

# An Unintentional Education: Volunteering While Studying Abroad

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The image most people have of study abroad programs is no schoolwork, freedom to travel, midnight pre-gaming before dance club revelries, and indulgence in a foreign culture with none of the responsibility of a citizen. So, when I show an interest in joining the volunteer program offered through the university, my friend says, "Don't do volunteer work. You're in Rome." But I reject the advice and end up at the Caritas Soup Kitchen and Hostel, and, later fortuitously at the Torre Argentina Cat Sanctuary.

By volunteering I have lost nothing of the preconceived notion of overseas study with its weekend trips to other countries, Thursday nights at the Testaccio dance clubs, daily visits to famous Roman monuments just because I can, and new friends who can only speak Italian. But two nights a week are set aside for the part of Rome not listed in the tour guides or class schedules.

## The Caritas Soup Kitchen and Hostel

Every Tuesday, Kerri, another student volunteer, and I cut through Termini Station and make our way toward the Caritas. Groups of people clutter the five long city blocks leading to the hostel, rifling through the dumpsters and sleeping on makeshift beds of pieces of cardboard. In Rome, these people are unavoidable, and, like the graffiti, simply part of the experience.

Even though the workers of the Caritas have counted at least 6,000 people sleeping on the streets of Rome, exact governmental statistics and current census reports on homelessness in Rome do not exist. Internet searches produce only outdated data, obsolete newspaper articles and rudimentary blog references. Filipa, a volunteer from Rome's Help Center for Foreigners who occasionally works at the Caritas mentions that law officials don't strictly enforce immigration laws, which is why homelessness has become such a problem in Rome.

"It's a problem with the number of illegal foreigners," she says, "because they don't officially exist. There is no one officially taking care of them or sending them home."

Many immigrants come to Rome not only because they know of the relaxed law enforcement, but also because the value of the euro is so much more than their own currency. They think that if they get a job making even a small amount, it will translate to a significant amount to send home.

The Caritas in Rome, a church organization founded in 1970, is funded by donations from the Catholic Church and minor social assistance from the municipality so it's impossible for it to resolve the problem single-handedly. They do what they can, sending immigrants to Italian school and providing a meal a day to about 420 people.

Carlo, one of the five full-time staff says, "Caritas helps not the soul, but the man. It's the left

part of the church.”

The Caritas is a hostel and a soup kitchen. Currently there are 197 ospiti staying at the hostel, which is split into female and male dorms. Kerri and I work with the men.

“You don’t mind seeing men half-naked, right?” is one of our orientation questions.

An elderly Brazilian nun, Sorella Maria, who stands about as high as my elbow and waddles on her stiff legs, ushers us into a small back room about the size of a church altar. The unventilated air listlessly drags the stale sweat and moldy earth smells across our faces, tangling in our hair and settling on our clothing the minute we enter. All four walls are lined with metal shelves stuffed with messy piles of pants, t-shirts, sweaters, shoes, bed sheets, pajamas and underwear. In the center of the room and taking up most of the space is a large metal table on which we conduct our work.

Extra large trash bags full of donated clothing are dumped in front of us and Sorella Maria explains in Italian facilitated by hand gestures that we are to sort through the bags and separate the clothing by style and size then fold them and place them in the appropriate spot on the shelves. Women and children’s clothing is to be placed in a separate bag and taken over to their side of the hostel. Clothing that is stained, dirty, damaged, out-of-season, too ugly, too ostentatious, too small or too big is to be thrown away.

We examine each piece of clothing carefully, debating whether or not a grown man would wear rust-orange pinstripe pants or a sweatshirt with a screen-printed teddy bear. Sometimes we find Valentino coats, Benetton sweaters, Diesel jeans, Armani handbags, genuine Italian leather jackets and other designer goods typical of the everyday Italian fashion. We also find little “treasures” such as a set of dentures in a suitcase or a piece of moldy bread at the bottom of a bag.

“This is gonna make some homeless person really happy,” Kerri says as she pulls a cranberry red heavy leather jacket from a trash bag. Two minutes later it is whisked away to the small room in front of ours that resembles a secretary’s space in a doctor’s office. It is long and narrow and there is a small window next to the door, which serves as reception. The residents from the hostel line up and bark demands through the window in Italian. “Shoes, size 42 and jacket, size 50... not white! Yellow!... not those, that one there... no THAT one...”

