

The Study Abroad Student's Guide to Spending a Month in Florence, Italy

1. Before You Go

Florence is the art and culture capital of the world. It's where the renaissance began and one walk on the stone streets and you'll see it never left. Be adventurous and have fun during your journey, it's a world that's yours to explore.

Right outside of the one security gate the Charleston WV airport has, my Mom went through my readiness checklist one last time.

“You have your passport where you can get to it? And your tickets? Do you need a snack? I know you've got apples and peanut butter in your carryon but is that enough? Oh I'm so excited for you!” she quickly rambled off before giving me a huge smile and a hug.

I went around the circle, making my little brother give me a hug that he only acted like he was too cool for for a second. My boyfriend Walker hugged me and kissed the top of my head, before reassuring me that we'd celebrate our three year anniversary that I'd be missing when I got back. My stepdad Brad gave me a bear hug and told me to have fun. I hugged mom again before walking into the security line where my life long best friend, Myranda, was already standing. Even though I'd been taking planes around the country alone since I was thirteen and had even left the country before, it eased Mom's mind to know Myranda and I were going together, along with ten other eager study abroad students from Marshall. We'd keep each other safe, she said. Plus, she knew Myranda wouldn't let me abandon my life back home and stay in Italy, like I had joked about for months.

After the TSA agent checked my passport, I took a few steps to get out of the way and watch as Myranda made it though. I saw my Mom run up as close as she could possibly get to

the gate without breaking some governmental law, to see Miranda and I before we turned down the hall way. She did a mini-wave and jumped up and down in excitement.

2. Planning Your Itinerary

There's so much to see in Florence it's easy to get wrapped up in trying to fit it all into your schedule. Make sure you take note of the pieces of art you most want to see and try to check them off of your list first. Go into places you never thought you'd be interested in, there's art hidden around every corner in Florence!

The third or fourth afternoon in the city, a small group of us took a wrong turn out of a shop. Between the five of us, only one had cell service with a map and the paper maps the rest of us brought didn't show every small winding side street. At least not well enough to where we could make sense of them. We ended up circling the block the shop was on and the one next to it three times before figuring out we were confusing one of those side streets with a main one. Finally, one of the girls saw the fountain of Neptune that we'd been using as home base since the first night we had arrived in Florence, we were just coming at it from a different side.

As we walked towards the fountain, we passed an open air market, which we would later learn was named "Mercato del Porcellino" as it was closing for the afternoon and decided to look around. It was mostly Firenze (FEAR EN ZAY) tshirts and leather bealts, but a group of people had gathered around an area near the back of the market. I stood on my tiptoes trying to see around the heads of people in front of me, wanting to know what had caused such a large group to gather.

A four foot bronze boar stared back at me. Its front legs wide spread while it sat on its hind quarters, looking like any moment he could stand up and barrel towards me. A small stream of water ran out of his smiling mouth, falling into the grate he was had been chosen to guard. His nose had been rubbed so many times that it shone gold, taking away from his menacing stare and instead opened up his demeanor from a watchful boar to a smiling pig. I watched as people went up to him, patting his nose before taking out a coin and placing it in his mouth to drop into the grate at his feet. If the coin landed on the grate instead of falling through the twisted iron, they'd pick their coin up again and try until it did. The closer we got to the front of the crowd it was clear that we were supposed to make a wish on our coin, and having it fall into the grate ensured that the wish would come true.

When it was my turn, I walked up to him and pet his nose softly. Using a one cent piece, I placed the coin in his mouth before closing my eyes and making a wish. Plop. I heard my coin fall between the iron and into the water below the gate.

3. Shop local!

Don't be afraid to approach the small stands with local goods. Sometimes it's where you'll find the best deals! Bartering can be a fun part of the experience, but be careful not to offend the shop owners or you might walk away empty handed.

