

6 [PERSEVERANCE]

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"Allons-y! I only expected to learn the French language and the basics of French culture, but I found out I learned the most about myself in my attempt to adapt to a culture that is so different from mine."



Ici! Ici! C'est Montferrand! This chant meaning "Here! Here! Is Montferrand!" is one of the chants proclaimed during ASM Clermont Auvergne Rugby matches in support of ASM.

Imagine yelling that out with 50,000 people in the city-center of Clermont-Ferrand during the European Rugby Final. Then, weeks later, imagine doing the same, this time with 30,000 people who decided to go to Place de Jaude again, despite a torrential downpour.

I did not know Clermont had essentially one of the top two rugby clubs in all of Europe. Rugby is king in Clermont-Ferrand and soccer (football) is secondary. It turns out Clermont lost both the European Rugby Championship AND the French Rugby Championship. I witnessed both losses on a giant screen in Place de Jaude. I never imagined the emotions on the faces of fans after each loss – defeated but hopeful for the following season.

During and after each game, I was able to interact with other ASM fans alike. I felt like I was a true Clermontois (someone from Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne region of France). What had not clicked until those moments, despite having already lived months there, was the similarity between the Clermontois and myself.

The struggles to win the rugby matches were not the only embodiments of the resiliency of the Clermontois I noticed. The majority of people do not know where Clermont-Ferrand is located. I bet it would be safe to say many people know about Bleu d'Auvergne. Bleu d'Auvergne would not be internationally distinguished if not for the dedication and toil put into making it. I would say a majority of people, who operate a vehicle have heard the name Michelin before. Michelin is a company that is international and has existed since 1889. Then there is renowned thinker Blaise Pascal and Gaul leader Vercingetorix. Pascale was instrumental in math and philosophy and Vercingetorix is a name of pride for the French – one of few leaders who successfully impeded Caesar's Roman Empire.

No, I did not make it to rugby finals, develop a renowned recipe, sustain a company through economic collapses, contribute to the intellectual

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community or stop an army. What I gained from my study abroad was a sense of adaptability. Prior to studying "à l'étranger" in Clermont, essentially all of my friends, who had previously studied abroad, painted a picture of study abroad that was idealistic. I did not expect integrating myself into foreign society to be a cakewalk, but my first two weeks adjusting to Clermont were the most stressful weeks of my life.

From not having Internet for a week to not knowing how to register to the university, obtain an ID and enroll in classes, my problems compounded upon each other. I did not have the same support system or wealth of knowledge I had back in Norman to help me cope with my situation.

Long story short, it took me two weeks to realize my level of enjoyment while in Clermont-Ferrand depended upon my ability to accept my situation and make the best of it.

By the end of my study abroad, I had met other international students and local French students, who I remain in touch with almost on a daily basis. I would not have been able to make these international connections if I had stayed in my dorm room or did not get out of my bubble. Relationships take work and I received what I put into each relationship – friends for life.



Another important time of growth for me, which pushed me outside of my comfort zone on numerous occasions, was my two-week spring break. I pushed my body to the limits of exhaustion for the sake of exploring. From staying with strangers in AirBnBs and learning to trust other travelers in hostels, I had to grow comfortable with the fact I would be traveling in countries where I had not visited before, with no Internet for Google maps, staying with strangers and knowing I would have to eat alone on many occasions. That last part was the most terrifying part of traveling alone.

During those two weeks, I found out so much about myself. I discovered I love to use paper maps as opposed to directions on a phone. I think it is a skill people have taken for granted. I confirmed that I despised eating alone. The reason for that is because I see experiences like study abroad as experiences that need to be shared together. Shared experiences give you another perspective on what you did. Most importantly, though, I discovered I could successfully make it through two weeks in four different countries, learn something from each country and feel more liberated to do it again.

Though I was traveling, my heart remained in Clermont-Ferrand. I missed the quirks of a small, modernized French city. From sitting at a bar and having a drink with friends while speaking French to the occasional cross-examination from a local because I looked different, I realized I began to understand some distinguishing characteristics between French and American society. I consider

the pace of life in America a hectic, results-oriented one. In France, many people, particularly students, sit and talk to their friends at a café or they go to the park and just relax.

Little by little, I chipped away at the frustration that took hold of me at the beginning of my stay in France. I overcame my insecurities of pondering the consequences of “what ifs” and I just did. I let myself worry about what could have happened AFTER I took action. Granted, I never did anything questionable, but I had held myself back because I was too scared of the consequences.

The highlight of my study abroad was when I went paragliding on the day after finals. This, like so much during my stay, did not come without its own problems. My friends and I had previously scheduled three different days to paraglide off the volcano, Puy-de-Dôme. Each time, it was canceled due to unfavorable weather. Finally, three days before I was to leave Clermont, paragliding worked out.

Persistence. That is all it took for me to make my experience in Clermont one I will never forget. I think about Clermont almost every day. I made mistakes, but I learned from each of them. I found a lesson in everything I did. I put in effort to make friends and memories. I almost gave up after those first two weeks, but I am glad I did not.