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Honors Study Abroad Albania 2012

September 1, 2012

Multiple study abroad programs take thousands of American college students to Europe every summer, and rarely can a trip to Europe be described as going off the beaten path. However, in a European country less traveled is exactly where seven University Honors Program students journeyed on a three-week trip based out of Albania. It is believed to be the first pro-gram of its kind in the region. Students Elijah Anderson, Ashley Boyer, Cady Ennis, Kelsey Keane, Molly Laughlin, Chelsea Medeiros, and Feagin Oliver took two courses during their travels: Politics of Ethnicity in Albania taught by Dr. Krista Wiegand and Narrative Memory in Albania taught by Dr. Lori Amy. Students were introduced to the long history of once-closed Albania and immersed themselves in Albanian culture found in four countries, including Kosovo, Montenegro, and the Greek island of Corfu.

After getting acquainted with Albania's capital city, Tirana, students traveled by bus—their home on wheels—throughout the Albanian region of the Balkans. The landscape of mountain ranges juxtaposed against miles of scenic beaches and the blue water of the Adriatic Sea was breathtaking as they visited the cities of Butrint, Saranda, and Shkodra.

Throughout the trip, the group met other students as well as public officials, artists, architects, and people from local nongovernmental organizations. They spent some days exploring the ancient ruins of castles, prisons, and fortresses, eating traditional foods and regional specialties, and holding seminars on topics such as narrative, memory, and self-determination.

The stop in Gjirokastra, located in the southernmost region of Albania, was particularly memorable because students were able to see the intersection of politics, ideology, and urban development. Students met with the Gjirokastra Development Project staff, a group of professionals dedicated to the historical preservation of the “city of stone.” Students were able to see the communist-era tunnels that run under the city's mountains. Exploration of these tunnels provided the entire group with tangible evidence of the mindset of those living in communist Albania from 1976 to 1991 during the time of Dictator Enver Hoxha. Rarely seen by even Albanians themselves, the tunnels are an eerie reminder of a traumatic history much of Albania struggles to forget. In addition to the tunnel networks, the entire country is peppered with several hundred thousand communist-era bunkers which were built to provide protection in case of an invasion.

“Built in a paranoid fervor these bunkers and tunnels serve as a living reminder of Albania's communist and isolationist past. I was absolutely terrified when we went underground into a tunnel, and it definitely provided me with a memory I will keep with me the rest of my life!” sophomore Elijah Anderson said.

Dr. Amy's class on narrative memory explored many of the challenges regarding how people grapple with the trauma of the communist era. In fact, it can be argued that the communist powers did not just tell people what to believe; rather, they altered their thought process used to interpret the world. The students realized the current effects and implications of this worldview as they discussed the past with Albanians during their visit.

While much of the trip was spent in official class related activities, the group also had a few opportunities to relax, including spending a luxurious two days on the Greek island of Corfu. This time was spent debriefing



from the lecture topics and swimming in the icy waters of the Adriatic. The trip to Corfu also facilitated interesting class lectures by Dr. Wiegand concerning the nature of international borders and national identity.

Several days after the stop in Corfu, the group had traveled all the way to the Northern border of Albania and crossed into neighboring Kosovo. Having only gained independence in 2008, Kosovo is one of the youngest countries in the world and in some areas still exhibits the tensions that played out so violently during the ethnic genocide of the late 1990s.

The lasting impact of that era was especially evident in the city of Mitrovica when the students, accompanied by local Kosovar journalists, witnessed the illegal blockade of major roadways. Dr. Wiegand's class directly addressed relevant issues of nationalism and territorial boundaries as these blockades are used to separate ethnic Albanian populations from the Serbian ones that still reside in Kosovo. The case of Kosovo provides a perfect case study on nationalism and territory as it endured ethnic conflict over questions of sovereignty and self-determination. After the NATO intervention in the 1990s, and the deployment of NATO peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, the country achieved a degree of independence, but is still only recognized by half of the world's countries.

The ethnic Albanians in Kosovo were the most compelling part of the experience as senior Ashley Boyer recounted. "The people of Kosovo are the most resilient and kind people I have ever met," she said. "Every single person in Kosovo was affected by the Milosevic regime, yet no one remains a victim of their past. Their strength and commitment to facilitating future change are evident in all areas of their lives. The stories of the people from Kosovo will remain with me and forever have a place in my heart."

Not only were the places the group visited extraordinary, the people who shared their time and knowledge of the region also helped to create a more memorable and meaningful experience for the Georgia Southern students. From the very first day in Tirana, the group's local Albanian contacts offered not only invaluable insight but also became fast friends of the entire group.

One of these people was an Albanian artist named Arben Theodhosi, whose father was assassinated when the communist leaders took over the government. Theodhosi was exiled for 15 years and forced to endure hardship in a work camp in the country's mountains. However, he was able to overcome the trauma of those years by using art as a healing mechanism, and his story is only one of the powerful narratives that the students heard.

Sophomore Feagin Oliver described the Albanian people as having great resilience and strength. "You would never guess it from first impressions, but it is a culture which has seen immense suffering and hardship, and yet maintains an inspiring sense of joy, hope for the future, and love for the people in their lives," she said.

Overall, the students agree that their experience studying abroad in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Corfu was an opportunity that dramatically shaped their knowledge and perception of the Balkans. After arriving in the area with only an elementary understanding of the region's history, the students left Albania feeling that they had truly connected with the many people and places they encountered during the course of the three week program.

By Kelsey Keane and Molly Laughlin

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