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Finding Yourself Abroad

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FINDING YOURSELF ABROAD

Sierra Z. Fish

Spinning. Spinning. Stop.

For most students who study abroad there is more to it than letting a finger glide across a globe until it lands on a destination. Immersion becomes possible, culture tangible, opportunity pervasive and glorified calendar settings a reality. A culmination of change churns and with an inner curiosity these young individuals set off to explore unknown territory and find more than just foreign tongues to absorb.” No one thought that I would really go,” said Nicole Paschoal, a speech communication senior at Cal Poly, who went through Fresno State in Fall 2002. “When I finally got accepted to go to Spain I was really excited. But, it was going to be four months away from family and friends and I thought that life at home would change without me and that I might not be able to catch up when I got back. However, I had enough motivation and people skills to walk away from what was behind me, pack up my whole life and travel thousands of miles away. I just told myself I could do it.”

Paschoal said that she was surprised at how well she adapted. She lived with a host family in Alicante and attended Spanish classes six days a week. She even traveled to parts of Portugal and captured tangible memories on several roles of film. “I learned to trust that wherever it is I am supposed to be that I would eventually get there,” she said with a smile. “I also learned to have more patience with myself and others- nothing is quick in Spain. It took me 25 minutes to buy 5 stamps.” Case in point. While the top of her finger swirled around her apple cider lid she also said that experiencing another culture made her more aware of her own. “When it comes to right and wrong there really isn’t one right way to do something,” said Paschoal.

Exploring her roots was another reason traveling to Spain intrigued Paschoal. While there she visited Alemria, which is where several of her relatives still live. With a pensive stare she gazed out the café window and a degree of nostalgia came over her. “I found a second home in Spain,” she said.

It was an eye, mind and heart opening experience. People really do fulfill a reason, season or a life-time. We all have experiences for a reason and I am thankful that I had that chance to have a life somewhere else.”

While Paschoal became fluent in Spanish, another Cal Poly student had a similar experience abroad where English remained the proper way to converse. Corrine Fralick, a Cal Poly psychology senior, did the London study program for three months in Fall 2001. “One week before I left I was scared out of my mind,” said Fralick. “I was thinking how I was going to be a continent away. It was exciting to have the opportunity to see a new place. One always thinks about what is around the next corner and I came to realize that the culture here would be different than any city in the United States.”

The first week Fralick was in London chaos grasped the United States and violently shook the world as it witnessed the tragedies of September 11, 2001. “England just had an incredible amount of support for the United States,” said Fralick. “I saw it all unfold on T.V. but it just didn’t hit home. Terrorism became so new and people were sympathetic. I think people just felt defenseless.”

Despite the shock of what would become Ground Zero, Fralick said that she learned a lot about her character living in London and traveling to such countries as France. “I realized that I didn’t need to be with people I was close with to gain self-knowledge,” said Fralick with an honest glance. “When one lives in a new place you learn to love it and to accept their judgments. The best way to learn about yourself is to be in a situation that is foreign to you.”

So with three months of successfully living on another continent Fralick is inspired to explore other parts of the world. When asked where her next destination is, Fralick sat up and slapped both hands on her knees. “Africa,” she said with a contagious grin. “All I know is what I read. There are so many people there. I don’t want to go there with the attitude that the West is superior. I want to touch lives. Even if I could just help one person who is sick and be there to give them a shot everyday. They are under such desperate circumstance there.”

Though Fralick enjoyed her time in England, she said that if she had it to do over again she would have liked to have had a more cultural experience. Anticipating such an experience is just what Talia Kline did when she chose to study for a year in Italy her sophomore year. “I love to study other cultures and languages and I wanted to experience something other than the normalness of Cal Poly,” said Kline, an English senior. “When I went to Italy I became completely immersed in a culture that was completely different from mine. My goal was to feel uncomfortable because I wanted to be challenged.”

Kline traveled to Italy a month prior to the beginning of the program and lived in an apartment by herself while teaching English in summer camps all over the country. “I knew that I didn’t fit in because I came from a different culture,” she said, poised while folding her hands on the table. “But I learned to embrace that.” Kline said that America was viewed as very commercial and materialistic. During her time abroad she also traveled to Sri Lanka for three months. “Take our streets, cities,

thoughts, expectations of a functioning society and completely flip them and that is what Sri Lanka is like,” she said as the white elephant she got there swayed on the end of her necklace when she adjusted her position.

Kline said how people perceived her was very different from living in America. “Here I am normal. There I was exceptional, because I came from a world that was completely foreign to them,” she said. Kline also traveled to Israel and India during her time away from home in the United States. “Israel was a chance for me to see the heart of all Western civilization,” Kline said. “India on the other hand was the most opposite place I could ever be from home- it’s chaos.” Kline went on to describe a place that most people could not imagine, except for exposure to National Geographic photographs. I had one change of clothing in three weeks. I had to survive in heat, dust, mud and crowded trains with as little as possible. It was humbling to see your identity and then having to erase it. It was a quest to get away from everything that was comfortable.”

Eager to convey her emotions, Kline, especially as a woman traveling solo in some places, spoke eloquently about her adventures in various countries. “Life is more than our set of expectations,” said Kline. “Life is experience. When someone wants to talk about globalization I have personal real-life examples as to why it is good or bad.” Kline said that at the end of traveling she felt like she did not have a culture of her own. This was because she said everywhere she went she had to change her expectations, even about the food she was eating, how clean the streets should be, the variety of forms of transportation and even the way people looked at her.

So with foreign eyes upon them, these Cal Poly students saw part of the globe from a whole new angle of vision. Each of these women embarked on separate adventures and came back as something they might not consider themselves to be—exceptional storytellers. I vicariously lived their experiences and became inspired by their sincere accounts of life-altering moments. “Everything I saw and everyone I met are a piece of me,” Paschoal said. “I know one thing for sure. I can’t wait to go back.” 

Sierra Zwald Fish is a Journalism Senior. She plans to study in Spain this summer and to graduate this coming December. She worked at the Mustang Daily as a reporter and photographer and plans to pursue a career in photo-journalism.