

France Beyond Borders Study Abroad

STEP

SECOND-YEAR TRANSFORMATIONAL
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

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Experience Description:

The objective of this STEP project was to think critically about multiculturalism, immigration, and identity in France and its bordering countries, Spain and Belgium while on a May semester study abroad trip to those three countries. There was also a focus on the increasingly integrated global community, issues with European immigration, and how to engage in cross-cultural dialogue in global contexts.

What did you learn?

Sarah Gensburger, a French sociologist who studied how the Bataclan terrorist attack affected the neighborhood of Paris that it took place in, discussed the attack and its subsequent memorials.

Sarah discussed the idea of a “**physical manifestation**” of a historical event. The Bataclan attack lacked any sort of physical manifestation, because no infrastructure was visibly damaged. To mark that something horrible occurred there, people created makeshift memorials until permanent ones were established, because they felt the need to have a visible representation of the event.

Walking around Paris, I saw more examples of what Sarah was talking about. All throughout the city are plaques commemorating the deaths of soldiers killed during the liberation of Paris from its Nazi Occupiers. I could follow the plaques and practically walk their steps, all these years later. Paris also has plaques marking the spot where Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI were guillotined or marking the schools from which Jewish French students were taken to concentration camps. Due to these “physical manifestations” in Paris, it was impossible to ignore its deep, rich, and tragic history.



Memorial to Ernest Hemingway outside of Pamplona's Plaza de Toros, the bull fighting stadium.

Impact on my Goals and my Future:

The longer I spent in France, the more my confidence grew. I could communicate with shopkeepers and understand their jokes, I could translate the tour guides for other students who didn't speak French, I could even ask for directions after getting lost in the Louvre.

This trip was transformative in so many ways, and it grew my self-confidence in my independence and my French-speaking education so much more than I thought possible. With this new confidence and new love for the language I wish to continue my French education, even though my French minor is already completed. I do not want to slowly forget this beautiful language that I have spent so many years learning.



Academic Sarah Gensburger takes us on a walk around Paris to show us sites of memorials to the victims of the Bataclan attack.



Me wading into the Mediterranean Sea in Cassis, France.

Personal Impact:

I have never travelled by myself before and while I was never actually alone on this trip, I had to rely upon my own independence and skills in unfamiliar environments in unfamiliar countries. I got lost in the Brussels train station, I conquered the Paris metro, I handled layover after layover in foreign airports and I came out the other side with a sense of reassurance. If I could do those things, then I can do anything.

Favorite Part of the Experience:

Our day trip to Cassis, France, a town along the Mediterranean Sea was not only my favorite part, but also one of the best days of my life. I have never in my life seen anything as blue as the sea in Cassis or as breathtaking as the mountainous calanques. In this idyllic, sunny sea town I waded into the sea, drank French wine, and enjoyed the amazing gift that this trip gave me.