

2008

## No Mountain Too High

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# Journeyer's Journal: 2008

## No Mountain Too High

by Sabrina Jones

It may seem like you can fit the totality of an individual's international program experience into one sentence, one paragraph, one essay, but it just can't be done. The worth of a year abroad can't be measured in the number of pictures taken, countries visited, passport stamps acquired, even people traveled with. A year abroad isn't about the dozens upon dozens of weekends of travel; if anything, it's about the one big journey that encompasses the entire year from start to finish. It's the journey that jumpstarts the next journey: going back home. At this point, though, home (at least the notion I once had of home) seems more foreign to me than that of packing a small rucksack and traveling to multiple countries within a three-day span. The very natures of home, family, and normalcy have been redefined during my year abroad.

When I first submitted my application for the Heidelberg International Program, I had all the doubt in the world seated in the crevices of my heart. I had seen pictures of former "Heidelbergers". I had heard the stories. I didn't fit the mold. Initially, I had figured I would end up in the Florence Program. And why not? I love art and music and pasta, so Italy seemed the obvious choice for me. However, it is for that very reason that I defied my own convention and decided upon Heidelberg. "Learn German, why not?" I laughed to myself. When my parents asked me how I felt about my chances of getting accepted, I told them that it was unlikely that I would be lucky enough to be chosen from the massive amounts of applicants to reside in the hallowed halls of Moore Haus. My friends

and I had sworn not to tell one another which programs we had applied for until we had submitted the official application, so as not to affect each other's decisions. But then, the day came that nearly every Pepperdine student simultaneously loves and dreads. At 6 o'clock on an unassuming autumnal evening, the two sizes of envelopes were distributed to the mailboxes of International Program applicants. If your envelope was the smaller, rectangular standard, you could know in an instant that you hadn't been granted immediate entry into the program of your choice. A large, affirming manila envelope was the other possibility. I had barely entered the Sandbar when I encountered masses of joyful exclamations, high-fives, and floods of tears. Which would be the response that I would elicit? I nervously twisted the lock on my mailbox. It popped open with greater ease than I had expected. There, folded over and wedged into my mailbox was the answer I had been dreaming of since I had first heard about Pepperdine University's International Programs: a big envelope signifying my acceptance as a student in the Heidelberg 2006-2007 program. I called my parents immediately and knew no other response except to start screaming in excitement. After a few minutes of squealing, I composed myself enough to inform them, that not only was I intending to stay for the year, but I also had my heart set on staying to travel over Christmas vacation.

Over the next few weeks, excitement increased as I heard about other friends of mine who were accepted into their programs of choice. Online groups sprung up to announce to the world just who the chosen ones would be in every international program location. I saw the Heidelberg 2006-2007 group grow larger and larger with every day. I would love to say it was exciting to see all the faces of my fellow classmates who I would be living with in the coming year, but instead, I was filled with apprehension. I didn't know half

the people and a great deal of the people I did know were only casual acquaintances. How were we going to fit together? We were too random a group. We had too many girls. We had too many different types of people. Still, my faith would patiently reassure me: all of you will be brought together for a reason.

In the second semester we started our German language classes and international program orientation sessions. These were extra attempts by the university to catalyze bonding amongst the group before we were shipped halfway across the world for eight months. And they helped, don't get me wrong, but nothing (not even the freshman dorm experience) can prepare a person for the lifestyle that becomes adopted abroad. The semester faded into summer and we were given a final four months to accrue enough money to last us through a substantial amount of our travels. Summer sun faded and September rolled around. Our group flight from LAX to Paris and then to Frankfurt was the first hurdle we conquered as a group, but not by any means, the last. With missed flight connections and people scattered, we had to come together and organize ourselves within the same 24-hour time span in which people first learned one another's names. It was chaos, but it also gave us a staggering first look at the inner-strength our group possessed as individuals coming together. From that day forward we were catapulted into a frenzy of ice-breakers and bonding situations meant to solidify our status as a Moore Haus community.

After all the preliminary orientations, we were finally able to set out on our own for our first weekend of travel adventure. My friend Pam and I were dead-set against going to one of the German cities that "everyone else was going to" in groups of five, six, or seven

people. So, the two of us decided to go in the opposite direction and visit Hamburg for the weekend. We boarded our first German train with all the optimism in the world and it wasn't until we stepped off and in the middle of Hamburg's Red Light district (which apparently rivals that of Amsterdam's) that our traveling innocence was obliterated. The rest of the our day included: a visit to the most frightening modern "art" museum I've ever entered, a boat ride through the port that was so unsafe that the tour guide started panicking, and culminated in running away from hordes of bachelor party participants who tried to follow us back to our hostel. Needless to say, subsequent trips yielded less-frightening and dangerous adventures. Every weekend of travel, however, it seemed would have an underlying theme or message that was revealed through various adventures, strangers met along the way, and just by virtue of getting to know my weekend travel companions better.

The most profound of my weekend trips, however, was not over a weekend at all. It was a trip in which I traveled alone for an entire week. For Christmas Break, I opted to stay in Europe and take advantage of the opportunity to have more time to explore the realms of the European Union and beyond. After Christmas, but before New Year's, I had a week that I had designated for exploring Switzerland. Unparalleled in its winter beauty, I was enthralled to soak up the snow and immaculate Swiss charm that I had heard so much about. Three days into my journey, I found myself on trains destined for the Jungfrauoch, Europe's highest mountain peak. It was a picturesque ascent and for me it was also the most symbolic of any trip I had made over the semester or break until then. Standing at 11,333 feet tall, it redefines the physically obtrusive. The trip to the top required multiple trains, a handful of changeovers, and the most foreboding obstacle of

all: a swipe of my Visa card. Despite all my sacrifices to reach the top, I knew it was a journey that I needed to make. And it was a journey that I needed to make by myself. Ever since high school, I have felt like life had been throwing curve balls my way. College seemed to be yet another series of hurdles that I alone was hindered by. But, then something miraculous had happened. The first long weekend of travel we were allowed in the fall, I had to sacrifice a trip to Prague after catching a horrendous strain of the flu. I was in an empty house while everyone dispersed throughout Europe, discovering new cities and countless natural wonders. It was that weekend, however, that I came to terms with the events of the past and wrote myself into a realization of my own strength and potential. I was strong enough to overcome the past. A mere mountain was a cakewalk in comparison to the limitations I had been placing upon myself for so long. All of these thoughts swirled around in my mind as we steadily chugged towards the summit. Before I could believe it, I was outside of the train and standing at the "Top of Europe". I had made it to the top. I breathed in the thin air around me and smiled as the sun shone down upon me. It had been a long journey, one that I had thought would never be granted to me. And yet, there I was. I had made it to the top of a mountain that most people could never dream of conquering. And I had done it all by myself. I had traveled through Italy and around Switzerland and met countless travelers like myself. In the end, however, it all came down to me and what I personally could achieve. I now have some of the most phenomenal pictures of a clear, winter day at the highest point in Europe to show for it. It was a day that afforded me clarity to see countries hundreds of miles away and the clarity to see just what I had accomplished in such a short time. College saved my life, Heidelberg changed it, and everything and everyone in-between has illuminated it.

