

Leah: “Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs. I'm Leah,”

Zoë: “and I'm Zoe, and we're 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

In today's episode we talked to Maria Infante-Pulido, an FSU alum who studied abroad in Valencia. Maria is a first-generation American and first-generation college student who studied during her last semester at FSU. After graduation she decided to continue her stay in Europe as an au pair in Germany. Maria talks about funding her experience abroad and working as a brand ambassador for IP. She also shares a meaningful quote to live by. Let's go to our conversation now!

Hi Maria, how are you doing today?”

Maria: “I'm doing really good, just happy to be here.”

Zoë: “Yeah absolutely, we're so excited to have you on the podcast First off can you just introduce yourself to our listeners?”

Maria: “Yeah of course so my name is Maria as as I'm sure you know by now. I attended Florida State for 4 1/2 years where I studied English with a concentration in editing, writing, and media and I studied abroad in Valencia, Spain this past fall semester in 2022 and after graduating I spent some time living in Germany working as an au pair and recently just got back from my time there about this past month and I'm now just kind of getting adjusted to life back in the States.”

Leah: “Cool! So, it's unique that you studied abroad in your last semester at FSU - what inspired you to study abroad when you did?”

Maria: “Yeah, good question! So I had hoped to sign up to attend for my junior year you know, and as we know COVID happened and changed everything and a lot of things were cancelled and stuff so you know during this time you know being unsure if this was still a possibility I still remained optimistic and eventually coming into my senior year I heard news that IP programs were programmed as scheduled at its full capacity and that's when you know I knew like ‘OK this is this is my moment now I think’, so began to look into this and with the required classes that I needed and schedule it had worked better to wait at least until the summer or fall period of the of the next one and you know I really wanted to leave for a full semester and so then that would really would have meant that I would have to push back my graduation, but and you know I knew that it was still the right choice for me so I applied and then about a month later I heard back and I was on my way and with that I say, you know like studying abroad as a

senior is almost like a reward for all your hard work and sacrifices I think - it's not the traditional path by any means, but doesn't mean it shouldn't be an option. I will say something to keep in mind is like if you do go on a semester beside summer there won't be too many upperclassmen in general within your program, and typically not seniors, so going in you kind of already have like a different perspective within you know your program and a lot of students almost look up to you because of your experience in your early university years and I think it's kind of nice."

Zoë: "Yeah, absolutely. I love that, I studied abroad a little bit later in my academic career as well, and I had kind of a similar experience, you know. But yeah it's really great, I love that you talked about it like as a reward for the hard work that you 've done.

Previously, off-mic you had mentioned to us that you're a first-generation American and a first-generation college student. So, what do those identities mean to you and how do they relate to your experience studying abroad?"

Maria: "This is a really great question, and I definitely think there's a lot to unpack here, so I'll probably go in and shift into my first gen experience and go on from there. In terms of being first gen, my family immigrated from Venezuela, and they came here, and then they had me, and you know hoping to provide a better future for their kids and which led me to attending FSU.

So just from navigating the college application process, I would overhear classmates talking about other parents organized like campus tours and had connections within their circles to help inform and guide them through the application and selection process since it can be so daunting, right, and overwhelming.

You know, as a first gen you don't really have that, you know, our circles are surrounded by other working class families and people who don't have backgrounds in higher education and work for well recognized companies so I always hear you know 'oh the Internet has so much information' and yes it does, I think it's easy to say that you know, but it's a lot more complex and it's easier you know to just do research when you already have a good amount of the support that's helping you take a mental burden off you so you can just focus on the smaller things and overall being the first in your family to attend university isn't easy, and for some of us it can seem almost impossible to achieve, you know, let alone studying abroad, and it can seem almost more of a fantasy than reality at times and you know once we do make it, the pressure of making it easily gets crept in, you know the impostor syndrome, if you deserve to be here, but let me be here to tell you that you do and all your hard work is a representation of that and I think once you're able to overcome that it can make you experience a lot more rewarding, especially knowing that you're setting example and inspiring those from your similar backgrounds, and something that helped with me seeing this was you know realizing that your parents sacrifices, including your own have brought you on to this point because I think sometimes we wonder, you know, why me, you know my parents did all this and kind of feel bad that they never got to do these experiences such as the one that you're doing like studying abroad and say just remember that and hold on to that and you're an extension of them, and if you're doing good things all that you can ask for and

be grateful for is you know that you're doing as good as you can be doing and you are their American dream and I think it's nice to lean into that.”

