

CET Siena, Spring 2022 | Leydi Alatorre Medina

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Latinx students, first-generation students"

May we share your email address with future students who have questions about identity abroad? "leydi.alatorre.medina@vanderbilt.edu"

Finding Pieces of Home Abroad: First-generation, Latina experience in Siena

When I first started college, the idea of studying abroad seemed impossible. As a first-generation student, getting to and through college alone was my biggest focus and I felt like it wouldn't be fair for me to leave my family behind. I even chose a college close to home so I could go back quickly and easily if anyone ever needed me. Study abroad was always in the back of my mind as one of my biggest wishes, but at first I felt like that's the only place that the thought belonged. After entertaining the idea for a few years, I finally decided I would do it as a challenge to myself, and it was the best decision I could have made.

There was honestly a lot of guilt that came with my decision. First of all, it was right after the peak of the COVID pandemic — I felt bad traveling when it was still an issue that wasn't fully resolved. Going to Italy specifically after it had been hit so hard by COVID seemed unfair. I also felt uneasy with leaving because of how I was raised and who I was raised around. I'm the only person out of my high school friend group (which was composed of Latinx, low-income, & first-generation students just like me) who made it to college. There's this very strong sentiment in the Latinx culture that once you "make it", you can't forget about where you came from which includes not flaunting your successes. Leaving for college was already hard in this aspect since none of my friends were going, but going to an entirely different country to study felt like I was doing too much and forgetting where I came from entirely. I realized, though, that studying abroad was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me and it was something I had been wanting to do since high school. I needed to break away from my comfort zone and stop always choosing what was best for everyone else, so I did.

Given my history, traveling alone and arriving in a new country by myself was scary, but the staff, local student roommates, and even the other study abroad students were so welcoming! On the very first night, my roommate had already invited us to go grocery shopping, explore Siena, and even to the library to study. On the first weekend, the majority of the study abroad students and I had dinner together which kick-started our amazing friendships. It was the perfect introduction to Siena and the people I would be living with for the next 4 months. The weekly activities hosted by the roommates were also super helpful for getting to know them and my peers, and made me feel comfortable with being so far from everyone I knew. The staff consistently made sure we were feeling comfortable and made sure to help make our environments as close to home as possible.

Thankfully, being Latina in Italy was actually a big plus. The Italian language itself is super similar to Spanish, and the cultures are also so incredibly similar! Once people found out I was Mexican, they would enthusiastically ask about my culture and compare it to their own. Through all these conversations with strangers and friends, I found out we have some superstitions in common, as well as similar gestures and values. The best feeling in the world was being able to find small pieces of home and the people I knew in the new places and people I met. It showed me that there was no way I could ever forget where I came from, no matter where in the world I found myself.

By the end of my semester, the roommates had become my best friends, so much so that I was being persuaded by them to just stay in Siena permanently. If it wasn't for my other commitments, I think I would have actually taken them up on their requests. The other American students had also become my dearest friends — during my time abroad I spent every single day with at least one of them. Everyone even decided to have a reunion in Siena again in 5 years, proof of our strong bond! Studying abroad was the best experience I have ever allowed myself to live. I had the joy of building eternal friendships and learning so much about myself and my culture that I wouldn't have realized if I had stayed home. I grew so much as a person and grew beside some of the greatest people I've ever met. Not only did I make my family and friends proud for taking this opportunity, but I made myself proud too. I learned to be independent and to be free. So, if you happen to be reading this, relating to bits and pieces of the beginning or maybe the whole thing, and are on the fence about studying abroad with CET in Siena: take the chance! I genuinely can't wait for my reunion and to see all my best friends together again.