Coronavirus Stories: Reflecting on an Unexpected Semester Abroad

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Angela Dueppen (BSM '21), far right, and friends in front of the Duomo di Milano in Italy.

Angela Dueppen, Senior Management and Psychology Major, Spring 2020 Study Abroad at Bocconi University in Milan, Italy

I arrived in Milan to study at Bocconi University anxious and excited about spending my spring semester abroad. I never would have imagined that after a month of getting a taste of the abroad experience I would be sent back to the U.S. due to a global pandemic. Although the disappointment of missing out on the majority of my semester abroad was heavy, I would not trade what I gained in the month I had for anything. Since I made the decision to choose a program where I did not have any

friends going to the same place, I was forced to get outside of my comfort zone to meet new people. I am so grateful for this choice because I now have a friend and a place to stay on every continent in the world. The group of people I spent time with included people from Australia, Scotland, England, Italy, Germany, Turkey, China, India, Canada and every corner of the U.S. I got the chance to learn so much about cultures from all over the globe while simultaneously immersing myself in Milan's culture. I got the chance to do some amazing traveling before returning home, I got to try so many interesting foods, I got to experience a whole new level of independence being an ocean away from all the closest people in my life, and I got to learn in a very different academic environment, all while being based out of such an incredible city. While I would have loved more time, I know I will treasure every aspect of my experience, even the chaos that ensued when COVID-19 reared its ugly head. Being in Milan, I was in the first Western epicenter of the pandemic. I was in Florence for the weekend when I got an email late Saturday night announcing how my host university would be cancelling classes the following week due to the coronavirus. Upon returning to Milan, the atmosphere of the entire city had changed drastically. Panic had set in all throughout the city and the dorm that was usually filled with people laughing was nearly silent. A few friends and I decided to go to London for the week to get away from the virus and the sense of fear that had fallen over the city. Just like when COVID first reached the U.S., the reality of the situation did not hit at first. I was having a night out with friends in London when I received the phone call from my study abroad advisor. While it was crowded and hard to hear her, I heard her say the words "You need to return to the U.S." incredibly clearly. Less than 24 hours later, I was on a flight from London back to the U.S. I ended up paying some of my Aussie friends who had yet to be sent home to pack up my things in the dorm and had them shipped home internationally.

Coming back home brought new challenges. Since Italy was one of the first places to get hit and for programs to be cancelled, when I got back home, everything was still normal at first. But I knew what was coming, and after what I had experienced, nothing felt normal to me. I felt the calm before the storm, except I knew very well that the storm was coming and waited. I watched a second country I lived in fall into panic all over again while still dealing with the shock and adjustment of coming home far earlier than expected. Then came the struggle of adjusting to remote learning. Four of my five classes included a group project as a large portion of the grade, projects in which the group members were scattered across the world, adding the element of time zone differences to the struggle of coordinating schedules to

work together. The entire semester required me to constantly adapt and make important decisions, and although it was difficult, these are now skills I will carry with me throughout my life. Looking back, I now think about if I would do it all again knowing the experience would be cut short. It begs the question: Is it worse to never have something amazing or to have it and then have it be taken away from you? In this case, I would do it all over. While there's the extra ache of knowing exactly what I was missing out on because I got to experience how amazing it would have been, the memories and relationships I made during my limited time in Milan are ones I wouldn't trade for anything. Some advice I have for those intending to study abroad in the future is to get outside your comfort zone, be prepared for anything, make the most of every moment you have while you are there, immerse yourself in the not-so-touristy parts of your host city, and appreciate every second. It is an experience that you truly can never give yourself again. Yes, you can travel and move to another country, but the community of other exchange students and being this age where you are getting this newfound independence while also still making the most of your youth and carefree spirit. They aren't lying when they say that "abroad changes you."

