

It first happened on a bus.

Just a few weeks after arriving in Florence, I hopped on the 17 around Via Sirtori for the first time to make my way into town. The seats were all occupied, but there was plenty of standing room, so as the bus rattled and rocked along the uneven pavement, I took my place near the center, swaying with each turn of the huge vehicle. At the first stop, two people got on, an old Italian couple. Then a few young women at the next stop. Then some more people at the next. With each successive stop, the space around me in the center grew tighter and more compact. By the time we hit the stop on Vialle dei Mille, the bus was full — hardly any room to turn around. Too bad for anyone else trying to take this bus, I thought to myself. This bus couldn't handle any more passengers. At the next stop, maybe 15 people flagged down our bus. They were just going to have to wait for the next one, I thought. Oh, how naïve I was.

The 15 people — it might as well have been 20 — crammed, pushed and squeezed into the bus's three entrances. Maybe a few people got off, but we had obviously gained a great deal of company. The space around me tightened some more, my tiny circle of personal space receding. To my disbelief, the same thing happened at the next stop. Ten more people — somehow, someway — packed into every little crevice, pushing me ever closer to the people around me. I strained my neck to view the back of the bus and saw men, women, and children disappear into the mass and join our herd of city goers. I just didn't understand where they were putting people back there. There was no more room.

At the next stop, I was jostled and twisted as a wave of people exited, only to be followed by 25 more people getting on the bus. I turned around to let someone pass by and found myself face to face with a breathtakingly gorgeous woman. Back then I still suffered from the delusion that I would be able to woo an Italian girl during my stay here. Forced together by an impossibly overcrowded bus on a shared journey, we stood only centimeters apart. I stammered a feeble "Ciao." She just rolled her eyes at me and got off at the next stop.

I didn't confront Italian culture. Italian culture confronted me. It first happened on a bus. It surrounded me. It enclosed me. It made me uncomfortable. It made my body temperature rise. It made me rethink a preconceived notion. It made me thankful I wasn't claustrophobic. But after accepting these discomforts, after overcoming my apprehensions, I found something beautiful, something I had never seen before, something I was in fact incapable of seeing before then.

It was time for me to get off the bus. When I did it was like stepping into Florence for the very first time, as if that bus had taken me there and dropped me off. The fresh, cold January air was a relief to my lungs and my body welcomed the freedom of movement. Despite how out of place I truly was — a kid used to the privacy and comforts of his own car, a kid who had never been away from Los Angeles for more than a few weeks at a time suddenly and solidly existing in a foreign environment halfway round the world — at the moment, I felt like I belonged. I felt a greater understanding of myself and the world that surrounds me.

I've taken the bus hundreds of times since then. And in many ways, I am still on that bus and always will be.