

Episode 09

Ali Jones- Valencia FYA, COVID

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.

H: On today's episode, we'll hear from Ali Jones, a First Year Abroad student who studied in Spain during the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters. Due to COVID-19, Ali came home early from Valencia.

At the time Ali left Valencia, Coronavirus had begun sweeping the globe creating health and safety concerns, causing business and industries to close, and governments and universities to make decisions based on limited knowledge. There was no roadmap for decision-making; no benefit of hindsight or experience. No one knew exactly what the best course of action was at that point, which you'll hear Ali talk about. While it was – and still is – a frustrating situation for everyone involved, our colleagues in Tallahassee and at each study center were faced with making difficult decisions to ensure the safety of our community, while considering ever-changing guidance from both the US and local governments.

Z: We know that COVID-19 affected so many of our students, faculty, and staff as it disrupted the Spring semester at home and abroad. We recognize, as Ali will mention, that information was changing from hour to hour and FSU's decisions had to be changed fluidly, with student safety as the top priority. Let's jump into our conversation with Ali, who will talk about her experience being abroad at the start of the pandemic, what she learned from that experience, and how her time abroad was the best time of her life.

H: Thanks so much for being with us today! If you wouldn't mind, could you go ahead and just introduce yourself to our listeners. Just let us know your name, where home is for you, what your major is.

Ali (A): Yah, hi I'm Ali, my major is IMS, interdisciplinary medical sciences and I'm from Virginia.

H: Wonderful, and where did you study abroad?

A: I studied in Valencia, Spain.

Z: Awesome, and we just want to jump in with a question right off the bat, we know that you were a first year abroad student but then unfortunately due to COVID-19 you had to come home early from that experience and so we just want to know just kind of how that experience has shaped you.

A: The actual experience was a little bit stressful because during that time that everything went down we were coming back from Spring Break. We weren't even in class a week before we left to go back to the states. And it was kind of stressful only because no one, absolutely no one knew what was going on. Ignacio, the director didn't know. Alicia, the assistant director didn't know. I felt so bad for him because everybody was going to him asking all these questions and then we had the parents on one side asking us to ask him but then he's asking FSU and no ones getting a clear answer. And then we got the email saying you can stay, FSU Valencia isn't closing but then the same day, like three hours later, Trump closed the borders. So then everybody was relaxing or like decompressing from the stress of not knowing and then Trump closed the borders and then it was up all night trying to get flights home because no one was staying if the borders were closing. Me personally, I had a midterm the next day so I was trying to study while also not really paying attention to that. It was just a lot of anxiety and stress around our physical health but also grades and other things. But it was I think that it really showed me personally that life does really throw you curveballs and so in order to adjust you need to find healthy ways to relieve the stress. Like if you just need to take a minute and bawl your eyes out, do it. Or if you need to take like ten seconds to meditate, well meditating might take a little more than ten seconds, but just meditate and relieve, clear your mind that also helps relieve stress and anxiety.

H: I think you have, you're kind of getting at what we want to talk about. You have such an interesting perspective having lived it, having been there and experienced the uncertainty and not knowing where to go for answers because at that time, no one knew what was happening.

So how do you think being abroad in the early stages of this pandemic has influenced your perspective of the global impact of COVID-19?

A: It was really, really fast. The spread was fast because I was supposed to go to Italy for my Spring Break, I think our spring break was a week ahead of main campus. So I was supposed to go but then COVID hit. We heard a little bit of things going on in China but no one really paid any mind to it, we were like "Oh its in China, they'll fix it, they'll get it." Whatever, right? And then it jumped all the way to Italy and then I'm like "oh crap, that's where I'm supposed to go for Spring Break but I'm like you know what it's fine, I don't care about the money, I'm not trying to get COVID, I'll stay." And then like within, this is all within a two week period, so beginning that second week it was in Spain. And then that meant that people weren't going to school or work but they were going on holidays in Spain which caused it to spread around a lot and then that's when that happened. It just showed me that like, how important it is to be on top of stuff, like the governments need to be on top of stuff because they're affected but the people that are most affected are their citizens and residents in their actual countries.

