

Matilda Curson (MML) - Florence, March/April 2016

With the help of a Pembroke travel grant, I was fortunate enough to spend two weeks of my easter vacation in Florence. As a first year ab initio Italian student, this trip was invaluable for me, both in terms of consolidating everything that I had learnt about the language during the previous two terms, as well as furthering my interest in the Italian culture.

The main reason for my trip was to attend a language course run by the British Institut of Florence, which had been specially organised to suit the needs of the first year Cambridge ab initio Italian class. It was a brilliant opportunity to solidify and expand my language studies. At Cambridge, the ab initio course is, rightfully so, very focussed on intensive teaching of grammar, so that after five months we have a strong grasp of all the basics of the language. The course in Florence was therefore really helpful because it gave us an opportunity to work on other aspects of language learning, which we hadn't had as much time to focus on whilst in Cambridge. As well as grammar lessons, we worked on things such as speaking, reading, listening and widening our vocabulary. What I really enjoyed was the way in which we were able to learn about general Italian culture through the language itself. We read texts and spoke about topics such as immigration, women and film in Italy. Not only did this help bring my language up to a more sophisticated level, but it was also interesting to see how attitudes towards such topics in Italy can vary from those that I'm used to encountering in Britain. One of the most exciting points of the course was the penultimate day, when former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato came in to talk to us. It was a great way to get a better understanding of Italian politics, and I also found it interesting to hear his external take on certain polemical issues in British politics.

Another great aspect of attending the course was how the British Institut organised our accommodation so that we were staying with Italian families. This was very helpful, because when travelling to Italy with English friends, the Italian can often easily be put to one side! The woman who I was staying with didn't speak any english, so I had a really immersive experience and quickly built up confidence in speaking. Our class had recently had a linguistics lecture in Cambridge on the Tuscan variety of Regional Italian, so it was also interesting being able to pick up on some of the pronunciation which is specific to Tuscany when chatting to my host, putting what we had learnt into better context.

There was also lots of time to explore all the culture that Florence has to offer. I particularly enjoyed visiting the Santa Croce and the Uffizi Gallery. In our culture paper this year, we have been studying Giotto's fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel, so visiting these sites was great for seeing more of his work and to compare it to that of the other great painters of the 13th Century, particularly Cimabue and Duccio. Amazingly enough, and thanks to Italian trains being rather faster than ours here in Britain, my supervision partners and I were able to take a spontaneous afternoon trip to Padua and see the Scrovegni Chapel itself! It has been one of my favourite topics within the culture paper, so it was an amazing experience to actually be able to see it in real life.

Overall, I would say that my trip to Florence proved to be incredibly enjoyable and useful. After coming back from Florence I have particularly noticed a real improvement in my pronunciation and confidence in spoken Italian. It's been a really useful form of preparation for my end-of-year exams and has generally just made me all the more excited to continue my studies of the Italian language and culture.