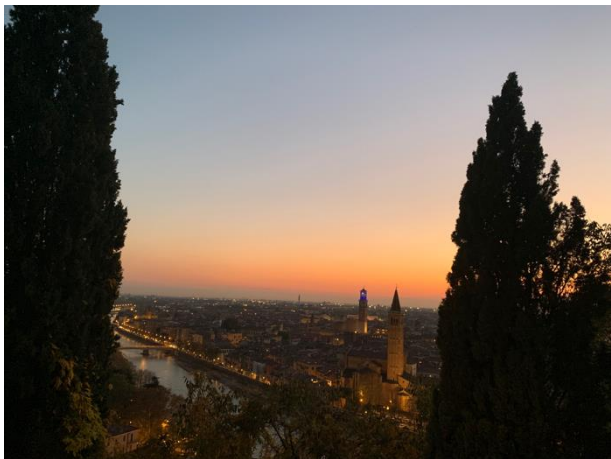


La Vita Veronese

Welcome to my blog 'La Vita Veronese'!

I'm Shannon - a Modern Languages student at the University of Warwick. This last year, I have been studying abroad in Verona, Italy, on my Erasmus placement.



Known as one of Italy's most romantic cities, Verona is a very popular tourist destination for lovers and Shakespeare enthusiasts – obviously having studied in Shakespeare's country in the UK it seemed only fitting that I continue the theme during my Erasmus year abroad. Verona is known to many as Shakespeare's city – the home of plays such as 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'. Along with its literary history the city is full of stunning Renaissance architecture and is known for

its Colosseum which dates back further than the Roman equivalent. Not only is it the perfect destination for a historical city break, but the close proximity to Lake Garda, Italy's largest lake, means that the area can provide something for everyone, whether it be history, mountains or beaches.


Doing a year abroad is a massive step for anyone. Although it is marketed as one of the best experiences of your university career it is undoubtedly also one of the hardest, especially at the beginning. Having to adapt to a completely different culture and study in a foreign language are only two of the difficulties facing year abroad students, but once the challenges have been overcome it certainly lives up to the claims. In my blog, I will aim to discuss some of the difficulties I have had adapting to the Italian lifestyle as a British student.

Stage 1 – Moving Abroad

Monday 15th October 2018 was a day I was dreading for a very long time. My flights were booked, temporary accommodation was sorted, and my bags were packed ready for what was going to be the adventure of a lifetime, I just hadn't realised it yet.



View from the flight to Verona – one of the most beautiful flights I've ever been on

LONDON (STANSTED)		VERONA	
STN		VRN	
PASSENGER Shannon Taylor	FLIGHT # FR4541	SEQUENCE 74	
GATE CLOSES 06:10	QUEUE Priority	SEAT 10A	

Ticket to Verona!

The most daunting thing about moving abroad for me was the fact that I didn't actually have anywhere to live once I arrived in Verona. Despite trying to find somewhere online I was very sceptical, especially having heard the horror stories about fellow Erasmus students who had arrived at their accommodation which in reality didn't exist – goodbye deposit! I decided it was a better option to wait until I was in Italy to find somewhere to live, a very popular choice among Erasmus students. Although I was reassured that there would be plenty of options and I would find somewhere easily, I still wasn't ready to be put in the position of potentially not finding a flat. It's safe to say that my first week as an Italian student was a terrifying one!

My one saving grace was the fact that I had met a girl online and we agreed to flat-share. We met upon arrival in Verona and started looking for somewhere to live. We went to estate agencies and called many people offering rooms online with no luck, either because we were Erasmus students with no guarantor in Italy or because the time which we were planning to spend in Italy was awkward and didn't fit with their schedule. Eventually we were lucky enough to find a landlord who accommodated our needs and within four days we had a flat. It was certainly a difficult experience but looking back it threw me in at the deep end and my confidence and language skills definitely thanked me for it. It also meant that I could see the apartment before I agreed to stay there, and I could ask any questions before giving any money. Overall, despite the worry it was definitely the best decision and I'm glad I did it that way.





Once I was settled in my flat, I found it surprisingly easy to adapt to the Italian lifestyle. I was lucky because the welcome week in Verona was 2 weeks before the start of term, so I had a few weeks to get my bearings and enjoy my time in Italy before being thrown into the authentic Italian student life.

Despite it being a difficult experience, I feel I was very lucky to find my Erasmus flat – being able to see this view out of my bedroom window daily is something I'll definitely miss!

