

Living and learning in a foreign country was one of the most formative experiences of my entire life. Challenging yet fulfilling, cultural and linguistic immersion through the University of Minnesota's Language and Culture in Southern France program opened my eyes to the drastic variation in lifestyles, landscapes, and customs that exist globally. My time abroad was not always easy, and I definitely realized world travel was not as glamorous as the travel bloggers make it seem, but this experience also allowed me to see the beauty in both the differences and universal similarities among cultures.

Growing up born and raised on a small island surrounding the Charleston peninsula, my world was fairly sheltered. I briefly traveled to Europe in highschool, but otherwise, barely left the state and never traveled from the east coast. I knew my world view was very limited going into this situation, but I was thrilled to see what all the world had to offer. Prior to leaving, I had many friends and family members joke with me about the culture shock I was about to undergo. This was a concept I knew how to define, and thought I understood, but had no idea the true meaning of until arriving in Montpellier, France. Soon after the plane landed however, it all began to click. Experiences seemingly as minute and irrelevant as checking out at the grocery store, ordering a coffee, or paying for the check at lunch were so drastically different from how I had lived through these interactions during the entire course of my life before.

For instance, I distinctly remember my first time at Les Halles Laissac, the closest grocery market to my apartment. As a frequent Costco and Trader Joe's bulk buyer, I was not prepared for the French style of shopping. The produce was vibrantly colored, package free, and irregularly shaped. Hummus and other spreads were made daily in the market, unprocessed, and natural. Flaky pastries, fresh breads, and other sweet treats lined all of the clear cases. Excited and seemingly prepared, I brought my reusable bags on a tip from Celia, our French student aide.

Totes in hand, I desperately tried to act like a local as I picked out food for the next week or two as normal. I will never forget the way the cashier looked at me when I came up with my hoard of groceries. This moment is how I learned that the French way is to buy fresh food for meals almost daily, rather than shop in bulk.

This is a small, silly example, but one that I hope implies how these differences could so easily add up. Over the next few weeks, I continued to face the many dissimilar parts of French culture head on, and it was truthfully much more overwhelming than I thought it would be. I completely expected study abroad to be a carefree vacation, a whole semester of beautiful sights, great food, and the occasional classes. But the differences in almost all day to day situations made for a tough adjustment. Having no access to a car, but full access to the extensive public transportation was initially daunting. Take out and iced coffee being frowned upon was unexpected. The slower walking pace and overall pace of life, 2 hour meals for example, frustrated me to no end. Living alone and in such a compact space was impossible to acclimate to. Being 6 hours ahead of my family and friends and unable to keep in touch easily was disheartening. Going to a foreign school in the middle of a large city was terrifying. Altogether, being unable to immediately jump into the native French girl role I so meticulously planned for was unanticipated. But after a while, the shock subsided and my perspective shifted.

The adjustment period friends and family talked about was real, but so worth it! The exact moment something clicked, and I fell in love with the parts of the study abroad process that had been so difficult for me was at one of Montpellier's best hidden gems, a picturesque lunch place called Nina Cafe. Around the 3rd week of settling in and exploring the city, my friends and I stumbled upon the locally owned and operated lunch place, famished. The small dining area was cut out of limestone and covered in lush pothos and monstera vines. The owner was eager to

help us decide on menu items and was incredibly patient, explaining things in digestible tidbits of French. As she cooked our meals, she spoke with us about her favorite things about Montpellier and France in general, mostly involving food and meal times. She explained to us how important lengthy meals were for the French. Food is sacred in the culture and in turn, meals are often prepared with the highest quality ingredients possible and enjoyed for at least an hour and a half. Families prioritize their “repas” as times to relax and connect with one another, and places of work are required to give at least one hour for a “pause déjeuner.” The French are incredibly intentional not only about the food they eat but the time they spend during their meals. This realization, along with so many others over the course of the following 5 months, was one that I wanted to be able to implement into my own life.

Ultimately, my time in France left me with a great appreciation for just how wonderful the French people were. Both the highs and the lows were the most memorable times of my college career. As a high strung type A pre-med, the French people taught me what it meant to slow down, be in the moment, and enjoy the day in front of you. I discovered what it was like to live in a place and culture which really emphasizes the priority of enjoyment and well being over productivity and routines. I am incredibly grateful to have been able to spend 5 months engrossed in all that Montpellier had to offer!