

Abr ad Education

SPRING 2003 VOLUME 1, NUMBER 2 ■ ACHIEVING IMMERSION

Immerse Yourself!

THE C.V. STARR-MIDDLEBURY SCHOOLS ABROAD are committed to encouraging the greatest possible immersion of students in their host cultures. The actual level of academic immersion will depend on the site at which a student chooses to study. Some sites, chosen because they are, in all but one case, off the tourist path with fewer people there speaking English, require students to take their classes direct-enrolled in the local university, (Logroño, Segovia, and Getafe in Spain; Poitiers in France; Ferrara in Italy; Mainz and Berlin in Germany); others provide a mix of classes taught exclusively for our students and direct-enrolled classes. In most cases, depending on language ability, the students can determine the level of challenge they will face.

Beyond the purely academic side of our programs, all of our sites have taken additional measures to encourage as much immersion as possible. We make every effort to assist students in finding homestays with local families; rooms in boarding houses where local students live (seldom real dormitories); or even, though less commonly, sharing apartments with local students. We encourage students to undertake volunteer work, service projects, or internships, which help introduce them to other social milieus outside their home and university. We also strongly encourage students to engage in extra-curricular activities with local residents, whether a sport, cultural club, or some other means by which they will interact with locals and, thereby, create more opportunities for cultural immersion; to travel exclusively within the country; and wherever feasible, to study abroad for the year rather than a semester.

Finally, although activities are of necessity undertaken with other members of the program (for example, orientation and occasional excursions), our schools are designed to discourage as much as possible the creation of strong bonds within the group; we strive to keep such collective activities to a minimum. Our staff encourages students to strike out on their own and to be responsible for initiating their own contacts with the host culture. They will, of course, assist students by providing information; and they are always there in the case of emergencies; but they try not to do what students can do for themselves. Do not misconstrue such behavior as a lack of interest or an unwillingness to help. Our staff is consciously striving to help students utilize their time abroad in the most effective manner in order to achieve the most successful outcomes.

We are convinced that the structure of our programs and the actions of our staff create the greatest opportunity for students to immerse themselves as fully as possible in the local culture. In the last analysis, however, the degree of immersion depends primarily on a student's own commitment and actions.

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The Office of Off-Campus study conducted the following interviews with recent participants at the C. V. Starr Middlebury-Schools Abroad regarding their immersion into the host culture:

FRANCE Housing

Julie Stevens is a junior French/psychology double major at Middlebury. She spent the fall semester in Poitiers and is now studying in Paris.

I was one of 70 girls who lived in the *Foyer de Feuillants* in Poitiers. A French dormitory differs from a university residence hall in that most are single sex, independently owned residence halls that are unaffiliated with a specific university. My *foyer* housed students from several universities, including the nearby law school, medical school, business school, and school of pharmacology, as well as the University of Poitiers. The *foyer* was run by nuns—quite a difference from dorm life at Middlebury.

As the semester went on and my language skills improved, I grew increasingly close with the other girls.

One of my best friends was in my psychology class, and we decided to study for the final together. One of the terms had been translated from an American text, and I pronounced it in English.

“But Julie!” She gasped. “You speak really good English!”

“I know, Christelle,” I laughed. “I’m American.”

She had forgotten. It was the best compliment on my language skills that I’d ever received.

I had a hard time leaving the *foyer*. I made friends who feel like family to me now. It opened up 70 opportunities to meet people—I would definitely recommend it.

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ITALY In-Country Travel

Amy Peterson spent the spring of her junior year studying in Ferrara. She is an international studies major who will graduate in May 2003.

As I became more familiar with the Ferrara lifestyle, I began to travel as much as possible to other Italian cities and to learn about culture in different regions. The more I did so, the more I realized that each region is strikingly different and has its own special charm. The Milanese, for example, are accustomed to a more fast-paced lifestyle than people from Pisa. Dialects differ vastly, and the afternoon *aperitivo* may depend on the wine grape particular to that region, but one thing remains constant: the love of life and food.

The more variety I noticed from one region to another, the more it became clear to me that each *paese*, or town, consisted of very similar people who loved their hometown and loved to share their specialties with everyone. If I asked someone in Rome about the history of the Colosseum, I would be sure to receive an answer with the same tone of pride as if I had asked someone in Parma about that region’s different cheeses and chocolates. The hospitality, warmth, and enthusiasm for local history manifested itself in different ways, but was characteristic of every city that I visited from north to south.

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GERMANY Yearlong Stay

Elif Kiratli is an international studies major who spent her junior year in Mainz. She will receive her degree from Middlebury in May 2003.

A full-year stay is definitely a more complete experience than spending only one semester abroad. The first semester is really all about culture shock, understanding the educational system, meeting new people, and getting to know the environment. It's in the second semester when you start



building stronger friendships, feeling more self-confident about speaking German, and becoming more comfortable in class.