Kerri and I listen from the backroom with our eyebrows raised as frustrated volunteers run between rooms attempting to accommodate the client.

“You know that saying,” Kerri whispers, folding down a Max Mara dress shirt. “Beggars can’t be choosers?”

We go over to the kitchen at 7 pm. It is cafeteria-style with three rows of short, four-person linoleum tables. It accommodates the resident men and women of the hostel as well as other struggling or homeless people of Rome. Each person fed for the night has a meal ticket that

is obtained through an application process in which the person's income status is verified and his current needs are evaluated. He is then given a Caritas card, which has an identification number that tracks who can eat and when. For the foreigners who are unable to work legally, the card has a 2-month term. For the Italians, the card comes with a contract.

"There's no such thing as a free meal," explains a regular volunteer as she checks in one of the ospiti.

Since the Italians are legally able to work, Caritas extends its services as long as the person makes an attempt to rejoin society, depending on age and ability.

"I give you a bed, food, doctor only if you are interested in a new life," says Carlo. "If not, you go on the street."

In the kitchen there is much more opportunity to interact with the people than in the hostel. We work the dining room, filling water pitchers, clearing and wiping down tables, and talking to typically invisible people who request our attention for reasons ranging from loneliness to lunacy to manipulation of our sympathies.

Christian has a baby face, big brown eyes and a Weird Science Anthony Michael Hall haircut. He is somewhere in his late 20s or early 30s, and has enlisted me as his English tutor. He raises his brow when he speaks which emphasizes the thick wrinkles along his forehead. Mostly, he speaks to me in Italian and I repeat it in English. It tests my comprehension and he likes to hear the way the words sound. During the lesson, he often holds my hands and asks me to bring him English books. Or maybe an extra apple or two.

Mario struggles with my name, as do many Italians. "Chess," he calls me. Mario wears suit jackets even in the summer and checks the temperature of all the pitchers of water. "Fa caldo," he insists and we fetch him a new pitcher of colder water. Mario kisses my hands and cheeks in greeting, and asks me questions even though he knows it's hard for me to understand him. He speaks quickly and quietly so often we need a translator. We look forward to these exchanges and I tell Mario that I will come back to Italy just to speak with him.

Mr. Chirro, as he calls himself, often sits alone. His silver hair, directly contrasting with the chestnut color of his skin, recedes at his forehead exposing his age more effectively the prominent wrinkles at the corners of his mouth. He reaches for my arm as I pass and has me sit across from him. With no hesitation, he promptly begins to lecture me about the current state of US politics in a heavy Southeast Asian accent through bites of food. "I think Mr. Bush made the right decision... asked him to pack his things and leave with his family... accepted by God... Russia said so, too... do you get what I tell you?... Mr. Saddam Hussein is a moron (pronounced more-own, accent on 'own', roll the r)."

He squeezes and tugs at my fingers moving his head in front of my face when my eyes start to wander around the room. After 20 minutes of nodding my head and mmhmm-ing, I tell

him that I have to get back to work. Desperately trying to keep my attention, he speaks louder and faster so he can finish his point before I excuse myself.

"Now, tell me where I am wrong," he pleads upon finishing. "Say, 'No, Mr. Chirro, that is incorrect. You are uneducated on these matters.' Tell me why I am wrong. This is what I want."

"Next time," I promise, sliding out from the pumpkin orange plastic chair and he laughs loudly, throwing his head back and squeezing my hands, holding me to that promise. He smiles, appreciating the time I spent listening to him and he continues his meal alone.

My heart breaks when Kerri and I leave at the end of the night. On our walk back toward the train station we watch the nonresidents of the hostel settle along the streets on their cardboard mattresses, pillowless and unblanketed. Tourists wheel their suitcases past quickly and avert eye contact. They see these people; I know they do. But only in the corners of their eyes. After all, they aren't one of the attractions listed in the Michelin Guide.

### Torre Argentina Cat Sanctuary

Rome's streets are always swarming: tour buses dump tourists in various city hotspots; Vespas and European compact clown-like cars buzz rapidly around corners and through crosswalks dodging pedestrians like football running backs evading tackles; gypsies shuffle through the train stations and restaurants with open palms exchanging Italian overtures for 10 euro cents, harassing people and breaking boundaries of personal space.