Zoë: “Absolutely, thank you so much for sharing that. We're also curious if you had any like scholarships that you applied for, for your study abroad experience?”

Maria: “Yes, of course, that’s a big one too. Let's see, so I do receive financial aid, so I was able to at least use my FAFSA and stuff that covered that within the scholarships that the state gives you and FSU so there's both kind of going into that so I was able to receive about half of what I needed, so I still needed a good other, some grant. So I’m like ‘OK how am I going to make this happen’ and I was able to find the rest of the half that I needed through FSU - thankfully they do have this like database named FS4u for you where you can apply for scholarships directly with FSU, that are only for FSU students which I think is nice, so it's a little less competitive and you have a better chance of receiving them, so.

They typically release them at the beginning of each semester and will run to the end, and if you do apply for any of these scholarships and if you are waiting for any kind of aid you are also able to defer any major payments if you know that you will be receiving these things for kind of an estimated amount so that you can hold your spot in place which was nice so people know that's an option for them.

So I was able to apply for about two, two or three and through those I was able to receive the rest that I needed which I was very grateful for and I guess it's funny, no when I applied for going abroad and all these things and I had gotten accepted, by that point you know obviously I didn't have the scholarships I needed but I wondered, I'm like you know what I'm not exactly sure I'm going to make this happen but I just think it's going to work out for me and all my hard work has brought me here, you know, I can't just be - I won't be left at an odds you know, so I applied not knowing if I'd be able to fully pay but I had the certainty that I would find the way, and as I submitted, two weeks afterward got the green light that I had what I needed to cover and something also I’d like to note is, you know if this is something that you desire it doesn't hurt to save as much as you can now but also don't feel that it's unattainable if you don't come from much financial means like me, because there are opportunities available for you to receive help.”

Leah: “That's great advice! I'm so glad that you were able to like find all those resources and fund your experience. So now let's talk about your experience in Valencia - could you tell us about some of your favorite classes and excursions?”

Maria: “Yes! Oh, this one’s fun. So, when I think about my favorite class, it was this class called business communications and the person that taught it was Ignacio Messina and he is the program director and he is also the business professor at FSU Valencia. He is such an amazing person and my experience would not have been the same without him and I think a lot of the students look up to him too and really enjoy like experience that we have in class. While business communications may sound boring for some, I promise it's more fun than you think. At least in our class in Valencia, you look at business

communications from an international perspective, you know such as what is normal for some might not be normal for others, but typically the class is you know taught using real life scenarios and we really use the city so that Valencia really becomes your classroom essentially and we even may present some of our class presentations in public and the way that he would make note of it is that you know typically you know when you do present in the real world a lot of distractions can come into place and you're not in this perfect setting with you know, not knowing, you know with - a perfectly controlled setting, is what I would like to say so in public sometimes you would hear a loud noise or maybe someone would accidentally walk into it and all these things and how you navigate and how you're able to you know you know use what you have and able to combat against those things coming into your presentation so it was, while it might have been difficult in the beginning you could really see how a lot of us over time were able to improve in our presentation skills so that was pretty cool and very interactive class.

And in terms of an excursion that I really enjoyed and I think also was the same for many of my classmates, was our flamenco dinner show when we were in Madrid for one of our class trips for me it was something I never saw before and it was truly beautiful getting to see the presentation of the arts, the music, and the dance, and getting to see more of Spain's culture, so everyone was very much in awe of how well the performance was and we had so much fun."

Zoë: "That's awesome. I love that you talked about like how that class you know like taught you real skills that you can use too, and the flamenco just sounds so fun.