When I first went to Germany, I had doubts about making myself understood to my professors or my neighbors. Spending more time with my German friends and writing long papers for each class made me feel more confident about my level of German in the second part of the year. In the past, writing a three-page paper seemed like a big success; now I trust my German well enough to write a two-semester international studies thesis during my senior year.

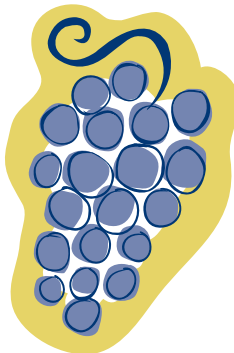
LATIN AMERICA Internships

Damien Chaviano is a junior international studies major at Middlebury. He recently returned from Argentina, where he studied in Buenos Aires for the fall semester.

I spent my first three months in Argentina working for Bertolo & Capozzi, an Argentinean law firm. It was a small firm with nine attorneys and two accountants. I spent the majority of my time working for the accounting department. I was asked to prepare balance statements, monitor outstanding debt (a severe problem in Argentina), and to meet with clients. I came to feel like I was part of a family. If I had a question, I was able to enter my boss's office at any time. Talking and getting to know the staff was



an everyday occurrence. For me this proved vital in increasing my Spanish proficiency. It was like having a five-hour Spanish discussion class every day. Because of the small business atmosphere I was given numerous responsibilities, but I was also able to work on my goal of increasing my language skills through everyday conversation.



SPAIN Extracurricular Activities

Kent Newman spent his junior year in Logroño. He will graduate in May with a degree in international studies.

In Spain finding extracurricular activities not only serves the purpose of developing relationships, it also helps with language and cultural skills.

I played pick-up soccer once a week with a guy I met in the Internet lab; from that experience I met about a dozen other guys. After games we would go to a bar for *tapas* and a drink and be joined by others for a game of Trivial Pursuit.

On Sundays I would run by myself through the streets and parks of Logroño. In March I was introduced to

another runner and joined an evening running club. We trained for a half-marathon. My language improved greatly on the runs, especially with slang. The running club helped me to better understand Spanish culture through a non-mainstream structure.

RUSSIA Academics

Mun Chan is a Russian/physics double major who will graduate from Middlebury in 2003. He spent the academic year in Yaroslavl.

I took mainstream classes at Yaroslavl State University. Americans and western Europeans are not too common there, so students are always interested in new faces.

The overall experience was very rewarding. I was happy to be exposed to ideas in physics I would not have learned at Middlebury. All the professors I had, like the students, were eager to meet new foreign students.

While I must stress that a lot of effort is required of the student, mainstream classes were definitely one of the more important aspects of my study abroad experience.



Interview with Michael Apicelli

Michael Apicelli spent his junior year in Yaroslavl after attending the Russian School at Middlebury. He is a Russian major who is looking forward to returning to Russia as soon as possible after he graduates in 2003.

How did Language School prepare you for your time abroad?

I noticed a sharp difference in preparation between those students who had been to the Language Schools and those who had not. The language is less intimidating to those who have already experienced immersion, even if it is only artificial. There are, of course, certain things Language Schools can't get you ready for... slang expressions, things like that. But in terms of usable basic language, the school was amazing. Basically, preparation is like a skeletal system. The stronger the basic structure, the more filled out the final form can become. So because my base structure built was so stable, the superstructure of more advanced linguistic concepts gained in Russia was that much more impressive. You can't simply memorize phrases and words haphazardly; you need some kind of solid understanding in order to make all those complex ideas take hold within context.

How did people in Yaroslavl react when they heard you speaking Russian with your friends?

Oh man...they were absolutely amazed. Remember, Yaroslavl is NOT a metropolis. It's this little "backwater" of 800,000...and not many Americans visit, although it has some of the most beautiful cathedrals in the country and is one of the oldest cities. So they were usually overjoyed at even the most rudimentary of Russian skills.

Describe ways in which you immersed yourself in Russian culture.

I usually went to *banya*, a Russian sauna, on a pretty regular basis. I think my group visited just about every museum and church in the city thrice over, and I made sure to make as many Russian friends as possible. I also dated a Russian girl, which certainly aids in your efforts of language acquisition.

What was the most rewarding part of your study abroad experience?

The days when I'd wake up, eat breakfast and chat with Lutsia (my *babushka*), and then go out with my Russian, American, and Finnish friends, come home, grab a snack, and go to bed realizing I'd not spoken a word of English all day were the times when I felt the greatest sense of accomplishment. Walking along the *naberezhnaya* (riverside promenade) and meeting new people and experiencing what exactly it means to be a student in another culture is really great. Being a student in Russia is just not the same as in America. Russian students are expected to be these young, effervescent youths teeming with life. They're zealous in studies and carefree in living. They're nowhere near as regimented as American students. To have that acceptance from the Russians was very rewarding. My Russian friends sincerely appreciated my attempts to live the student's life.

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