a little town called Ercolano. Like Pompeii, all its inhabitants had been massacred by the explosion of Mount Vesuvius some eighteen thousand years ago. We explored the ruins, eagerly weaving in and out of various rooms. We saw the intricate mosaics on the shrines that they had built for their gods. Seashells pressed into fresh plaster, locked into place for teenagers in the 21st century to gawk at. Women and men painted in original frescoes stared at us as we walked past. We sat on the same benches that people sat on thousands of years ago. Massive discs hung from a massive outdoor patio, each one depicting a different being. We gazed into the depths of the very pots that they had served food from so long ago. Tucked into another corner were dozens of skeletons stacked on top of one another. Some held onto each other, seeking comfort in their final moments. We were walking through history, we realized.

The stones beneath our feet were the very ones trampled by Ercolani trying to escape their inevitable death. We were wandering so casually through the last remnants of these people's lives. We looked out at the horizon and *bam*. Mount Vesuvius. Like what? It's a random Monday and we were just looking at Mount Vesuvius? *The* Mount Vesuvius? The same one that has been referenced in just about every piece of media ever? The same one that killed so many people thousands of years ago?

*Wednesday March 5, 2025*

Sometimes, I forget just how much history there is in Viterbo. Today, we had a scavenger hunt around Viterbo and one of our items was an ancient washhouse. Initially, we were confused. What? Where in Viterbo could there possibly be an ancient washhouse? We leaned over the side of a pedestrian bridge, gazing at the shrubbery beneath, and we used the ledge as a flat surface to write on. We had proceeded with everything else and all that was left to find was the ancient washhouse, but we had absolutely no idea what to do.

Then, out of nowhere, a member of my group pointed out something to the left underneath us. It was tucked away in a corner and half covered by overgrown plants, but sure enough, there was an ancient washhouse underneath our feet. We went down to take a closer look and upon further

inspection. Although it had deteriorated with the passing of time, we were able to make out quite a few details. There were two slanted slabs of stone that directed water into a central canal. Next to that main structure there was a bench of some sorts, although it was a bit far to have been used as a seat, so we weren't super sure what its true use was. On the other side there was also a staircase leading further down. We wanted to figure out where it led, but it had been blocked off.

Later, I was walking to the gym with my friend, as I often do, when I had another realization about the extent to which I have immersed myself into the classical world. We were simply walking and getting each other's energy up to go to the gym, when I suddenly remembered that we were walking on an ancient Etruscan road. Earlier in the year one of our fieldwork assignments had been to walk down this road. We had learned then that we could identify it as Etruscan because on either side the mountain loomed, its surfaces nearly flat, having been cut by the Etruscans with a great deal of precision.

*Monday March 17, 2025*

Today, we travelled from Palermo to Catania. Although the two cities are on opposite ends of the Sicilian island, the drive would have been just over two hours if we had gone directly. However, instead of going directly from point A to point B, we went to Agrigento instead, increasing our travel time to about five hours. Even though it took a significant detour to get there, I am immensely grateful that the school decided to take us to Agrigento to visit The Valley of the Temples.

The Valley of the Temples is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that showcases the ruins of the Akragas, an ancient Greek city. It was beautiful, to say the least. Surrounded by flourishing greenery were dozens of ancient Greek ruins. There were temples, massive statues of gods, gardens of tranquility, and so much more. Beyond it all, you could see the crystal blue ocean. Certain pillars had fallen, broken into several pieces, and created a space on the ground where they rested. Photos are never able to capture the true scale of things. Just a small chunk of a single pillar was large enough to crush me—and a friend or two. It was absurd to think that after thousands of years of surviving harsh winds and horrendous storms these structures were now simply laying in an open field being explored by a group of sixteen year-olds.

I took a walk through one of the gardens. It was peaceful. I wondered if another girl had done the exact same thing, bending down to smell flowers and swatting away insects in exactly the same manner, only wearing a tunic and sandals instead of jeans and sneakers.

*Thursday March 20, 2025*

After eight days of being in Sicily, our trip is finally coming to an end. Earlier, we were in Taormina, a small coastal town. We recreated the story of Jason and Medea in the Greek theatre that was there. It was quite a surreal feeling to have been able to experience a theatrical performance while sitting on the same stone that ancient Greeks had sat on so many years ago. I mean, in my pocket I had my iPhone, something created and popularized by humanity only in the last decade or two, while I took in a story that had been passed down over countless generations in a place that had survived millenia.

Later, we returned to Catania for our last night in Sicily. As a school, we all had dinner together at a pizzeria near the hotel. More than forty students and just under a dozen teachers had crammed into a relatively small space. The walls were stone and the room was dimly lit. The roof was low and curved, pushing us toward each other even more. When we left, we walked down the street and we began to see information plaques for something below ground level, so we walked closer to take a look. Lo and behold, it was a Roman amphitheater. We stood for a moment, blinking in disbelief. We were simply on our way back to the hotel after a lovely dinner and we had managed to run into a Roman amphitheater?

The classical world truly permeates every single aspect of life here in Italy. Even if I wanted to, it would be impossible to avoid it.