Stage 2 – Making Friends

One of the main benefits of the year abroad is that you have the opportunity to meet people from across the globe.



Whilst the thought of this really excited me, it also daunted me because I'm not the most confident person and integrating with new people was a challenge. I was also in quite a unique position as I was the only student from my university who studied in Verona for the first semester, so I was thrown into the deep end and was expected to find my own way forward. However, I pushed myself to get past this and I made loads of friends not only from across Europe but from all over the world.

One of the main advantages of having such a diverse friendship group was the opportunities we all had to share our cultures between each other. Not only did we discover the Italian culture as a big group, regularly going out for 'aperitivo' and Italian food, but we were also able to cook food from our own cultures, share our music tastes, talk about our traditions and share photos and our experiences as students from our native countries. Furthermore, having a larger friendship group made travelling more enjoyable and this was something we did regularly. It was an amazing experience as I've now come out the year abroad not only more knowledgeable about the Italian culture, but about other cultures too.



Of course, during my time in Verona I didn't just integrate with international students but also British students who were here on their Erasmus. Whilst it was great to have friends from different countries, I found having British friends quite comforting because we were able to support each other. One thing that I really liked about the year abroad is the fact that you are thrown into the experience with people that you usually wouldn't integrate with – some of my best friends from this experience are completely different to me yet have been invaluable throughout my time here and are certainly friends for life.

I was very lucky that I developed a close relationship with my flatmates in Verona. I lived with a Spanish girl and an Italian girl and they are both now two of my best friends. This was a particular advantage for me as I study Italian and Spanish at home, so I was able to practise both languages at home which was invaluable. If I was to give any advice about going on the year abroad, it would be to live with international students. You are forced to speak other languages and I personally believe I gained a lot more from my time in Italy because I spent so much time at home with two girls from different countries to me.



Stage 3 – The Italian University System

It's safe to say I'm very accustomed to the British university system, having now been a British student for 3 years. I was expecting a culture shock when I started studying at the University of Verona, but not to the extent that I experienced when expectation became a reality.

The Erasmus welcome day gave us a flavour of life in an Italian university. From the moment I stepped in I realised that I was very far from Warwick and the next 8 months were certainly going to be a very different experience. To start with, the university itself is very relaxed, from timetabling to attendance everything was much more independent, which of course has its benefits but as a student trying to negotiate this in a foreign language, it didn't feel that way. One of the great things about this year is that we were given the freedom to study whatever we wanted, provided the amount of credits we received in Italy equalled what we would be studying in the UK. This gave me the opportunity to try completely different subjects such as education, religion and history, but of course, with this freedom came the issues of timetabling, negotiating with professors and trying to balance completely different subjects at a degree level. Whilst these issues existed, once they were overcome it was great to be able to study such diverse subjects. For me, a highlight was being able to study religion – a subject I loved at A level, but obviously from a very different perspective in Italy.

Before coming to Verona, I was told that the exams in Italy are very different to what I am used to in England. Whilst in England the focus is not only on exams but also coursework, the Italian system is very much exam-focused. Furthermore, whilst I am used to sitting written exams and only taking an oral exam which is purely designed to test linguistic ability, in Italy the majority of exams are oral, regardless of the subject. Another huge difference between the Italian and English exam set up is the organisation – whilst in England everything is scheduled, even oral exams have a separate timetable, in Italy you are expected to turn up in the morning and wait for your name to be called, even if that means waiting for hours. The fact you also have to sign up for exams adds to the disorganised feel of the university, but on the plus side, you have multiple attempts at all exams which means you're able to pick your timetable and also retake any exams which don't go so well. Always think positive!

As Erasmus students in Verona, we were lucky enough to be able to take language classes in the CLA (Centro Linguistico di Ateneo). This meant that we were able to have Italian language lessons in a reasonably small class, similar to what we are used to in the UK. The classes focussed on all aspects of the language - speaking, reading, writing, listening and grammar which was great because whilst the standard university lectures obviously helped our comprehension and vocabulary, it was very easy to slip up on the productive language, especially the grammar. Furthermore, after completing the CLA courses you are given a certification which is recognised across Europe so it's a great way to prove you are a particular level in the language.

All in all, the university was certainly an aspect of my time in Italy which I found challenging, mainly because of the stark differences in the Italian system compared to the British. However, the academic challenges I have had and overcome here in Italy will set me in good stead for my final year and have certainly made me appreciate my home university far more than I did before!

