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» Ciao for now: Playing with Firenze

Study abroad columnist Mollie Barnes on the land of the free

By Mollie Barnes

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This past weekend, I went on a trip to Firenze (aka Florence) for my friend Sarah's birthday. When booking the trip, I had no worries about planning for a group of eight girls to stay in two hostel rooms together for the weekend as a kind of girls' trip to celebrate Sarah's big two-one (since she wouldn't be getting to celebrate it in the States).

Overall, the trip was great. But one thing did happen that overshadowed the whole trip, unfortunately. On Saturday night, when Sarah and some of our group were walking back home from the discotheque, a man groped her. When she kicked him in defense, he backhanded her to the ground.

Men shouldn't hit women — in America, that is the general rule. Everyone knows it. From the rural areas to the 'burbs, pretty much everyone young and old sticks by this guideline.

Of course, there are many situations that go unspoken, and men still do hit women (and vice versa) in America, even though it is frowned upon by most of society. But when I came to Italy to study abroad, thinking of it as just another "westernized" country, I didn't really think that basic social norms would be much different.

I don't think I would be able to handle studying abroad in a country where woman's rights are so obviously ignored because I am a super independent person — I have come to expect freedoms for women after having them my whole life in the United States. A girl should be able to walk down the street in a pretty dress with two of her friends on her 21st birthday without being grabbed by a stranger and then knocked to the ground when she tries to get him to stop.

If we had been studying abroad in a different country, I might be a little more tolerant of this situation. Another girl in my program spent some time studying in Bangladesh. She said a man punched her when she wouldn't give up her seat to him on a bus. She had been warned about this.

On the train to Florence, my friends and I were reading an issue of Cosmopolitan UK, and there was an article about International Women's Day (which is today!) and certain situations of the oppression of women around the world. We were sympathetic about the injustices and grateful to be in a country that we thought was safe for women. Obviously, no one was expecting that Sarah's birthday would be ruined by a stranger who thought it was OK to grope a strange girl on the street.

In the self-defense class my mom made me take before I left, we learned that in the U.S., it is OK to react with twice the amount of force used against you. So I think, in Sarah's case, kicking this man in the groin after he touched her inappropriately for no reason was completely acceptable.

Some might want to say that his reaction after that was twice the force that she used, but this would be false. His actions weren't in self-defense. She didn't grope him. She didn't even know him. He might have thought he was owed a touch simply because she was wearing a blue sparkly dress for her birthday, and he might have thought he could get away with it because she stands only about 5'6" even in heels. Luckily, Sarah didn't sustain any major

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injuries besides a bloody nose and a scraped knee. But that doesn't make it right.

As a traveler, you need to be aware of your surroundings and the cultural differences that might be different from yours. The appeal of traveling is experiencing things completely different from what you are used to, but no one usually thinks about the things that are worse. You imagine how beautiful Italy or another country is, and how amazing everything looks "over there."

But "over there" has its problems. Living in a place allows you to see the beauty of places that you wouldn't be able to experience on a short vacation, but it also allows you to appreciate some aspects of the U.S. as well. The Italian lifestyle might be "la dolce vita," and America is the land of the free. Turns out that neither are perfect. The grass isn't greener on either side, it's just a different shade. Ciao for now!

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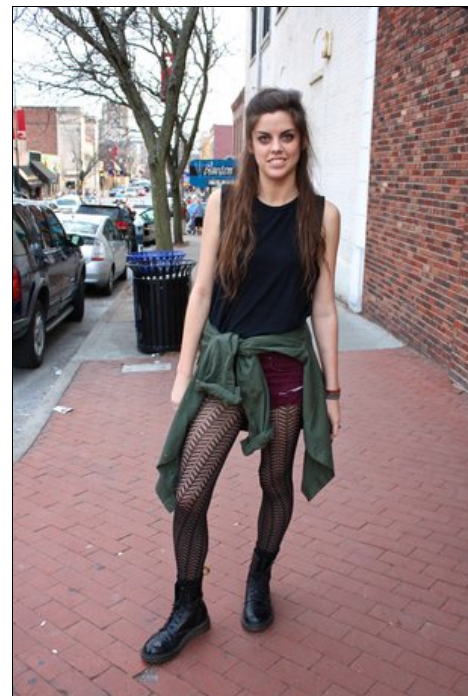
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