

Episode 07

Chris Bret-Harte

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah,

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: Today we'll hear from Class of 2020 graduate, Chris Bret-Harte, about what it was like to work as an IP Ambassador, what he gained from that experience, and how to feel at home while abroad. He also has some great advice about going outside of your comfort zone and taking the jump to study abroad, even if it seems scary! Let's jump into our conversation with Chris.

Z: Could you go ahead and introduce yourself to our listeners? Just telling us where home is for you and what did you study at FSU?

Chris (C) : Sure, so my name is Chris, Chris Bret-Harte. I am a recent FSU grad as of this past May 2020. I used to work at IP, that is also recently over. I am from, well I'm from a lot of places but I currently live in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Weston to be specific. And when I was at FSU I studied Economics and got a minor in Italian, Psychology and Business.

Z: And where and when did you study abroad?

C: So I studied abroad in two places in 2017. It was my sophomore year I studied for a month, a summer month in July in London, England and then I did my fall semester of my sophomore year in Florence, Italy.

H: What made you decide to study in two locations? We don't hear that from students a lot but, what was that decision like for you?

C: Hmm well, so originally I had been wondering, not wondering, I sort of had this internal debate between doing the First Year Abroad program which is, I guess for those of you who don't know you do your first, freshman year abroad, Summer, Fall, Spring the whole thing. And I

really wanted to do that but I was also really conflicted because I thought, I don't know, maybe I should be on campus, go to school. So I didn't end up doing it and I actually ended up regretting it a lot. So the next semester I just, I wanted to do it and I wanted to extend it as much as possible. And I also was having, I guess you could tell I'm indecisive, I was debating between London and Florence, I wanted both because I studied Italian in high school but I wanted to live in London because it looked so cool. So I mean I am very, very, very lucky because my parents said "hey, why don't we find a way to make both of them happen?" so that's how it ended up coming about.

H: That's awesome, what do you think you gained from studying in two different locations?

C: Hmm, so I think the coolest part about that is that I was in Europe for about six months I think. So I didn't get to do my full year as my dreams wanted to but I did get to do six months. I was there from July to December practically. So it was just kind of like this whirlwind of different places. I'd be travelling on the weekends from here to there and I got to call a lot of different places home. You know London and Florence and the cool part about that too is that I had a little gap. I had a little gap in between my summer months and my fall semester. It was a month long gap and instead of going home I stayed in Europe and decided to travel around and that was actually one of my favorite parts about it because I got to sort of live this independent lifestyle that I never had, I was 18. So I mean it was awesome to just explore the world and like I said, independently, you know? Do it on my own agenda.

H: That's super cool and I, for those who don't know obviously I've worked with you before Chirs when you were an IP Ambassador and I have always recognized that independence in you and I'm just curious do you think that you gained that independence while you were travelling abroad or is that something you have always had? I'm just curious.

C: That's actually a great question that I think about quite a lot actually. So yah actually, so I was a bit of a shy kid. It was a bit difficult for me to break out of my shell. I moved a lot as a kid so dealing with the culture shock at first was pretty difficult you know and instead of deciding to be very outgoing, trying to make as many friends as possible, I did kind of the opposite and I closed off. So I recognized that in myself and luckily I got the opportunity to say you "Hey, you know what I want to break this, I want to do it." And it's like jumping into freezing water you know, just going you know, "I'm going to go live in Italy, that's what's going to solve it." And that's what I did. And being for instance in a train station and you don't know the language, you're lost, you're starting to panic a little bit you're like "oh my god, oh my god, how do I ask for directions?" And you do it and you know after all of those moments you start to prove to yourself, you're like "Okay I can do things, I can spend a month alone, in Europe traveling around and not be lonely." So yah, I definitely learned that and I took those lessons, and I still take those lessons today.

Z: That's so awesome that you were able to gain that while you studied abroad. You mentioned earlier that London and Florence kind of became like your home while you were there so I'm curious how you went from feeling like you know like that discomfort in the beginning to then coming back and being able to reflect and saying that it was like being home.

C: You mean the discomfort in the beginning of being there?

Z: Yah you know like the discomfort of being abroad and having to deal with the culture shock and things like that, but then when you come back you look back and thinking, no it felt like home when I was there.

