

After spending two amazing months exploring and studying abroad in Europe, here are a few memorable examples of what I have learned...

1. Be open to trying new things. The best experiences I had in Europe usually started by trying something completely new. Sailing the Atlantic Coast of France, visiting all five towns in Cinque Terra, discovering Spanish paella, stumbling upon the famous Portobello Market in London, visiting the Prague Castle, enjoying contemporary art at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, and driving on the autobahn were just a few of the remarkable adventures I experienced while in Europe. All of these activities were completely new to me, and truly made my stay in Europe unforgettable.
2. Live like a local. Throughout my stay in Europe, I frequently ventured off the beaten path to find the best local cuisine, stores, and sights. While in London, my friend and I decided to go without a map—instead asking the locals where to spend our time. Taking a break from the standard tourism designations allowed us to experience a day in the life of a local. We ended up having an excellent weekend and learned a valuable lesson about traveling.
3. Enjoy cultural differences. During my stay in Europe, I experienced diverse cultures every weekend. My most memorable cultural moment was making a new friend in Rome. My friends and I were wandering around Rome, when we randomly introduced ourselves to an Italian journalist. We ended up spending the entire day with her, and met up with her throughout the week. She spoke perfect English and taught us many things about culture and history that you simply cannot learn from a tour guide. We became good friends, and still keep in contact with her today.

I also learned a few lessons that are important for anyone preparing for this exciting experience. Although quiet comical, the stories below offer some insight on what to expect and appreciate while abroad.

TURN OFF THE LIGHTS!

Don't be surprised if your computer, phone, camera, and hair dryer magically become unplugged during the day at your home stay. This phenomenon commonly occurred during the day while we were at away at classes. My roommates and I soon realized that these occurrences were not caused by the French Electricity Fairy, but rather our host mom on secret anti-electricity missions. Innocently enough, she would go around during the day unplugging all of our electronics and turning off lights. Other observations came about during our first few weeks in Nantes. Our host mom *owns* a brand new car, but rides her bike to work—even during thunderstorms! She *owns* a dryer, but hangs her clothes outside to dry. My clothes grew at least one size larger in France due to a lack of drying. Showers were kept short and watching television was limited to special events like FIFA World Cup. Our host mom rationed electricity so tightly that after awhile even turning on the lights gave us a real buzz. At first glance, these cultural aspects seemed like inconveniences, but relayed an important lesson about conservation and sustainability. Commodities we take for granted in the United States—especially water and electricity—are considered particularly valuable to the French. Adapting to the French

ways of conservation was difficult at first, but seemed normal and sensible after only a few short weeks in France. Being more mindful of sustainability and recycling is one cultural aspect I was sure to continue upon my return to the United States. Good luck with your adventures in Nantes—and be sure to turn off the lights!

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED!

During our second week in France, we were preparing to travel to Nice for a much needed weekend excursion. Our group planned on taking a train to Nice on Thursday, flying from Nice to Paris on Sunday, then taking a train back to Nantes that evening. We booked our tickets over a month in advance and were sure that everything would go smoothly

Desired

With our travel itinerary planned far in advance, our group left class on Thursday and headed towards the Nantes train station. Our train arrived on time and the conductor enthusiastically welcomed us aboard. We were all in good spirits for our weekend getaway. The weather was beautiful and the countryside views were phenomenal from the train. After a seemingly quick journey, we arrived in Nice with an entire day ahead of us. Our weekend in Nice and Monaco could not have gone any better, and on Sunday morning we said goodbye to Nice as we arrived in the local airport. With plenty of time to spare, we joked about everything that *could* have gone wrong throughout the trip. A natural disaster, travel cancellations, and strikes. We boarded our plane and had a smooth flight to Paris. After exploring beautiful Paris for the day, our group took the train back to Nantes. The weekend was a great success and we were thankful that everything went perfectly as planned.

Reality

With our travel itinerary planned far in advance, our group left class on Thursday and headed towards the Nantes train station. We arrived at the train station only to hear rumors of severe flooding in the southeastern coast of France. Despite the news, we were still determined to make it to Nice. The train conductor made no promises of even making it to Nice, but said we could try by taking an indirect route with multiple connections. After multiple connections and a seemingly endless ride, the train finally reached its last stop. Lost and irritable, we quickly discovered that we were over two hours away from Nice by car, and the trains would not be operating that evening and perhaps the entire weekend. After much deliberation, we pulled together our funds and decided to rent a car and continue on our journey not knowing what the weather would hold. Our weekend in Nice and Monaco could not have gone any better, and on Sunday morning we said goodbye to Nice as we walked to the local airport. We chose to walk to the airport because it was less than three short miles away from our hotel. The clock started and our race began. With the airport in sight and our time running out, we started running with our luggage to make up time. Of course, we had troubles finding our terminal, and ended up running through the gate with thirty seconds to spare. Our timing was so unbelievably exact, that the couple behind me was not allowed to board the plane! We boarded and had a shaky flight to Paris. Despite the logistical travel nightmare, the weekend was a great success and we were thankful for the experience and story. The reality is that you should prepare far in advance for your travels, but revel in the adventure and welcome changes as they happen.