It was almost impossible to tell one stand from the other when we talked through the San Lorenzo market. Every single stall was packed with leather goods, jewelry, or small reproductions of the David, and every vendor was smiling too big, trying to get you to stop and

look at their identically stamped fleur de lis wallet. The overwhelming nature of it was alluring. I watched as other tourists had their go at talking down the salesmen from fifteen euros for a silkscreened *Italia* t-shirt and eventually settling at twelve, before the processes started all over again with a new group of white sneaker wearing customers. I couldn't wait to try it out myself.

A few stalls in, Myranda had stopped to look at embroidered aprons for her mom. While she sorted through the stacks, I peeked into the adjacent stall that was packed full of leather items. I ran my hand over the bags, and paused when I got to one that had stamped *Firenze* into the corner.

"That one is very good quality" I jumped at this. The salesman had appeared next to me without my noticing. I nodded in agreement and continued to look. He took the bag down and shoved it in front of my face before continuing with his speech.

"It's very high quality and is made right here in Firenze. See the engraving? That is because it is made here with our leather. It is not made somewhere else and then shipped here like some of the other stands" He opened the bag, explaining every aspect of the compartments and buttons. It wasn't a bad bag, but, I was more or less familiar with how a purse worked.

"How much is this one?" I asked him.

"We will get to that," he said and started to explain again.

"I really just want to know how much it is," I tried again. I was eager to start bargaining. At this point, I had heard Myranda purchase one of the aprons for her mom at half the price the lady was selling them for and now stood next to me.

“You give me five minutes to explain how beautiful this bag is, and then I will answer your question okay?” He smirked and tried to continue explaining.

“Orrrr,” I started out, seeing my chance to start haggling, “why don’t you answer me now, a three second answer, and then I’ll give you five minutes.”

The salesman narrowed his eyes and let the corner of his mouth inch up in frustration.

“That is not how it works,” he snarled back to me. Seeing that I had clearly made the wrong comment, I turned to Miranda and started to leave. “Okay, it is seventy five euros” he said as we turned.

“Thanks, but no,” I said. I just wanted to get out of the situation. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back to face him.

“You have offended me.” He spat into my face. He kept a strong grip on my arm while with the other hand he shoved his fingers in front of my face so quickly and forcefully that I moved my head back, trying not to get hit. “Not one, not two, but three times you have offended me! You did not listen, then you did not buy! Three times!” he yelled.

I yanked my arm free and stomped my foot on the ground. “I’m the one with the money here! I’m the one who wants to pay you! I’m sure I don’t need your knock off bag and I know one of the billion other people in this market will gladly take my money!” I threw my hands in the air, gesturing like an insane person to all of the other vendors.

Miranda started tugging on the back of my shirt, pulling me away from him, as the man cursed at me, but didn’t take a step in our direction.

I walked away backwards, with my hands still in the air as if in victory, refusing to let him win. I watched until he started talking with the next customer, and I physically shook the incident off of me.

“I saw what you did back there, *bella*” a shop owner about five stalls down said to me, while reaching out to touch my arm.

I quickly recoiled, thinking that I had managed not only to piss off the purse guy but had somehow made every vendor in earshot of the conversation mad, putting myself and the rest of my group in dangerous situation.

“*Bella, bella, no*” The salesman stepped back from me and put his arms to his side, signaling that he was not trying to harm me. “I only wanted to say that I am sorry he treated you that way. For you, I would give you anything in my shop for free.” He smiled, probably a little too hard, but I was too embarrassed at what he had said and at my own actions. I couldn’t help but respond.

“Free?” I said as I looked around his stall, which was like the yelling man’s, filled with leather goods. Only instead of purses and wallets, this man had coats hanging from the every edge he could fit them on.

“Well, *Bella*, almost free” He practically whispered the almost. Squished it in between the compliment and the shining magic word free.