C: So I think going into it with the right mentality is important. Going into it going "You know what, I want to be uncomfortable, I want to have these culture shocks, I'm curious." So when you look at it that way it's like "Oh my god, yah I had a really uncomfortable moment at the train station today, I had to ask for directions. That's good, that's what will get me to where I want to be. Into the zone of comfort." So you know even though I was uncomfortable, that was always expected, I wasn't shunning it away, I wasn't like "Ah, I'm uncomfortable." It was a good thing, I was like "Yes, yes, great." And like I said earlier I moved from country to country before, I was born in Costa Rica, raised in Guatemala, Mexico, went to the United States so I always, I sort of was familiar with the process of when you move to a new home you have initial discomfort but that's just part of the whole thing, you can't take it out of the package.

H: So moving forward a little bit, after your study abroad experience you've already mentioned, you were an IP Ambassador, can you tell us why you decided to apply to be an IP Ambassador and a little bit about what the experience was like for you?

C: Sure. So that was probably, apart from studying abroad, it was definitely my favorite part of being in college, the job that I had. I've worked a lot of different jobs but this was one that I was legitimately just very satisfied with, excited about. I mean yah, it was just very rewarding. So I guess the motivation behind it was I got the speeches, that I ended up giving, the talks informing me about studying abroad and they were eventually the ones that convinced me to do it. I always admired the people talking, you know I'm like "Oh my god, you know this person is talking in front of 130 people and they are informing me, they're making me laugh," this and that, I wanted to be like that, and I wanted to see if I was capable of doing that. So that was my motivation and I got the job, thank god and yah it really helped me, like I said earlier, I used to be a bit shy so once you have to talk in front of 200 people, 90 people, 30 people, sometimes they are paying attention and sometimes they're not. I don't know, it kind of forces you a bit out of your shell but I definitely learned how to approach people more I would say.

H: Yah, I think that's such a cool thing about a job like an IP Ambassador, you get that public speaking experience that isn't really common in a lot of jobs, especially like jobs on campus and things like that. So I'm curious, do you think that experience will help you in your future endeavors whether it's career, personal or otherwise?

C: Definitely, I don't know I always had an inclination towards public speaking, an interest, I always wanted to get good at it. So when that job came up I thought this is perfect, this is going to train me, I don't really know what I want to do in terms of my career yet, I did just graduate but I know that speaking to crowds is something that I want that to be a part of so this was the perfect, perfect training for that. Whatever it may be.

Z: So just kind of a fun question but going back to your time abroad, what was your favorite thing about living in London and Florence?

C: Ooo, okay, okay, okay. In London, favorite thing? So something that I really like to brag about, that by the way no one really seems to care, no one seems to be interested when I say this in the speeches, it would be like the joke that always fell flat. But I always had to put it in because I cared about it so much was that a block away from the study center where you live which is in downtown, right in the middle of everything is the first ever YMCA, in the world. Right, and I go to the Y at home, back in Ft. Lauderdale so I was there and it was the first YMCA and they gave me the student discount and it had a chapel, it had a church in it and I think it was the first steam room that I went into or something like that. I went like everyday, I was fascinated. It was the coolest thing ever, it was underground and that was something that I would look forward to everyday, I was like "Oh my god, I get to go to the Y, yes!" I loved that. And then there's a bunch of other things. Specifically that you're right in the middle of the city, so that's London. When it comes to Florence, no doubt about it, there was a restaurant right by where you take classes where the study center is. It was called Pizzicheria, and in Florence they give you these vouchers, I don't know if y'all have talked about it before but its like five bucks, five euros and it gets you a pretty decent meal in a lot of places that they school has partnered with. So I just went here once and you go in and these these, it's like an ice cream store but instead of ice cream flavors it's different pastas and different little side dishes and the guy, Valentino, was the kindest man on earth, he was amazing. I quickly became a regular, it was my favorite place to go and I would walk in I'd go "Valentin!" and he'd go "Caio, Christophoro!" and I felt like I was in Cheers, where everyone knows your name and it was just so fun. Sometimes my friend that I always went with wouldn't come with me and I would sit with the regulars and talk with them a little bit about their life. And I remember the craziest part, one time I made a joke and making a joke in a foreign language is really hard, but people laughed and I was like "Oh my god, yes." and then this random guy, who I had never met before in my life was like "Oh yah that was nice Chris," and I was like "What, how do you know my name?" And that's when I kind of started, I felt at home. And every meal there was amazing, every meal there was AH-mazing. And my Facebook profile picture for a long time was my behind the counter with a giant salami in my hand. So yah that was my favorite part of Florence. Every single afternoon I would find myself in that restaurant.