Caroline Flynn, Senior Marketing and Communications Major, Spring 2020
Study Abroad at ICADE Business School in Madrid, Spain



Caroline Flynn on a weekend trip to Sevilla, Spain

In the weeks leading up to when I left Spain, the situation in the country was very uncertain. While some exchange students panicked, others acted completely unconcerned. Meanwhile, the Spanish students told us over and over again that we were blowing things out of proportion, there was no way we'd be sent home. I bounced back and forth between worrying and feeling that the situation might just blow over. As various universities began to bring their students home, I went from questioning *if* I would be sent home to wondering *when* it would happen. After nearly a month of complete uncertainty, booking my flight home almost felt like a relief. Finally, I had an answer and a relative sense of security. That said, I barely felt upset about the situation until I landed in the U.S. The moment I stood up to get off the plane, the adrenaline of trying to return safely subsided, and everything hit me like a

wave. Up until then, none of it had seemed real. Once I took a moment to pause, I allowed myself to reflect on what I'd lost, on the experiences I wouldn't be able to have. However, I didn't wallow in this for long, because I was still so grateful for the incredible time I did have while I was in Madrid. Looking back, it was the perfect place to spend a shorter amount of time, because I was able to see so much of the country so quickly. As cliché as it sounds, my whole experience taught me to really appreciate the present moment, rather than constantly looking ahead. My advice to other students, regardless of where they choose to study abroad, is to take advantage of everything you can. Don't put anything off, because you could miss out on it entirely.

Diana Lucia Gonzalez, Senior Management and Marketing Major, Dual Degree Student at Tulane University from Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia



Diana Lucia Gonzalez (standing, fifth from left) and other Tulane incoming exchange students at the Fly in the New Orleans.

When Tulane announced that all classes were going to be virtual and we were officially in a pandemic, I didn't believe it and I thought this was something temporary. Days passed and my parents were really worried because the airport

was going to be closed. However, I didn’t want to return because I felt like it would mean I didn’t take full advantage of this experience. Therefore, I tried to delay my flight as much as I could, but my parents were desperate to get me home. When I finally understood the seriousness of the situation as cases increased in NOLA, I bought the flight back to Colombia just in time, the day before the airport closed.

I didn’t want my abroad experience to be taken away, so I struggled a lot at first. I didn’t want to return to my home country because I was enjoying myself so much and it was too soon for my experience to be finished. It felt so unfair that my abroad experience ended the way it did because I was so happy just before leaving.

Despite my disappointment, I took away from my time abroad the people I met and the places I visited. Knowing people from around the world was an incredible experience and sharing our customs was very enriching. Also, I’m surprised by what I learned in such a short time as I was able to acquire valuable knowledge from Tulane and New Orleans. I came to know a new culture and shared mine with people from different places. I wish I could have more time so I could build strong relationships and enjoy more experiences with the people I met.

If I could do the semester again, I would have seized all the opportunities I had to hang out with the exchange students, getting know the city and going to restaurants and parades. Sometimes I preferred to stay at home because I had to study, but now I regret missing some of these chances. To any future students studying abroad, I would say that this is going to be one of the best experiences in your lives, so take advantage of it. I think studying abroad goes beyond having classes at Tulane and living in a different country because what makes this experience unique and valuable is having the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. You have the possibility to build great relationships and share unforgettable moments with the new people you meet. Also, you get the opportunity to understand different cultures and be open to learning new customs and ways of thinking.



Elsa Rothenberg, Senior Management and Political Economy Major, Spring 2020 Study Abroad at ITAM in Mexico City, Mexico



Less than a week before I was sent home from my semester in Mexico City, the president of my host country gave a speech encouraging citizens to continue kissing, hugging and living life as normal. I was receiving conflicting messages from the Mexican and U.S. governments, and I was trying to navigate which safety precautions I should be taking. Should my best friend from my semester in Spain come to visit during her spring break? Should I still be going to my favorite workout classes?

It turned out that the answer was that I needed to go home as soon as possible. So I did, moving back in with my family and taking my classes, in Spanish, online. My mom became my coworker and we distracted each other during our respective Zoom calls. It was great to spend time with my family at home, but I couldn’t help missing tacos al pastor, the fresh mango cart outside my university, and weekend trips to cool sights. I tried to make the most of the semester, making Mexican recipes for my family and trying to practice my Spanish with my classmates. Ultimately, I was lucky to have spent the time I did in Mexico and to get the opportunity to be home for longer than usual. Although it was disappointing that I

had to leave due to COVID, I had the opportunity to meet great friends and professors and take interesting classes. I hope to go back to visit and will always look back on my time in Mexico fondly.

Stories compiled by Alex Duffy (BSM ’21), a double major in finance and international development. She studied abroad at Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Colombia for the Fall 2019 semester and is a Global Guide.