



Veronica

from Brampton

to

Italy

“How do you measure a year?”

A year could be measured in 12 months, or 52 weeks. Or even in 365 days, or as we all famously know; five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes. You could measure a year in the change of the seasons, or by the countdown on your phone for this year's New Years party. Maybe you measure your year by the number of morning coffee cups you've collected on your way to work, by the early alarms, or by the long wait for summer break after a tiresome exam season.

A regular person might look at one year's time in this way. But, as exchange students, our year can be measured by so many different things. We measure this year by the number of new smiles we meet, or by the number of pins we have collected on our blazers. We can measure our year by the new landmarks we've visited, and the people we got to visit them with. We measure this year by the number of new verbs we've had to learn to conjugate, and the progress of our language skills. This year can be measured by the facetime calls home, the “I'll see you soon's, the crying fits, or more importantly the laughing fits. Above all, I think we can measure this year by the amount of love we give to everything we set our hearts to do.

Every year eventually comes to an end, most often signified with a countdown on New Year's Eve and a kiss shared with someone you love. But this year will live on forever. There is nothing that can signify its end or beginning. Although I know that in just a few short months I will find myself in the Toronto Pearson airport, struggling with a heavy heart after leaving the country I just put my all my heart into, or even worse, struggling with three over packed suitcases filled with the memories from this year. The person I have become, the people I have met and the lessons I have learned during this year will live on for the rest of my life.

These past three months have been filled with so many new adventures and discovery. I've seen so many new places and explored some of the most breathtaking parts of Italy. In the beginning of March my Rotary District took us on a trip down south to Puglia which many people say is the most beautiful part of Italy - I have no arguments against this. We spent 5 sunny days exploring some of the most unique parts of Italy.



We began our trip by visiting the Castel del Monte, which is a very famous castle built in the 1240's. It is located on the top of a hill in Andria, Italy. This castle has the most beautiful view of the surrounding cities and forests below. The architecture of this castle is known to be quite unique; many people refer to its look to be similar to a honey comb. This castle is so famous it is on the one cent Italian euro!

The following day we visited a historic town in Italy called Alberobello, which translates into "beautiful tree". This town is famous for its Trulli, which is one of the most unique examples of Italian architecture. This town is filled with houses built in the 14th century. They are small round houses with white walls and a grey cone shaped roof. Each roof has a symbol on it which is the symbol of the family that lives inside. Some of these symbols are used to communicate with other families. Now in 2019, this town is a huge tourist stop in Italy. Luckily it still has its charm.



On Sunday we spent the day venturing around Ostuni, Italy's whitewashed old town. This city is famous for looking like the streets of Greece. My friends and I got lost in the winding streets as we wanted to see it all and take every turn that we were presented with. The adventure was supposed to end with a 3:30 meeting time that we were not going to make as we were deep in the streets of this gorgeous city and quite literally did not know the route to get back. After a few "*mi scusi, dov'è centro?*" Excuse me, how the hell can we get to centre? and some competitive sprinting, we found ourselves at the bus stop with everyone waiting and ready. At least we had a good time.

Good thing all that running didn't tire us out, because that night we got to celebrate the Italian Carnivale! Carnivale is the celebration before 40 days of fasting. It is the last banquet of the people and a very important part of Italian culture. Luckily, we got to celebrate it down south in Putignano. The entire city was blocked off just for this celebration. There were thousands of people walking around and following tradition by wearing masks and crazy costumes.

We watched gigantic Carnivale floats pass by us during the parade, we ate a ton of food, and we danced in the city centre with strangers until we couldn't anymore. One of the biggest parts of Carnivale, and personally my favourite, is the celebration with confetti. Basically, it is an excuse to throw confetti at anyone you'd like, which is exactly what we did. The streets were covered in confetti and so were we as we pranced around with our masks on.



In the morning, after a good sleep, we got to visit a very historic part of Italy called Matera. It is a city built into a canyon and often referred to as 'the underground city'. It is known to be one of the oldest continually inhabited settlements in the world. It is often compared to the views one would find in Israel. This year it was titled the "European capital of culture".

We spent the day touring around the city, seeing how people used to live and what their lifestyle was like. Seeing Matera was truly an eye-opening experience. When you think of Italy, normally sights of Matera are not what you would think of, but I truly feel that it is one of the most important things to see to truly understand Italy.



