

Europe Tour 2017 – Through the eyes of Jamie Horay – Year 12

It began under the departure sign with teary eyes, strong hugs, and the last turn of the head, waving goodbye – knowing that the next time we saw our parents, friends and loved ones, we would be forever changed individuals with a bank of memories and knowledge of the world, friendships that will last a lifetime, and the desire to travel forever.

So, onto the plane we went – arriving in Singapore seven hours later. Here we divided into our two groups: the French group heading to Rouen, and the creative arts group heading to Copenhagen. From here our adventure would begin with our sister schools and homestays – friends we will now know forever. Creative arts students, who resided with families from Copenhagen International School, got to experience many exciting activities – visiting the little mermaid statue, the Tivoli, or roaming the markets and streets where the great Hans Christian Anderson resided. And of course, there was the all-important showcase we performed to the students, staff and parents. Consisting of music, dance, drama and art, Cleveland flaunted the brilliance and range of artistic talent possessed by the students.

Once the Copenhagen leg ended, it was time to fly across the ocean to Manchester, and make the acquaintance of our new life long pals from Parkside College. Here we performed a numerous seven times, saw the snow fall for the first time on the tour, and bonded so well with our homestays it was impossible to not shed a tear when we departed. We travelled to York for a day where we wandered round the beautiful streets full of parks and markets, and had the opportunity to visit the famous York Minster. But all good things must come to an end, and so after a heartbreaking goodbye, we headed south to London via Stratford-Upon-Avon; the birthplace of Shakespeare. We wandered round his home and learned about his history, followed by roaming the streets of the quaint town. Then before we knew it, were in London.

While all this excitement was happening in Copenhagen, the French group were accommodated by families from Lycée Gustave-Flaubert in Rouen, where the students visited the Jeanne D’Arc musée and church, visited the town and Christmas markets, went ice skating, and took a day trip to Amiens and Villers-Bretonneux. After departing from their new long-life pals as well, they headed onwards to Bayeux, where they were able to experience many highlights – the beautiful Bayeux tapestry, the D-Day Lansing beaches, and finally the American War Memorial. After an educational and exciting 10 days in France, it was now time for the French group to head over to London to reunite with the other students – making two groups one again.

Here we were in London where the sightseeing truly began. Despite being exhausted from an elongated journey, time was limited everywhere we went, so it was crucial we jampacked all the best sights and attractions in as best we could – and what better place to start than the city of London. The list was long: the tower of London, the London eye, tower bridge, Buckingham palace, Trafalgar square, and Big Ben. Of course, it wasn’t London without visiting the West End. Over the course of three nights students watched Mamma Mia, STOMP, and had the choice between Aladdin and Kinky boots; all four being knockout performances. Amidst the amazement of classic London, we also had many other fantastic experiences; the borough markets, the globe theatre, watching the changing of the guard at Buckingham palace and of course making our way round on the tube. We ended our journey in England by visiting the mysterious Stone Henge, where all our conspiracies theories were thrown about, followed by exploring the Roman baths in Bath.

Next up, Paris! Travelling across the channel, we witnessed the White Cliffs of Dover, and took in the scenery of the beautiful area, before continuing on another long drive to our accommodation. Over

our next few days in Paris, we visited the Palace of Versailles, Champs Elysees, and of course soared up the Eiffel tower. We saw Paris and all its beauty by adventuring on a bike tour, and dominating the roadways like birds across the skies. Students also had the option of visiting Oscar Wilde's grave, and the almighty Mona Lisa in the Louvre.

From Paris we continued to the snow covered little town of Lauterbrunnen, Switzerland. Although the bus ride was a treacherous ten hours, we were still able to enjoy a snow fight that night and see the grand mountain ranges that surrounded us. The highlight for many however, was heading up the Jungfrau. How lucky we were to receive the weather we did – sunny skies and not a cloud in sight. We witnessed the never-ending biomes of snow covered plains from the top of Europe, and indulged in wonderful chocolate at the Lindt shop. It was here at the mountain peak where it hit home that we were in Europe, seeing a sight ever only found on postcards and Tumblr accounts, and the realisation we were pretty much living in winter wonderland.

With the wondrous views permanently marked in our bank of memories, we departed Lauterbrunnen, and visited the tiny principality of Lichtenstein for a few hours, where we basked in all its glory, and received a unique passport stamp. From here we headed onwards to Munich, Germany which undoubtedly ending up being the city with the biggest rollercoaster of emotion. It began with the confronting encounter at the Dachau concentration camp, where being in such a space with an abundance of horrible history brought some of us to tears. However, we continued on from the devastating area, and visited the famous Marktplatz. We wandered around the beautiful market area – tried a classic German sausage, and eventually began the journey onwards to Salzburg, Austria.

Salzburg: the city with one of the best Christmas markets in the world. What better time to do it than at night time in the freezing snow! (Well during the day would be better I suppose considering we almost froze to death – but that's all part of the experience). The point is, we roamed the glittering and twinkling markets at the most wonderful time of the year and experienced something brand new, which we would recommend to all family and friends. Whilst in Salzburg, we had the opportunity to go on the Sound of Music tour, visit the salt mines, or wander the markets again but at a smarter time where frostbite wasn't possible. Salzburg: it's scenery and its markets; lived up to the expectations and was certainly a highlight for many.

So off we headed to the sinking city of Venice, but firstly made an essential pitstop at the Swarovski gallery near Innsbruck, where we saw sparkling crystals and bedazzling jewellery. Unfortunately, due to a blizzard and an epic traffic jam, we arrived at our accommodation at 1am. Nevertheless, that did not stop us the next day as we wandered around the beautiful streets of Venice, experienced a gondola ride, watched a glass blowing demonstration and ended our time in Venice watching an enchanting and mesmerising Baroque Chamber Orchestra. Fortunately, we did not experience what the city is quite literally known for – we got out dry.

Our last few days consisted of Pisa, Florence and Rome. While it was only short, we had time to take the famous photos one takes when at Pisa – pushing it over or holding it up. From here we headed to Florence, where we had many wonderful experiences such as a guided tour round the streets of Florence and seeing the famous statue of David in the Accademia. We were also lucky enough to watch a leather demonstration and learned the difference between fake and real leather; which of course came in handy when roaming the famous leather markets.

Rome was our final leg of the tour, and it was here where we witnessed the multitude of wonderments Rome possesses: the colosseum, the Spanish steps, the Pantheon, and the Trevi

Fountain. We had the privilege of strolling through the Vatican and laying our eyes upon some of the outstanding historical paintings of all time. Our final day we visited the ruins of Pompeii – an eye opener for exactly how destructive the eruption of Mt Vesuvius was, yet also intriguing to see the incredibly well preserved 2000-year-old Roman City.

So that was 31 days in a nutshell. Each night, after a day of magic and awe, we would lay our head on the pillow and think – before exhaustion hit like a brick – about the day in the prettiest village ever, the coldest mountain imaginable, the longest coach ride you've ever been on, or the picturesque scenery tattooed in your mind forever. We replayed in our minds all the wondrous things that occurred that day. Because each night the extraordinary realisation of being in Europe would sink in as hard as it did the first day. We fell asleep reminiscing of the experiences and all the stories to tell everyone at home.