H: It's such an interesting perspective, and being able to see that from a global scale, being in a country where the spread was coming quickly but it wasn't quite there yet. And getting to see what was happening in Italy and just being in that close proximity I'm sure is just an interesting perspective to be able to see how things have gone since then. And so thank you so much for sharing all of that.

Z: Okay so we also want to talk about your decision to spend your freshman year abroad which we know was probably a big decision that you made. So what was that process like and why did you choose that experience?

A: So going into my college experience, I knew I wanted to do something medical, in the medical field and I knew that anything medical related as a major would be very hard, not hard but like demanding is a better word for it, as you get farther into the major and so I applied to FSU because I had a few friends down in Florida State, or in Florida and we were like why not, it would be cool if we went to school together, but that didn't end up happening, but whatever. And so I got, I applied, I got in, I toured and then my mom, I don't know how she found out about it but she found out about FYA and FSA and so... Actually no that's a lie, I'm sorry, I got admitted through Pathways, that's how we found out. So I got admitted through Pathways so we went and we did a bunch of research. My mom joined a bunch of Facebook groups that were very, very helpful in deciding whether I do or I don't want to do this. I knew I always wanted to study abroad but I didn't know when that would be, or fit into my schedule, or how much it would cost. So when we were looking at Florida State, I hadn't committed yet but I was leaning very much

towards Florida State because of this FYA program because it seemed like so put together and very well developed and it seemed easy enough where you could have this awesome experience for an entire year and then actually have a good experience and learn about the world and culture while you're still taking your pre-reqs and stuff like that and then get a little bit more serious and start into your major more. Not that studying there wasn't serious at all.

Z: Right yah, that makes sense. And how did you choose Valencia?

A: So I had taken five years of Spanish prior to college and I fell in love with the language, the culture, everything and so I was like if I'm going to go abroad I'm going somewhere that speaks Spanish. So there were four choices, London, Florence, Valencia and Panama City, Panama. And I said so that knocks out two, I'll either do Panama City or Spain but then I was like "Well I would like to travel," and I thought that in my head, personally I thought that being in Europe its easy to travel, cheap travel, kind of safer because, in my opinion I don't know a lot about Central America and so I would be a lot more hesitant about traveling there but I had been to Europe once before, in Barcelona, with my family so I kind of knew how to travel and we did a whole Europe thing so I kind of knew how to travel there so I was like its more, I'm more comfortable in Europe so I'll go to Valencia. I had never heard of Valencia before this but I thought it was cool.

H: So when you made this decision that you wanted to go to Valencia, that you wanted to study abroad for an entire year to start your college experience, what was people's reaction when you told them that you were going to start university abroad?

A: There were two categories and they're kind of polarizing a little bit. There was the "oh my god, that's amazing, I didn't know Florida State did this, you're going to have such a great time." And then there was the other side that was like "You're missing out on your freshman year. You're missing out on the freshman experience of being on a new campus and all that stuff." But then I was like "well I kind of get two freshman years out of it because it's not like I'm not going back to main campus, it's just I'm delaying that and having an awesome academic freshman year and then I'll have like a social year when I go back as a sophomore."

H: That's such a great way to look at it and I feel like we hear that same sentiment from a lot of students that do FYA just that idea of I get two experiences, I get two freshman years, one where I get to live abroad and have this totally unique experience and then another where I get to immerse myself in Florida State's campus and get to know that campus culture and everything like that so it's cool that you got to experience that.

Z: And now that you have spent time living abroad, how would you say you adjusted to living abroad and how did you immerse yourself into the local culture while you were there in Valencia?