So our next question is kind of about your time as a brand ambassador for international programs while you were in Valencia can you talk a little bit about that experience?"

Maria: "Yeah of course! So, being a brand ambassador was honestly such an amazing opportunity to combine my interest in content creation and working in a position that allows me to connect with students, prospective students, faculty, staff, so I got to work with FSU IP in Tallahassee and also work with FSU faculty in Valencia so that was something that I really got to enjoy and I'd say it's really good for students who are looking to gain more experience while also studying abroad, especially for those students that are in their early years of university which I think is nice because a lot of times you wonder, you know I want to get this experience but I'm still so young and early into my years and how can I make this possible and I think FSU does a great job of offering those opportunities to us even if we're abroad so you can still get experience while you're having fun and studying.

It's funny too, because I'm usually the friend that's always like recording or taking pictures for everyone to have memories to look back on and I was able to still do that, you know it's like I had a greater purpose for that and I really enjoyed that so if anyone out there can relate then I think it would be a great opportunity for you too."

Leah: "Awesome! So after graduation you moved to Germany to be an au pair, could you just tell us what made you want to go back to Europe and do that, and would you say that your study abroad experience influenced that decision?"

Maria: “Oh yes, of course. So going into my last semester I realize, you know, OK well I guess I don't have to go back right so right away, so I know a lot of people they take those chances to do lots of cool things and I wondered, you know, what can my cool thing be? I wanted to stay and that's something that brought up a lot for me and I began to wonder you know how I could do that and you know how would I be able to go in terms of you know graduation and my ceremony as well as thought something that got up brought up for me too so I spoke with FSU and I was informed that I had a year to complete the ceremony for example if I graduated fall 2022 I would have until the following fall semester of the next year to walk the ceremony so I'd have until fall 2023. So if anyone's in that similar kind of position, that's something to keep in mind which I think is a great is really great for us. So when I became aware of this, I knew that I wanted to extend my stay and with about two months left of my program, I did lots of research and I came to the conclusion that becoming an au pair was the best choice to do this, and you know while staying in Spain would have been the easier choice because I you know I am fluent in Spanish and I was getting kind of adjusted to the culture there, I decided to go to Germany because I wanted to push myself more out of my comfort zone and I was there from January of this past year until April.

So yeah, my choice to do this really would have been possible without my time in Valencia, which really inspired me to take even more risk and to do things even more outside of my comfort zone so it's one of those things you don't really always know until you're experiencing it that really brings out these different sides of you.”

Zoë: “I think it's great that you, you know recognized that you wanted to stay in Europe and push yourself a little bit more outside of your comfort zone and so you did that and you just went for it I think that's really cool we love to hear about students who, you know extend their stay or like go back to Europe or or anywhere really just to have that furthered international experience.

So with that I'm sure it wasn't all easy being an au pair, but what were your favorite parts of doing that in Germany?”

Maria: “So for those that don't know, like an au pair is pretty much a childcare provider who lives with a host family as part of an international cultural exchange. it's similar, I would say, to a nanny but it comes with less responsibility and typically you'll help kids with homework and take them to their activities and play with them and small household work and in exchange you get a small monthly stipend, room and meals. so you'd work during the weekdays and would have the weekend off and depending how long you're on the contract for you will get also more time off as well I think it's up to like a month and you can either take that fully or do it you know in increments and going into my favorite parts, so for me you know I grew up in Florida my whole life so I never got to experience the seasons and I truly got to get that when I was in Germany. I never experienced a real winter until I came here and it was a little hard at first but I was able to get adjusted right, so you know how to dress for it, you know activities, all these things are just very not typical for me, so very different, and it didn't really become real until the first

day where I had to help shovel snow I was just like OK this is what's happening now I guess this is my life.

