

Study Abroad Reflection

My time spent abroad was some of the best months of my life. The combination of the people, courses, and beautiful scenery led to a tremendous amount of growth in my cultural understanding, language skills, and personal life. The timing of events made this experience a true blessing.

Before leaving for Salzburg my understanding of the city was limited strictly to *The Sound of Music*. The Austrian town came up infrequently in my classes, even the German ones. We learned about Berlin, Munchen, Koln, Wein. We touched on Austria but spent a lot of time on Germany. Luckily I would have a class that would fix the gaps in my knowledge.

My favorite course that I took while abroad was Contemporary Austrian Culture. This was a great chance for me to learn more about the country that I was spending time in. Our instructor was a local who gave us a detailed history of Salzburg starting with the Romans, through the Second World War, and into the modern era. We covered topics like food, music, fashion, relations with neighbors, and more. He was not afraid to cover the darker parts of history, telling very personal stories about his family, neighbors, and countrymen.

My The Modern European Mind course was a chance to learn about some of the greatest thinkers of Western philosophy. A great advantage of taking this course while abroad was the opportunity to see where these people came from. We had the chance to visit major cities, coffee houses, and outdoor spaces that sparked the minds of Europe's greatest minds. The playgrounds of these philosophers were at our fingertips.

Another course that I took was Intermediate German II. This lecture class was building on the previous years of German language courses I had taken. While I spent a lot of time speaking German while going about town, having structured courses on the Language always helped. Particularly the vocabulary and grammar that we learned in class were focused on making hotel reservations, booking a train or car, and other useful language skills for kids traveling across Europe on the weekends.

Potentially the most thought-provoking and meaningful course that I ever had the pleasure of taking was Hilter und das Dritte Reich. This course was focused on the study of tyranny and the phenomenon that was Adolf Hitler. A chance to learn about the rise, and fall, of fascism in a country that was the “first victim” of the Nazis. This course allowed us to visit the homes of Jews who were exiled from Salzburg and sent away to forced labor camps. We visited the home where the later dictator was born. Conducted in German, the course offered a unique opportunity to cover deeply important topics.

Beyond the classroom, I loved getting a chance to explore. With the Europass in hand, I had the pick of the litter with some of the most historic and culturally significant cities in Europe. All just a short train ride away. The chance to go to Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, Czechia, and countless towns and hamlets along the way. I was always looking for a cheap hostel and a friend to tag along.

While my program consisted of Americans, I had the opportunity to live in a dorm with people from all over. While I expected there to be Austrians living in the dorms, they truly came from all over; Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia, Hungary, Italy, and more. Sharing stories of our homes, swapping recipes, or showing each other new card games, the cultural exchanges that happened across a dining table was an experience I will never forget.

I had the chance to spend a lot of time at the end of the trip with my roommate's extended family. They lived in Sankt Stefan im Gailtal, a small town in the South of the country nestled in the Alps. Four generations lived on a large plot of land in the valley. The grandfather was the town's police chief while the grandmother owned a shop. The town mechanic, school teacher, and doctor all called this ancestral plot home. We spent a week with this side of my roommate's family, getting tours of the local church and family plots, and going to the Christmas markets or Krampuslauf in town. This week I spoke only German, as English was not spoken in the family. That week of immersion took my language skills to a place where they had not been surrounded by my American classmates.