The last day of the trip began with an early wake up time and a rush to pack our bags before we headed out for the day. Before catching our flight that afternoon, we got to explore Polignano a Mare which is, by far, my favourite thing that I have gotten to see in all of Italy. It is a town of Greek origins, situated on a deep gorge overlooking the Adriatic sea on a steep rocky cliff. I have no words that can truly do justice to describe just how beautiful Polignano a Mare is, so I will include some pictures.



After five days in paradise, I was back to school. But luckily not for too long. Towards the end of March, my class and I took a trip to Venice! This experience is one that I am truly grateful for. Spending three days in the beautiful Venice with my amazing class went much better than I expected it to. Three days of strictly Italian allowed me to realize just how capable I am with my language skills. I am starting to feel really confident in my Italian skills and not speaking English for 72 hours was never something that I thought I would be capable of, but apparently I am, and with no problems too.

Google translate was not needed as we travelled deep into the streets of Venice eating delicious foods by the water and riding boats to visit all the different small islands. My class and I have grown much closer since this trip and I can now confidently say that I have some lifelong friends. I am so glad for this experience to really travel Venice in-depth and get to know it.



Although I am very grateful for the big trips I have gotten to take, many of the most important parts of my exchange have been in the little experiences;



Every two weeks, our local soccer team plays an at-home game at their stadium. I have been to every single game and would not miss one for the world. Before coming to Italy, I was not a soccer fan at all, but the Cremonese team has converted me. The fans are absolutely crazy. I truly feel like I belong while I am standing in a crowd of hundreds of supporters singing along to the chants and cheering for my favourite team with my best friends while Old Italian men curse out the opposing team in strict dialect.

In early march I got to visit La Scala in Milano with my two closest friends, Maria and Marcello. La Scala is one of the most famous opera houses in the world; many of the finest singers around the world have performed at La Scala. We got to watch an amazing show performed by a German opera singer and amazing Italian ballet dancers. Many people dream of visiting La Scala and I truly believe this was an amazing experience of Italian culture.

As the weather has been getting nicer, I have been taking very many bike trips alone. The city where I live in Italy has many biking trails deep into the forest. Many days I have biked over thirty kilometres and decided I should probably turn back if I want to make it home for dinner. There is much to see and a lot of beautiful nature to experience. As I am biking down these paths I truly feel at home. I have discovered many forested trails, rivers and ponds and even a huge beach, which is one of my favourite places to go here in Cremona. My friend Maria and I even made the trek up to the beach with backpacks filled with food and blankets for the perfect beach picnic.

This year we got 10 days off school for Easter vacation. Everyone has told me that this was the right year to come to Italy, because normally they only have three days off school. I took advantage of these 10 days and experienced as much as I could cram in. Unfortunately, my physical ability levels were running low as I twisted my knee on the very first day of vacation and was put on crutches. But I did not let this stop me as I got to experience a complete and traditional Italian Easter celebrated with family. I got to visit a very beautiful lake in the north of Italy called Lago Di Como, and I got to visit some of my best friends and explore new cities with them.

After 9 long months in Italy I feel like I have thousands of stories to tell of the thousands of adventures I have been on. Although the date of my departure comes closer and closer by the day, I still have much to look forward to. There are many more adventures awaiting me in this beautiful country that I now call my home. Two years ago, I never imagined myself travelling to Italy, now here I am sitting in the park, by the river, under the hot Italian sun, feeling like I truly belong here and dreading my departure home.

I have fallen in love with Italy and I have fallen in love with Italian culture. I truly do feel like Italy is now a part of who I am. I have been welcomed into Italian families and been shown the true strength of Italian love. Although I will be saying goodbye, it will not be forever.

Years from now, when I am reminded of my year abroad, I will remember the pain, the hardships, the uncertainty and the loneliness but only for a second. Then I will remember the laughter, the joy, the days spent jumping into the freezing water of Sorrento, getting lost in Venice without a care in the world, exploring historic castles in Naples, getting caught in a rain storm in Pisa, the touch of snow in the Dolomiti mountains, the satisfaction of learning a new language, and I will remember the love shown to me by all of the amazing people I have spent this time with.

I am so grateful for this experience and would like to thank Rotary District 7080 for giving me this wonderful opportunity and choosing the perfect country for my year abroad and all the things it has brought me. I would like to thank Rotary District 2050 for believing in me and truly showing me the love this country has to offer. This has been an experience I will never forget and that has taught me so many new things about myself and the world. I am not sure where I am going, but I sure know where I have been.

Con affetto,

Veronica