H: That's great, I imagine you going back sometime and it being this amazing reunion, I hope you get to experience that because I imagine those people absolutely remember you, you are certainly memorable, so I'm sure it would be a fun and exciting homecoming.

C: Yah, the cool thing is this guy has a picture album of his regulars so he takes your picture, prints it and puts it in the album so he has this album that dates back years so yah that's like, I dream of going back. I dream of going back, it would be amazing. The food definitely in Florence is out of this world.

Z: Well we hope you get to go back someday.

C: Hopefully, hopefully. Hopefully soon.

H: Alrighty, well that is all the questions we have for you but I want to give you one more opportunity, I mean you have studied abroad in two locations, you worked in the IP office, you are now an FSU alum. And I want to give you the opportunity for some like final parting words to IP or to students who are interested in studying abroad, like with all of your wisdom what would you tell students who are interested in studying abroad?

C: Uh that's a big question, that's uh. So definitely, it may seem scary, but it's good because it's scary. And if you're ever sort of in a rut, like I was before leaving, first year of college was a bit difficult. If you're ever in a rut and you feel like, I don't know, there's not enough opportunities out there, the world isn't really offering you enough, it's not as exciting, it's probably because you haven't seen enough of the world. So if you're ever kind of down, take a trip, go somewhere, live. Things become more vivid when you go to the other side of the world. Even going to the supermarket, going to the train station, seeing roofs and architecture and streets and smells. It's just all much more intense and it makes you more grateful to be on the planet. So definitely yah, go for it, take the jump, especially if it is scary. The more scary it is to you the more important it needs to be. The more important it is, sorry.

H: That's beautiful. That's great advice. Sometimes we just need to widen our perspective little but to get a better view of what we think we are looking at.

C: Yah thank you so much for reaching out, this was a great time!

Z: Thank you!

Z: Before we disembark, we want to talk more about culture shock.

Culture shock has been widely studied and there are many ways to name the stages but today we are going to talk about the five stages of culture shock: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, adaptation, and re-entry. Maybe in your own travels, you have experienced some of the feelings of culture shock but didn't know quite how to explain it — we hope this will help!

H: The first stage is the honeymoon stage. Soon after you arrive in a new country, just beginning to take in the sights, sounds and smells, everything seems exciting and new! Next you may move into the frustration stage where the novelty of the newness has worn off and you might experience some frustration or anxiety when navigating or finding something to order at a restaurant. This stage won't last forever though, the adjustment stage allows you to create a routine or find a comfortable familiarity with life in your host country. Next, the adaptation stage may bring a sense of belonging and home as you have adapted to your new way of life. The final stage comes when it is time to head home, after the experience of a lifetime. You will have likely changed in some ways through your experience abroad and the places and people you are returning to may feel different than before, this can lead to feelings of re-entry shock. Luckily you have already experienced this process and are hopefully prepared to re-adjust to life at home, while integrating all of your new perspective and experiences, of course!

Now that you know about culture shock, it is important to remember that it is normal and you should still get out there and explore! We have linked an article on our blog and in the show notes that has some great advice for managing culture shock.

<https://www.now-health.com/en/blog/culture-shock-stages/>

H: If you're enjoying our podcast, be sure to tell a friend and leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Visit our blog, nolesabroad.international.fsu.edu/podcast for show notes and photos. For today's episode we'll be posting a photo of Chris with the Italian salami, so be sure to check it out.

Join us for our next episode where we talk to Dr. Whitney Bendeck about what it's like to teach abroad in London and Prague and the benefits of study abroad for faculty and students.

Whitney: ANy student who's interested in study abroad, I absolutely say do it. It will change their life no matter what experience it is they're having. It's so worth it.

Z: Thanks again to Chris for joining us today and to all of our wonderful listeners!

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