

## STUDENT TRAVEL

## France. Belgium.

### *Classrooms without walls*

By Anna Lafferre



**M**y heart thumped in anticipation as the airplane landed at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. My jet-lagged mind had no idea what time of day it was as I stepped off the Air France flight into the cool Paris morning. I barely had time to comprehend that I was in Europe before my best friend, Catherine, and I dashed through the airport in an effort to find the train that would take us to Brussels, Belgium - our final destination.

The little French I knew from high school was not enough to tackle the signs that were all in French - there was no English in sight. Catherine and I looked back and forth from the train tickets in our hands to the signs above our heads, trying to match the words. Fifteen minutes later, as we collapsed into our seats on the train, I already knew this trip was going to be an adventure.

Until I took that flight from Washington, D.C. to Paris, I had never been on an airplane. As the oldest of five children, intercontinental travel was not something realistic. If we went somewhere, all seven of us piled into my family's minivan, and we drove to such exotic vacation spots as my grandparents' house or the zoo. However, my life changed dramatically at the end of my junior year at Shepherd University when I applied to a European study abroad program through my school and got accepted to spend a month of my summer in Europe.

During my senior year at Huntington High, many factors contributed to my decision on which college to attend. I knew I wanted a school that offered many organizations, internship opportunities, and a variety of majors. When I took a tour of Shepherd on a brisk February morning, something about the campus just felt right. When I began attending in the fall of 2002, I was pleased that everything I had looked for, and thought I would need was available on campus. I soon became surprised at the extent of the options as well, including so many opportunities to

experience college outside of the classroom.

My involvement with study abroad was by far the biggest of these surprises.

From the time I was a small child, I always knew that I would love to see the world. At the age of three, I became obsessed with a movie. I know that is hard to believe: a three-year-old obsessed with something that was not ice cream or her favorite stuffed animal. But it is true that at the age of three I became obsessed with the movie *"The Sound of Music."* My father had taped it off television during the Christmas season, and little did he know that that small act would change my life. After the first time I watched it, I got up every single morning for a year and refused to do anything - eat, change my clothes, wash my face - until I had watched that movie. As a child, seeing the beautiful pictures of another country on my television represented something bigger than the little area I grew up in.

Even though I had held this dream to travel my whole life, I still saw it as a far off experience and something for me to do when I was "older." However, the opportunity to travel abroad presented itself a lot sooner than I imagined, and I took advantage of it. Study abroad taught me many things, but the biggest thing I learned was to quit putting things off for the abstract "future." College is the future. It is a time to grow and experience life different from what you are used to growing up in your hometown. No matter which college you choose, the size of it or where it is located, there is more to the college experience than sitting in a classroom day after day. There will always be opportunities to take part in new things; all you have to do is look.

Good luck in all the classrooms of your life.

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