But when the water stops pumping through la Fontana di Trevi, when the stores pull their gates and when the gypsies retreat to their mysterious homes, the streets are blanketed with a comforting silence. That's when the cats come out. Decorating bases of statues, rubbing against the hands of late-night wanderers, stalking and prowling through the night are the lionized Cats of Rome.

About 300,000 stray and abandoned cats inhabit the streets making them the unofficial rulers of Rome. Many have made homes of the major monuments due to the fact that they are well fed and sheltered here. Others are cared for at the Torre Argentina cat sanctuary, tucked beneath the historical site where Brutus and his co-conspirators stabbed Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.

I stumbled upon the ruins on my first day in Rome while exploring with a couple of my roommates. We were snapping pictures of the temple's ruins when I noticed cats scattered across the grounds, sunbathing on large stones and strutting across the elevated walls.

"Look at all the cats!" I exclaimed, elated at the sight due to the fact that I had a tearful departure from my four cats only a day before.

It wasn't until my next visit that I noticed it was an adoption center for stray and abandoned cats. Down a flight of stairs and situated underneath the sidewalk, cave-like with low ceilings and areas where the walls are still bare stone, is the shelter. The main room is bordered with rows of cages, cat beds cover the tables and corners, and litter boxes omit odors one would expect with 250 to 300 cats using them.

The cats are everywhere: on the stairs as I enter, in the plants, wandering the ruins, sitting on the wall ledges watching the people pass, hiding in cabinets, filling the beds and cages, peering from the corners and weaving between my legs. Some are missing limbs or eyes. I see one with a fanatical puff of a tail that looks like it exploded. Others are gorgeous pure-breeds. Some are kittens, wide-eyed and playful, while others are old, shabby, and indifferent.

The volunteer inside tells me the sanctuary was started about 16 years prior but has no official license.

"No one ever kicked us out, though. We were doing the city a service, so they just let us be," she says.

In 1929, when excavation began on Torre Argentina, cats started taking refuge here because it was below street level. The cats were fed by women the Romans contemptuously labeled gattare, or cat ladies. Three women established the sanctuary in 1995 after gaining resources from the English organization A.I.S.P.A. (Anglo-Italian Society for the Protection of Animals). Two years prior they had been working under primitive conditions in the damp underground-excavated area with no electricity or running water and funding everything at their own expense.

The sanctuary takes in stray cats almost every day. Many are abandoned by their owners when they leave for summer vacation or are dumped off at the shelter in the middle of the night. Some have even been adopted and then brought back to the sanctuary. Funded through raffles, fundraisers, flea market sales and donations, the adoption center feeds, sterilizes, medicates and vaccinates every cat brought to them.

Fascinated and heartbroken, I bring my friend Carla with me for another visit. Because it's close to 11 pm, we stand at the bottom of the steps petting and cooing at the cats surrounding us. A tiny silver-haired woman comes out carrying a litter box. Her skin hangs loosely on her jowl and her thick glasses magnify her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asks with a German accent, her voice sweet and soothing like a flute but her words slightly threatening.

"We were... uh... just petting the cats," Carla replies as we prepare to leave. "Is it too late?"

"No, it's ok. But usually when you come to a place," she starts turning to re-entering the sanctuary, "you come inside."

"Oh!" I say apologizing. "We thought it was too late."

"Do you like cats?" she asks.

Carla and I nod in unison.

"Then you come inside."

She starts to prepare a grotesque looking mixture of grains, water, meat and wet cat food, mixing vigorously for a woman of her age and small stature. We kneel among the kitties, 'awww'-ing and giggling as they climb into our laps and onto our shoulders.

"Everybody say they love the cats, but no one want to help them," the woman sighs.

Carla and I look at each other. "We'll help!" we agree.

"They can't even give one day a week," she continues.

"We'll help," we repeat.

She doesn't believe us, we can tell, but she introduces herself as Rixa and asks us to come Monday nights around 9 pm.

When we show up the next Monday, a slight smile parts her lips and she says, "So you came after all."