Overall how close proximity everything was so anything I needed was always a quick walk or cycle ride away, and people actually you know respect and give priority to pedestrians and cyclers, so you do feel safe doing so. It's not like you know I'm back home in Florida and I'm like oh I really want to get a bike maybe but then I'm like well maybe, maybe not the best idea. People are always like trying to race and you know not really giving priority to people that are you know walking or you know cycling so holding off on that dream for a bit but who knows. And I'd say let's see flexibility overall so I was able to have a steadier pace in terms of my travel experience instead of moving around every couple days I was able to build a home for myself and the new place that I was living in and I could do things and not feel rushed right so it gives the chance to fully immerse yourself and improve in learning the language of the host country you're living in so yeah I really recommend it."

Leah: "Very cool. So now that you have studied abroad, and you've worked abroad, we are curious to know if you want to continue to have international experiences in the future and we want to know what's next for you?"

Maria: "So if it's anything my time the Valencia and in Germany have shown me even more so, is that I love getting to travel to new places and learn from them and try different lifestyles and more importantly it's shown me a whole other pace of life that I didn't know was possible and that I feel aligns more with my interests and values so through my discoveries something that I'm deeply considering is moving to Europe to pursue grad school and potentially further building my career and life there could also be in the cards for you know the next couple of years so I'm kind of in that process right now also as of now I'll be home let's say for maybe the next half year and I'm also preparing to go abroad again with an international exchange internship program in the Netherlands and then from there we'll see what happens but I'll be going off for six months so I just got back and I'm like OK I'm going back now but yeah, I'm really excited."

Zoë: "Sometimes you get that travel bug and you just have to keep going."

Maria: "It's true, it's true!"

Zoë: "So, our final question for you is something that we ask everyone on this podcast which is what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad?"

Maria: "Ooh, OK I have a couple things here to maybe more than a couple but I really hope that I can maybe resonate with some so I know this one's like a cliché right so it's like questioning to it but a little

bit more into that is I think a lot of the time we got scared of missing out you know, the FOMO, like football season, tailgating, you know other college festivities, and typical things that we that we see when we think of the American College experience but they will be there when you get back. You know not that this isn't any fun but the world is so much bigger than this and you owe it to yourself to discover more of it especially if you have the yearning desire to do so like I did. In many different ways going abroad can change and reshape you whether it's in your personal, professional, or academic life, and there's things I've learned I've seen and have changed my opinions on because of my time abroad and every place that I have visited has impacted me in a special way and sometimes it takes leaving the place that we are at to be tested in settings that will teach us valuable lessons, you know. There won't be too many times when you can have this opportunity to take off for two to four months to travel and enrich yourself into a new environment and culture there's a quote by Mark Twain that I like to like live my life by and like once I heard it it really just resonated with me so it goes:

'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime'

So give yourself the opportunity to expand your worldview by taking the time to learn about other people, places, cultures, be curious, ask questions and most importantly share your stories so others can hear and invest in your experiences and learning to be OK with plans not always going as expected and sometimes those are the things that in stories that give you the best memories, and lastly if you worry about not knowing anyone in your program you will find your people. People are usually always very open and friendly and welcoming because they also like you don't know anyone, they're looking to connect with others it's one of those things where you know you don't realize until you do and then you kind of sit around and halfway through the semester and you're like wow these people mean so much to me and they quickly become such a big part of your life and they'll be people who you always you know cherish the memories you made with them during your program and no matter how much time has passed like I know with my friends that I met during my program you know we've seen each other since I've been back and we're planning on taking trips together in the future and it's something that's continuing to evolve, so."

Zoë: "I love that quote that you shared and I that advice is amazing, amazing advice for our students I think that that's really wonderful that you shared your experience and just thank you so much for talking with us today."

Maria: "Thank you, thank you for having me."

Zoë: "Before we disembark, we want to talk about financial aid. Did you know that financial aid can apply towards your study abroad program fee from Bright Futures to Florida Prepaid to other scholarships loans and grants, financial aid can help you have the experience of a lifetime."

Leah: “We have two more financial aid info sessions happening this summer in July and August where you can learn more about how financial aid applies towards study abroad. You can sign up for the sessions by visiting the money matters tab of the student section of our website at international.fsu.edu you can also find more information on our social media @FSUIP.”

Zoë: “Thanks for listening, and thank you to Maria for talking with us today.

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