

A Sit-Down with Ms. Francois

- Meredith Piela

I have been studying French since the 7th grade. When I am in college, I would like to study abroad, most likely during my junior year. In order to get some information on studying abroad, I decided to interview someone who had done it. The person who I chose is my French teacher, Mary François.

Q: How long did you study abroad for (semester, year)?

A: I studied for one semester (Fall).

Q: Where did you go to study?

A: I studied in Aix-en-Provence in southern France.

Q: Did you go by yourself, or were there other people you knew going to the same place?

A: I went on my own.

Q: When did you go?

A: I went during the first semester of my junior year at university.

Q: Why did you decide to study abroad?

A: I always knew that I wanted to study abroad. When applying to colleges, one of the things I looked at was abroad programs. My research paper for AP English 11 was on study abroad. I've always been someone who loves to travel, and I also have two older brothers who studied abroad. They both went even further than Europe (Tanzania and Tibet) so I thought for a time about going somewhere exotic, but I couldn't give up a chance to live in France. I was a French major, so it made sense, but I also already knew that I loved the country. I had visited my high school exchange partner in southern France and loved it. That's why I chose to be in the south rather than in Paris.

Q: What was your favorite part of the experience and why?

A: I'm torn between the day to day life in the south and the possibility of travel. I loved just experiencing the daily life in Aix. Whether it was dinner with my host family, a coffee at a cafe in old town or exploring the various markets, Aix is a very beautiful city. It's one thing to learn about a different culture, but something else to live it and experience the differences in life, school, and cultural points of view. I also loved the ability to travel. There are many villages to visit in Provence, and I also made my way to different places in France. However, most weekends I traveled to different cities throughout Europe (Barcelona, Madrid, Porto, Rome, Athens/Santorini, Munich).

Q: What was your experience like?

A: It was certainly hard at times. And though France's culture isn't terribly different from the U.S., there is still enough of a change to cause a bit of culture shock. You start to miss certain aspects of home whether it's people, foods, and other things you might be used to like activities and sports. Host families are often picked carefully, but you're still living in someone else's

home. My host family didn't have Wifi, and I had to go to an internet cafe in order to Skype friends and family, so that could feel lonely during the week at night. And I remember at the time, it was hard, however the lasting impressions are all very positive. On returning to Tufts, I quickly regretted not staying longer. I missed living in France for months after, and continued to until I moved back two years later! I met one of my best friends while abroad, and I have some of my best memories from those months. And knowing the experiences of my friends in other countries, I know that any experience in a different culture is just as exciting, educational and unforgettable. I had friends in Europe, but also some in China and Egypt, who had an even greater culture shock.

Q: What are three important pieces of advice you would give to someone who wants to study abroad?

A: My first piece of advice is to fully take in your new culture. It's sometimes hard when you're with other Americans to not spend most of your time with them. However, I would highly suggest spending time just at home with the family, meeting local friends (especially if you're in classes with local students) and getting the most of the opportunity. Secondly, I would say to anyone who's nervous about traveling away from what's familiar, that it's certainly worth it. It wasn't my first time traveling, which it may be for some, but I still felt scared about being far for several months. It's hard at first, but if you let yourself experience the first couple weeks, you'll quickly find yourself feeling at home. Thirdly, many students may not be sure about studying abroad because they're worried about class credits, or being away from friends and activities at university. I had some friends who were pre-med who felt that they were unable to take time abroad, however, in my experience; schools will help you find the right program that matches your major and helps with required credits. And I can say from experience that you have three years of university, the whole year is worth it!

Q: Would you recommend studying abroad to students? If so, who (specifically-high school/college students) would you recommend it to?

A: I know that I'm partial to the experience, especially since my passion is French and French culture, but I would highly recommend studying abroad. I think that it can be a great experience for high school students if that student is ready to try and immerse in the culture, which can be hard. I worked with American high school students in France and some of them were looking for more of a vacation with friends, which can be fun, but not as fulfilling. I would definitely advise college students to go abroad. Especially because it's becoming much more popular and universities are very supportive. Many of them have their own programs, or you can find your own and most universities will support most outside companies. My mother was one of the first students to go abroad to Paris in the 70s at Smith and it was very rare! Nowadays, depending on the school, you'll find most of your peers have left campus during junior year.