We follow her around the sanctuary as she shows us what to do and where everything is. She leads us to the back storage area, which is totally dilapidated. The walls and floors are bare stone, no extra walls have been erected and no temperature control has been installed. Another collection of cats fill cat beds and small houses fashioned for creatures of their size. The cats emerge from hidden crevices and secret passageways, scrutinizing our movements and ducking from our outstretched palms.

The sanctuary is separated into spaces. The back storage room and another small area in the center of the ruins, next to the exact spot where Brutus betrayed Caesar, house many of the shy, nervous or reserved cats. The main room keeps all the well-behaved and well-composed cats, while the second room, divided by a jail cell-like gate, holds the cats that can't roam freely due to blindness (one has two missing eyes) or ignorance to traffic. Behind this room is a secret room blocked off by a set of cages, which have to be moved in order to enter. This room accommodates the sick and injured. It's a small, private area removed from the incessant talking of the other cats, but retains a desolate, distressing atmosphere. These cats have raw wounds and horrible infections, and many of them don't like our intrusion of their space, flattening their ears and crouching low when we enter. Some hiss and swat ferociously when we reach for the litter. We learn which cages to leave for the morning shift.

Bigiu (pronounced Bee-jew) always tries to get in to this room, waiting by the door for her chance to slide between our feet and terrorize the less fortunate. Bigiu is chunky and stout striped mutt with anger management issues. She walks around growling and yowling like someone is constantly standing on her tail. She threateningly makes eye contact and swats at anyone in her way, including sweet Lorenzo, the oversized longhaired tuxedo cat that quietly minds his own business and smiles when we scratch his ears.

Even though some of the cats don't want to be bothered, none respond like Bigiu. Some are tranquil and unphased by our presence; others just make it clear they don't want to be touched. Most love the attention, like Phantom, a tiger-striped beauty with a protruding muzzle. He won't hesitate to climb in my lap as soon as I kneel and nuzzle affectionately under my armpits so I can't bring myself to put him down.

Pirate is all gray with fangs that extend over his bottom lip and one eye where the socket has been cleanly covered with fur. He waits calmly for attention, lingering around our workspaces.

Baghera is the enormous panther-like black cat that silently watches the world from her master suite-sized cage offering barely audible meows in exchange for love. She shares a room with Hugo, the white teen kitty with black spots. He reaches out for us as we pass and tilts his head brokenheartedly if we pay too much attention to his kitten neighbors. He loves to curl into our necks and promptly attaches himself to our sleeves climbing across our shoulders if we try to put him back.

Caravaggio is missing both eyes, but boldly loiters at our feet as we work sniffing at the air and listening for any sudden movements. "Blind but still beautiful," says Rixa, leaning to scratch his head but letting him sniff her hand beforehand so she doesn't startle him.

Rixa has been at the sanctuary "the longest of them all!" she says. She struggles due to the lack of help. There are usually about three volunteers during the day and two at night, but often Rixa works alone. "It's nice to have the help," she says to Carla and me. "And the company."

Occasionally there are late-night, last minute visitors who wander in. Three young girls in their early twenties enter like they've been here before.

"Where's Honey?" she says scouring the room. "Is this her? I think this is her," she points to a longhaired orange cat that wriggles free and scrambles away when the girl picks her up. "I almost adopted you," she says scolding the animal. "Don't be mean to me."

When I ask her why she didn't adopt Honey, whose real name is Andromeda, she says that her application was denied. She lives in Rome but she is a student and, even though there are close to 300 cats that need homes, the standards are rigorous, as they want to be sure the cats get the care and attention they need and deserve.

She asks if we volunteer at the sanctuary and says that she visits often. "Maybe I should volunteer here. I love cats."

"You should," I say. "They could use the help."

"But what do you guys do?" she asks watching me sift through a heavily soiled litter box. "Just... that?"

"Well, yeah and change the water and stuff."

"Oh, I don't think I could do that," she says screwing up her face. "I just want to, like, hang out with them." She leans down to pet one of the cats as it passes her.

I shrug at her disappointedly. "Everyone says they love the cats," I think. "But no one wants to help them."

I'm learning lessons in my study abroad far beyond those promised in Rome for Dummies or the school's curriculum. The travel guides say you need at least a week to really experience Rome. That's if you're only looking. After three months, I've learned there's still so much to do.