I hesitated just a moment too long and before I knew it, the stall owner had grabbed my hand and started pulling me behind him. Luckily, Miranda and the rest of the group saw what was happening and quickly followed behind. He zigzagged us past the maze of stalls and into a shop that was just as equally filled with jackets as his stall had been. A man that had been

leaning up against the counter playing on his phone sprung into action as the stall owner, clearly his boss, spoke to him in quick Italian. The owner, still holding my hand, spun me around in a circle while I acted like a dumbfounded ragdoll and followed his instruction. The clerk watched as he did this eyeing me up and down.

When the twirling finally stopped, the shop owner kissed my hand and spoke in English “For this bella, anything she wants for almost free”. He winked and walked out of the shop again, leaving me utterly confused and wondering how I’d gotten into this situation. Myranda covered her mouth and laughed at my bewildered look.

“Okay, so, what do you like?” The shop attendant said while going around the walls pointing to different items.

“Uh, well, I, uh”. I stammered.

He snapped his fingers. “I know! This one!” he pulled out a walnut colored jacket and started to pull it onto my arms.

“This is the fastest I’ve ever seen a sale go” Myranda said, watching the ridiculous mess unfold.

“Miss, I don’t, uh, I don’t want to be rude or uh,” the clerk said while zipping up the jacket, pausing at my ribs.

“Oh!” I snapped out of my trance like state, and tried to zip the jacket up over my chest. It refused. “It doesn’t exactly fit” I responded.

“No, no, no, no, it fits. The leather will grow with you,” he said.

Cue laugh from Myranda.

“I think once the cow is dead, they kind of stop growing” I laughed. This whole process was getting out of hand. Then I spied the price tag. Six-hundred and seventy five euros. Immediately I started taking the jacket off.

“What are you doing, signora? No, nononono, he said for you almost free. Do not worry about the price. If you like it you can have it?” he offered.

“Can I have it for twenty bucks because that’s how much I can spend on this” I said back. “Honestly, man, I’m not trying to be rude, just. Almost free of seven hundred euros is still way more euros than I can spend on this jacket.”

He kept shooting back numbers that ranged anywhere from five hundred euros to one hundred and fifty.

I shook my head. No way. I held up a red and gold stamped fleur de lis change purse from the counter. “Look, I’ll buy this so that you can at least tell him you sold me something.”

Fifteen euros later, and a change purse I didn’t want, we walked out of the market having successfully managed to talk him down from thirty.

4. Homesickness Happens To Everyone

On any extended journey, the traveler is bound to experience bouts of missing home. To combat this problem, send messages to loved ones, do a familiar activity, or talk to a companion who has joined you on your trip, as they have likely felt the same way you do.

Myranda had been mostly silent throughout the day. Other than making a few jokes about how the text we were looking at for class, The Trotula, had cure for worms of the ears that

involved holding an apple up to the side of your head and hoping it came out to feast, she didn't have much to say.

After a lunch of not apples, we went back to the apartment for a nap and planning our evening. We'd fallen fairly well into a routine; class in the morning, lunch, naps when everything was closed, and back out in the evening to meet up with classmates for gelato around the Duomo and a museum. The art classes we had with the rest of our roommates were in were busy painting

I flopped down on my smaller than twin size bed and pulled up Netflix before turning to ask Myranda if I could shut off the lamp. Before I had managed to look up to ask, I heard her sniffling on her bed.

"Um...?" I asked.

"I think I want to go home," she wiped her eye but it didn't do much the tears just kept coming.

I paused for a beat and took a breath. She was used to spending every waking hour with her then boyfriend, now fiancée. They'd been speaking on the phone for at least an hour every night and generally more in the day. I knew it was hard for her, because it was hard for me. I was about to miss my anniversary with Walker and I had already missed my baby cousin's graduation. But we were in Florence, and I thought we were having a good time. Yes, our roommates had already gotten us a noise complaint after they had smashed wine bottles on the floor in the middle of the night, and we were covered in Italian mosquito bites, but we were eating real pizza any time we wanted and looking at art I never thought I'd get to see. We were

spending the evenings watching the Arno and listening to the violinist in the square. And we were over halfway done with the trip. There was no real reason to go home.

