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No One Does Christmas Better

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"No One Does Christmas Better"



Kölner Dom in Cologne, Germany

The morning after we left Amsterdam was bright as we made our way out of the Netherlands, many of us falling asleep as the bus traveled past borders and into Germany. We arrived in Cologne, Germany (also called *Köln* in German), and dropped off our things at the next hostel before we could start our day. Neville, our tour guide, taught us a few German phrases – mainly how to ask if the person could speak English – and we went on our way to explore the new city.

Cologne was beautiful and modern – save for the cathedral in the center of the city, the *Kölner Dom*. We climbed to the top of the *Dom* and looked out at the entire span of the city completely lit up for Christmas. We wandered through the Christmas market, and I realized one solid truth. No one does Christmas better than the Germans. Thousands of lights were strung up over our heads, and people passed us sipping steaming cups of mulled wine and holding dozens of wrapped parcels from one of the small Christmas shops.

There was a moment during the evening when we went silent for a minute out of respect for the people affected by the Berlin attacks. It was jarring and a little bit scary, but you could tell that everyone had decided to come together instead of cowering in fear. Even in a time of terror, it was met with love and respect – and it was truly amazing.

We left Cologne and traveled to various other places: Rothenburg, a quaint little town surrounded by ancient walls and filled with the nicest people you could ever hope to meet; Munich, a large city with so much history and an incredible clock tower that brings out dancing figures twice a day; Hohenschwangau in Bavaria with the famous Neuschwanstein Castle (the castle Disney modeled Cinderella's castle after); a brief stop in Austria where we were able to walk through a beautiful church and see the gazebo where they shot the "Sixteen Going on Seventeen" scene for *The Sound of Music*; and eventually we made it to Lucerne, a beautiful city in Switzerland that sells some of the best chocolate in the world. We spent two

days in Switzerland and ended our stay on Christmas Eve when we held a Secret Santa party before hopping back on the bus for our overnight trip to Paris.

We made it to Paris early on Christmas morning, and spent the day walking and sight-seeing. We watched the lights sparkle from the Eiffel tower – as they do once every hour (I felt slightly sorry for the locals) – and took pictures by the pyramid of the Louvre. By the end of the day, our backs and legs and feet were completely sore, but it was nothing that couldn't be fixed with a good night's sleep. On our last night in Paris, we all had dinner at a French restaurant nearby complete with wine and laughter. This group had become like a family to me in such a short time, and it saddened me that our trip was ending but I was thankful to return to England.

It's strange when you've been studying abroad for so long and the place truly becomes like a home to you – and returning felt almost like a huge relief. I learned so much on the trip, and met so many people from all around the world who became such fast friends with me. This trip was truly something that I believe everyone should experience once in their lives if they have the opportunity to. It really opens your eyes to different cultures and different ways of life. In the U.S., we live such fast-paced and erratic lives – but there is something to be said for taking a moment to truly experience life. This could mean simply sitting down in the morning to casually sip your coffee, or walking down the road without a destination in mind. It's so different and jarring, but it made me truly consider how I've been living my own life – not taking in the place that I was in, or letting each day be experienced –not just lived through. This is something that truly changed me, and was probably one of the most valuable experiences of my time studying abroad.

Rhiannon