Stage 4 – Travelling

Travelling was definitely one of my priorities as a year abroad student. I wanted to make the most of living in a new country, one which I had only travelled to once before.

Of course, this not only helped my cultural awareness and understanding of the diversity of Italy, but also my language skills.

Bolzano



Vatican City

Travelling has many benefits – by travelling to more regional areas away from the main touristic cities, you are forced to speak the language as English isn't as widely spoken. You are also forced to use different vocabulary in order to navigate your way through the

cities, understand the transport systems and integrate with the locals. Furthermore, the places of interest in such cities gave explanations and tours in Italian. So of course, I could take advantage of this and learn the language in a more relaxed setting.

Another benefit of travelling within a country is of course the cultural immersion. It goes without saying that Italy has huge cultural diversity, not only between the north and south but simply in different regions. Each main city has its own regional dish, its cultural heritage, its traditions and its dialect. Whilst these things can obviously be studied from a classroom, the best way to learn is practically, by experiencing them yourself.

Pompei



Mantua

This year I have mainly travelled across the north of Italy. I am very lucky that Verona is well connected, and I can take trains or busses to almost anywhere. The transport in Italy is also a lot cheaper than the UK, so I took advantage of this and tried to travel as much as possible. I have been to bigger tourist cities such as Milan, Venice and Florence but I have also visited smaller, lesser-known cities such as Trento, Bolzano and Mantua. It surprised me how different each city was, the cultural diversity I heard about before coming to Italy was definitely true and it was great to be able to compare and contrast each new city I visited.

Without a doubt, my highlight day-trip during my year abroad was to Padova. Situated only a 45-minute train journey from Verona the city was stunning, full of history and things to see. Of course, it helped that I visited the city during the glorious sunny weather we had at the beginning of my time in Italy, but it's definitely a city I want to visit again and one I would recommend to anyone travelling in Italy.



Padova



Lake Garda



Rome

Top Tips for the Year Abroad

Now I am coming to the end of my time in Verona, I feel it's time to reflect on the 9 months I have spent abroad in Italy. I can't deny that the year abroad has been one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life, but upon reflection, the claims are true – it's definitely the most rewarding.

The year abroad is a learning experience – you will be thrown into situations which are uncomfortable, scary and challenging but overcoming them is the best feeling and it certainly builds your confidence and character.

A year ago, I was dreading the year abroad – it's something that I knew was coming as I picked to study a languages degree, but I put it to the back of my head, avoiding it at all costs until I had no choice but to face it. Now, a year later, I am so pleased that I faced my fears and moved abroad, and I'm proud of what I've achieved. I've met some amazing people, travelled to some amazing destinations and made memories which I'll never forget. The fear is worth it – I'd certainly do it all again.

So, with this in mind, here are some top tips for the year abroad based on my own experience living in Verona:

1. **Explore your local area** – whilst it's great to go travelling around the country in which you're living, it's also important to become an expert in your own city. Take advantage of the fact that you're living in a completely different city for a year and explore the areas which are less well known. Find cafés off the beaten track and really get a feel for the place, after all, you may as well feel like a local!
2. **Be brave with your food choices** – It's easy to stick with what you know, use the local supermarket and cook what you would do if you were at home. However, each country has its own cuisine and you'll probably find that each region or city has its own dishes. Try them, however crazy they sound. That way you can recommend them to others or at least say you've tried! What's more, even if you don't like it, you'll have a funny story to tell afterwards.
3. **Learn to cook!** – From my own experience here in Italy, I have learnt how the Italians cook some of the dishes we love in the UK, but of course, properly. For example, a carbonara without cream (which tastes MUCH better!). Take advantage of friends from the local area and ask them to show you how they cook some of the dishes you love, then you can go back home as a proper chef from your area and wow your friends!
4. **Push yourself** – The year abroad is going to throw many challenges at you. It will encourage you to do things that you usually wouldn't dream of, but definitely push yourself out of your comfort zone! The feeling of achievement afterwards is fantastic, and you never know, you may discover things about yourself that you never knew.
5. **Speak the language** – Whilst this seems obvious, if you are living in a particularly touristic area then it is likely that people will try and take advantage of your English. Don't let them! You're in the country to learn the local language so make

sure you push yourself to speak it at every opportunity. It's scary at first but the rewards are invaluable – you can do it!

N.B. All photos are my own