A: So living abroad was actually awesome, like it's probably the best experience of my entire life. I'm sure you hear that a lot. When we got there we had to go through a bunch of orientation and stuff like that and that was, no offense Ignacio, but kind of boring. And then we got, this woman named Paola come on and started talking about the cultural experience and the culture of Valencia and then obviously the trips but just started talking about what it would actually be like living in Valencia and that for me caught my attention the most because she just painted the city in such a, like highlighted it so much that I was really, really excited to live there. I was obviously scared but at that point I was more excited than scared to live in a foreign city. But yah we just started, you just have to take initiative on yourself to go out to the local markets, they have this huge it's called the Central Mercado and it's a bunch of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, all of that and it's all in this one central place so you can do all of your grocery shopping there. And it's a little bit, no it's about the same price as going to a grocery store but it helped me immerse in the culture because it's not like you can't read what things are in the grocery store but you had to really, really pay attention because they're not labeled. Like some of the stuff would have the same labels as America so you'd be like Philadelphia Cheese, or cream cheese, done but you would have to really look at what the names are and what you were buying in the Central Mercado to make sure that's what you wanted. It's more about like what's happening around the city is more how I immersed myself. There was this one plaza, Plaza de la Virgen, it's a lot of people say it's the heart of the city because at night so much happens. There's live performances by street performers, there's little families with little kids running around and then on two feet away there will be a really, really old couple who probably has lived in Valencia their entire life and then there are a bunch of kids, college kids our age just chilling there too with skateboards and it's just so much activity. Oh you can also eat there, there are restaurants that put tables out and then there's this huge patio and you can eat there too. And then there's so much activity and so much people watching where you can learn, it's kind of weird to say watching people but you learn their mannerisms and not really their values but how, what it is like to live as a true Spainard in Valencia.

H: You mentioned earlier that you had never heard of Valencia before you started looking into studying there so we're curious, what were your expectations before you arrived in Valencia and was your experience any different than what you expected?

A: Yah, it was very different. As I mentioned before, I went to Europe with my family. I went to Barcelona for a few, a week I think and then we traveled around but I fell in love with that city. So I had never heard of Valencia but I looked at a map and there's Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid all in this little triangle. So I was like "so it's on the water, that's nice, and if it's anything like Barcelona, I'm going to love it anyways." I was like okay and I don't know why but I didn't do a lot of research before I went like some other people. I think I really wanted to experience it for myself, I didn't want to go in with really, really high expectations of the city because I can personally get really, really excited about something by researching it and stuff like that so I didn't want to go into Valencia with the highest of high expectations and then for some reason be disappointed because with any experience there's the chance that you will be disappointed. And so I was like you know what I'm just going to go in there, go with the flow and just, I was like okay I guess I'll go and stuff like that, I'm sorry what was the question?

H: So what was the experience like? If you didn't go in with many expectations what did you experience that may have been, that could have been influenced if you had expectations going in?

A: I think the biggest impact to me, I remember the first day, move in day. I came with my mom a week before and we like walked around the city but I think the most impactful day was move in day for me because the FSU study center is located right behind the Torres de Serranos which is a huge statue, not a huge statue but its a huge monument in Valencia, like everybody knows if you say Torres de Serranos, everybody knows, taxi drivers know, like the biggest hole in the, or smallest hole in the wall restaurant, everybody knows where that is. And it was part of the 14th century gate to the city and so you have to walk through the Torres to get to the study center and that is just so breathtaking to just look up and see this giant monument. And then some apartments in the study center have a view or a balcony overlooking the Torres and just to wake up to that every morning and walk out was amazing. So I really think that, my experience wouldn't have been less if we weren't situated right behind the Torres but, I think the fact that you wake up and you come home to this giant monument that means so much to the city and is so beautiful everyday it's easy to take advantage of but like it just makes, you know you're in Valencia when you see the Torres, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

Z: That's amazing, I think location can have a really big impact on your experience so I really like that you talked about the study center and how it's located right there. So just kind of a fun question to finish us off here, we want to know what was your favorite program excursion while you were in valencia.