“Okay, well. Leave then,” I half yelled back. She was clearly startled by my response. She stopped sniffing for a moment and looked back at me in the wide-eyed way she does when she doesn’t understand something. Then she started crying even harder.

“If you don’t like it here I’m not going to keep you here!” My hands started to shake a little and I let a couple tears out. I couldn’t help but be mad at her for wanting to leave and myself for snapping at her. I desperately didn’t want her to go, but I missed my people too and I wasn’t crying about it.

“Can’t you just be nice to me for one minute!” she said. “I miss Roger and our roommates suck and I just want to be home. Everyone keeps leaving messages on my Facebook about how we’re so lucky and how they’re so jealous but I just don’t think they get that this is really hard.” She was still sobbing.

“I know you miss Roger, but the more you focus on the fact that you’re not with him the more you’re going to miss him.” I was talking fast now, just babbling past what I should have been saying because I was frustrated and even though I had spent the past two weeks with my best friend, the girl who I’d known since I was four, she had been doing this for the past year. Our plans would be cancelled because Roger got the day off, or plans we had made suddenly turned into group plans. She was worried about being away from him like this, they’d never been apart for more than a week and no doubt she was scared of losing him. I liked Roger, he was a good guy who loved my best friend, so much so that he had let me know before our trip that while we were gone he was going looking for engagement rings. “I get that you miss him I

really really do but this could be the last chance we have to hang out and have an adventure just as best friends before you're enga-“ I stopped myself short, caught on the words I wasn't supposed to let her know.

She stopped crying and gave me the wide eyed look again. I clammed up and looked down at my hands. There was no place else to turn the conversation.

She hiccupped. “Want to go get some gelato?” she said.

I nodded and let out the breath I'd been holding since I let the secret slip.

“I didn't hear anything” she said. “But maybe while we're here for the next couple of weeks we can look at that wedding dress store we passed the other day?”

“Duh”. I couldn't help but smile.

5. Find Unexpected Adventures

Make sure to utilize the public transportation! Trains are fairly inexpensive and go almost anywhere you want within the country. From Florence's Santa Maria Novella station you can be in Rome in two hours. For more local transportation, busses can take you all over the city and just beyond city limits to some of the best restaurants and less tourist filled views await!

The day before we left, Myranda and I decided to fit in one last trip. Florence's orchestra was performing all of the Led Zeppelin hits in a concert hall on the outskirts of the city. The tickets weren't available online, so we caught a bus to the venue around ten in the morning so we'd have tickets and know how long the trip took for the concert that night.

At first the ride was relaxing. The bus chugged along the Florence streets, stopping at the important junctions, the Ponte Vecchio, the Campanile, the Plazzo Pitti, to let people off.

According to our bus chart and map, we were supposed to ride for nine stops and exit on the Piazzale Michelangelo and then we could walk the quarter of a mile to the concert hall. However, when the ninth stop wasn't Piazzale Michelangelo we weren't sure what to do, so instead we kept on riding. Thirty days in Italy and I realized I didn't learn any of the words I should have. I knew how to order flat water and say excuse me, but not ask "is it safe here?". We went past anything recognizable and into the area of Florence were all of the apartment buildings of actual Florentines and gas stations lived. There weren't any people left to watch while we rode the bus, but there were street signs we didn't understand. Except for one we passed that with giant red letters and an arrow kindly let us know that Florence was now that-a-way. We had managed to leave the city.

I pointed this out to Miranda, and we couldn't help but laugh. We nervous laughed until the bus completely stopped, the driver turned the ignition off and left, leaving us and a single old lady sitting on the green plastic seats. While still thanking God for the SpongeBob quote we had managed to remember, "You are now in Leaving Bikini Bottom", a new bus driver got on, shook his head at our laughter, and turned the bus around. We thought we were the cleverest people to have ever existed and the dumbest all at once. We spent three hours in total on that bus, before scrambling off at the first stop we recognized, still laughing at the fact that we never even found the concert hall. Above all, we were ready to go home.