

2017 CWIL Student Travel Grant Reflection Essay

Greece Summer Program

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If you would have told me a year ago that I would study abroad, I would not have believed you. Even though Saint Mary's has a strong association with studying abroad, I did not think it was for me, a student-athlete earning two degrees in STEM fields. However, I learned about a short-term summer trip to Greece with a professor that I recently had, and I knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I could not pass up. Now I am deeply grateful that I was able to study abroad; this trip taught me so much about myself and my world.

Our trip consisted of ten days in Greece traveling from Thessaloniki to Athens and stopping at many wonderful cities along the way. We visited different sites with historical, cultural, and religious significance. We witnessed Meteora's breathtaking sandstone towers and toured the Byzantine Christian convents which were built on top of these nearly-vertical towers in the 14th century. The architecture, beauty, and preservation of the convents were amazing to see. The convents had importance in preserving Christianity, which is central to Greek Culture. Being an athlete and a sports fan, I was excited to visit Ancient Olympia. We toured the site of the ancient Olympic Games and even ran the track. I was fascinated to learn about the formation of the games that have become a great tradition in the modern world. Another interesting site we visited was Ancient Corinth. I glimpsed into Ancient Greek life by observing the ruins left from the city. History never felt as real and relevant as when I was in Greece.

In between the traveling and tours, we experienced Modern Greek culture through our daily interactions with Greeks. In every city we visited, the locals were attentive and receptive of us. They wanted to know where we were from and why we traveled there. After adopting Chicago as my hometown, it was entertaining to hear their impressions of the city. Many would simply shout "Chicago Bulls!" or "America!" The workers and owners of shops and restaurants were especially welcoming. I enjoyed hearing their stories, and sometimes they gave us discounts or free food. A majority of the Greeks we met spoke English, so we were generally able to have conversations with ease.

From my time in Greece, I learned two significant aspects to Greek culture: hospitality and history. Greek hospitality is essential for Greece's economy, in which tourism is a major

industry. Greek hospitality goes beyond necessity, however. From my experience, hospitality is a source of national pride to Greeks. They love their home and way of life and find pleasure in sharing with visitors. History is also fundamental to Greek life. They have *a lot* of history, with the numerous groups of people that have lived in that region throughout time. Everywhere we went we saw ruins as proof of these past civilizations. At most of the sites we visited, we saw groups of grade-school children on field-trips. These impressive structures and stories are a part of everyday life for Greeks as well as another source of pride for them.

I gained so much from my ten days in Greece. Aside from my newfound affection of gyros and gelato, I now have an increased awareness of myself, my country, and my world. I discovered the impact of Greece on the US. For example, influential ideas in philosophy and religion have spread from Greece all the way to the United States. I also witnessed the effects of America's pop culture and entertainment on Greece. I learned that Greeks listen to the Billboard Top 100 and watch Hollywood movies. My study abroad trip was filled with delicious food, beautiful sights, new friends, and wonderful memories. Additionally, I gained great experience traveling Greece under the guidance of a study abroad trip, in particular with a remarkable Greek family. I now have more confidence in traveling and being interculturally aware, which will be beneficial in many aspects of my life.

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