A: Oh, that's hard. We went, I went to three places or we went three places with the staff. I think, I enjoyed all of them but, so some of them we went multiple places. On our way to Madrid we stopped in Toledo, I loved Toledo, and I liked Madrid but I loved Toledo, that was in the Fall. And then our one excursion in the Spring that we got to go on, we went to Seville, Cornada, Cordoba. On our way to Sevilla, we stopped in Cordoba, I loved Cordoba. And then the first trip we went on in Fall was Hacca, I loved that too. It's just different aspects of each excursion we went on. So I think Paola, she's the coordinator for all these trips and stuff, she does a really good job of trying to find these really cute, quaint towns that are culturally significant to Spain that are also something that you wouldn't think to go to yourself so I was pleasantly surprised how much I really, really liked these small towns that we went to. And granted the larger towns we went to were also, or larger cities we went to were awesome and I loved those too but, the fact that we got to see a little gem of Spain while also going to some big cities was pretty cool.

Z: That's awesome, I think sometimes it's the places that are more off the beaten path that sort of impact you more and stick with you more because you're able to see the culture and you know not as much the touristy side.

H: Last thing real quick. If you had one piece of advice or just one thing you want to say to any students who are considering studying abroad, what would that be?

A: It's kind of like a whole thing. You don't need to learn Spanish to go there but really really try to immerse yourself in everything Spaniard. Like you're in Spain don't go, like obviously it's a city so they have McDonalds, KFC, Five Guys, don't go there. If you're missing home, fine go to Five Guys or you don't want to cook one night or something like that go to McDonalds or you're in a hurry, do that. But really try to immerse yourself in the culture because food, I think what I got out of it was Spaniards love family and food the most. And so they really put a lot of their heart and soul into the food that they cook and it's really amazing when you can see that a meal that you order at a hole in the wall restaurant was cooked with the same love that their grandmother cooked or their great grandmother cooked and so it's really important to immerse yourself, like indulge in the fun times going out and doing what college kids do but also invest time in learning about what it's like to be a Spaniard and live in Spain. Because it's easy to get lost in like you're living with Americans so you're speaking English all the time and you don't need to know, like most of the people in Valencia know English or a little bit but, try to speak Spanish, it really helps you learn a lot and it helps immerse yourself in the culture. Because once you start getting used to speaking Spanish you'll speak it more, you'll get to know the locals more and then that really just enhances your experience, tenfold.

H: That's wonderful, I absolutely agree that the best way to learn about people or a culture is through their food, it's the most enjoyable for sure. But thank you so much for joining us today Ali, it was so good to hear about your experience and we wish you all the best.

Z: Thank you!

A: Thank you so much for having me.

Z: Coronavirus continues to impact lives and industries, including international travel and education, but we look forward to offering study abroad programs in future semesters. As Ali mentioned, despite not being abroad as long as expected, she was still able to have an amazing, life changing experience. We look forward to when future study abroad students can have their own experiences worth sharing.

H: Before we disembark, we want to introduce Lauren Schoenberger, First Semester and First Year Abroad Coordinator to tell us more about IP's programs for first year students!

Lauren: At FSU you can start your college career abroad! We offer both the First Semester and First Year Abroad programs and they both have some perks! First Semester Abroad, or FSA, is a Pathways Admission option and offers the opportunity to immerse yourself in another culture before heading to Tallahassee in the Spring.

And did you know that if you're an out-of-state student you can earn in-state tuition by completing our First Year Abroad or FYA program? On this program, you also have the option to switch locations for the summer.

Both programs offer the opportunity to make lifelong friends, have enhanced educational experiences, learn skills in cross cultural communications, and have an adventure of a lifetime!

Zoe: Thanks for listening! To learn more about our Freshman programs, visit international.fsu.edu or email us at IP-Freshmen@fsu.edu.

Be sure to tune in next week for our final episode of this season, to hear from Hallie Gaudio, about how doing an internship abroad helped her personally and professionally,

Hallie: "I've always been super excited about travel and tourism and those differences in cultures and people from all over and so I think being able to intern in Florence and see those pieces connect has made me even more passionate about those things and I know that just being able to intern and have that on my resume has been a huge boost.

H: A special thanks to Ali Jones for talking with us and, as always, thanks for listening.

This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoe Crook.