

2008 Scholarship recipient and Santa Clara University student Christina Hagerty's essay about her experience abroad

To The County of Santa Clara, CA.USA/Province of Florence, Italy, Sister-County Commission:

I remember the exact moment it happened.

The exact moment I was mistaken for an Italian.

The moment I was mistaken for a native Florentine has shaped my abroad experience. The afternoon it happened went something like this:

I was on a mission for a leather coat that was two weeks in the making. After lecture I would wander down to San Lorenzo, fight through the storm of "ciao bella"s, and try on numerous coats. None seemed to be just right; too small, too big, too expensive, etc. As the Florentine weather began to turn brisk, the perfect leather coat became less of an object of my desire and more of a necessity. One afternoon in early October I interpreted a class cancellation as my destiny find the perfect leather coat. I parked my bike on the edge of San Lorenzo and strolled into an off-the-beaten-path leather shop. And there it was, like a beacon of light. Brown, simple, bomber style; I asked to try it on. I was instantly in love; it fit perfectly, perfect length, color, plenty of room underneath for a sweater and scarf. And the price was right too. Donning my new purchase, I walked back to my bike with an extra skip in my step.

As I fumbled with the lock on my bike, I felt a presence behind me, "Senta, scusi, sa dov'è stazione Santa Maria Novella?"

I looked up to see the most elegant Italian woman I have ever seen in my entire life; high-waisted skirt, black pumps, fishnets, the whole she-bang. She was now staring at me, waiting for a reply. My heart pounded. "Ahhhh, e molto vicino, in questa vialle" and I jabbed a finger in the direction of the train station. If only I had a camera to capture the look on this woman's face. She couldn't believe she had mistaken an American for an Italian. How dare I pose as a native? It took me a few moments to digest what had happened, I pondered on my bike ride home. Can one *become* Italian?

No. I do not think so. In the US, we have a notion that once in America, one is American. In Italy, it is not so simple. To be Italian is a gift you are born with, not a right that can be acquired. No leather jacket can change my identity; it can only for an instant disguise me.

I came to a conclusion: quite frankly I have never been so flattered. Being mistaken for an Italian is one of the highest compliments I have received. I have accomplished a few other things while abroad that I am quite proud of too: I can, hand clad in plastic glove, effortlessly weigh my fruit at Esselunga. I have found the only public restroom in all of Italy with toilet seat covers (basement of the Uffizi in case you were wondering...). I can pack a backpack for a weekend trip that will fit in the overhead compartment of a Ryanair plane. But there is nothing I am more proud of than having been mistaken for an Italian.

Since that afternoon in early October, I have been confused for an Italian on multiple occasions, and my heart still pounds every time. Thirty years from now, when I find my leather coat in the back of my closet, I will recall my time abroad and be thankful for the flexibility my American heritage allows.

I had such a wonderful time abroad, thank you so much for the generous scholarship. While abroad I was nominated for an academic excellence award.

Sincerely

Christina Hagerty