

Jane E. Smith

According to legend, Greek courier Pheidippides covered 150 miles in two days and ran the final 26.2 miles from the town of Marathonas to Athens to announce the news that Greece had emerged victorious over Persia in a war. Thus the marathon was born, and each November, runners from all over the world make a pilgrimage to Athens to experience the original course. This semester, I trained for the Athens Marathon, and ran it on Sunday, November 13th. The race day itself was a celebration, but there was a ton of work leading up to it, all of which took place in Florence. Marathon training calls for a long run of twelve to twenty miles once a week, with three shorter runs of five to nine miles each, in between. The long runs often happened on school nights, since I didn't want to miss the opportunity to travel, and as a result, I spent many, many hours out on the streets of Florence, in the parks, as far as the Stadium in one direction and Piazzale Michelangelo in the other. The more I saw of Florence, the more my runs expanded beyond an extreme physical challenge: training for the marathon was a cultural journey, an internal search for present-mindedness, and a search for creative voice since I was journaling and writing poetry throughout the whole process.

Spending autumn afternoons running for upwards of three hours is not the usual practice of students on their semesters abroad, but I loved every minute of it. My best memories of Florence are of what I saw on foot: stopping to talk to locals, either to ask or to give directions, the heightened smells of the river, the leaves, and the food vendors, my observations of the rhythm of daily life in the park Le Cascine, getting lost and not caring, and the reward of the view from the top of the hill—it never got old. Though in my pursuit of long distances, I explored quiet neighborhoods and side streets, my favorite place to run was the network of paths at Le Cascine, because there I felt like a part of the

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active community in Florence. Downtown, it's easy to get singled out as the American running, and I often felt discouraged when I was sweaty and everyone else was dressed up. But at Le Cascine, people of all ages were rollerblading obstacle courses, dog-walkers were everywhere, children and adults whizzed by on bikes, older couples were out for a stroll, and I was by no means the only runner. On cold days, I could stop at a stand for a quick espresso, and on hot ones, I could rest in the shade with a Gatorade and watch the scene. I get the feeling that people go out in the park to see and be seen, to spend time with their friends, but not really to interact with strangers. In the United States, it's considered polite to say hi when you pass another runner, or to smile and wave at the very least. At Le Cascine, I learned very quickly to keep to myself, but the environment was by no means hostile. Working out just did not seem to be a social activity, and I was perfectly happy to observe.

Probably the biggest thing Italian culture has taught me, though, after hours and hours of running is, ironically, how to rest. Italians embrace leisure time, and don't think ten steps ahead to the next task when they have a little time off. So much of my physical energy this semester was spent running, and so much emotional energy was spent motivating myself to run, that the restful moments really stood out in a way I've never experienced before. What I learned, though, through all of it, is that I don't have to take a twenty-mile run to earn a break. It can be as simple as drinking a cup of coffee, or reading something enjoyable for an hour, but the way Italians live has taught me to work when you're working, but then stop when you're stopping, and you'll be a lot healthier, happier, and more balanced for it. Back in the United States, I plan to put that into practice every day.