

In UNH Bologna Program, Life Imitates Art

New Italy study abroad program launches after COVID delays

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A FILM SCREENING AT IL CINEMA RITROVATO, THE ANNUAL BOLOGNA FILM FESTIVAL (PHOTO COURTESY OF BOLOGNAWELCOME.COM).

The pandemic may have put the brakes on many study-abroad programs nationwide and at UNH, but the programs that sought shelter from the storm in 2020-2021 are roaring back with a vengeance in 2022. One of these is the UNH Bologna, Italy program, which is busily gearing up for its second year, having had its opening delayed twice by COVID.

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The brainchild of [Nicole Gercke](#), senior lecturer in [Italian studies](#), and [Amy Boylan](#), associate professor of Italian Studies, the [Bologna program](#) sent 11 Wildcats to Bologna for the inaugural six-week period in June and July of 2022.

Gercke and Boylan designed the program to coincide with Il Cinema Ritrovato, a Bologna-based film festival devoted to little known or rediscovered films. Gercke's familiarity with Bologna, where she spent three years in graduate school, has enabled her to curate a unique, insider's experience for UNH students, one typically missing from other programs. "The festival includes hundreds of films that are shown outdoors on huge screens in the piazzas where as many as 7,000, including students and locals, alike, turn out to watch," Gercke said. "One of things that makes the program work so well is that Nicole is able to use her contacts there to arrange for our students to meet with some of the directors, producers and writers of the



**VIEW OF BOLOGNA, ITALY
(COURTESY PHOTO).**



**STUDENTS VISIT MONTE SOLE
HISTORICAL PARK (PHOTO
COURTESY OF
BOLOGNAWELCOME.COM).**



**STUDENTS VISIT A VINEYARD IN
MODENA, WHICH MAKES BALSAMIC
VINEGAR AND PARMESAN CHEESE
(OLIVIA DILL FRONT ROW LEFT AND
ALLIE COLONNA FRONT ROW
RIGHT) (COURTESY PHOTO).**

films they watch,” Boylan said.

Each year since 2017, Gercke and Boylan have brought a little piece of the festival back from Bologna to Durham, offering students the chance to watch a dozen or so representative films from the festival. “As far as I know, UNH is one of just three universities in the U.S. with this kind of traveling show,” Gercke noted.

But nothing beats being there, a fact to which Olivia Dill '24 from Tilton, New Hampshire, readily attests. She is a political science and international affairs dual major who, someday, wants to work in international diplomacy. She’s participated in UNH’s Model UN team for three years, but going to Bologna marked her first step outside U.S. soil.

“One of the things I enjoyed the most was visiting the places we watched in the films,” noted Dill. “The most powerful was our visit to Monte Sole Historical Park, which Professor Gercke arranged for the UNH students after we watched a documentary about the tragedy that took place there.” The site, which lies some 24 miles from Bologna, marks the spot where Nazi and Italian fascist troops slaughtered hundreds of defenseless civilians in 1944. Dill’s visit was powerful in part because the Holocaust-related history offered a sharp contrast to the Renaissance art, carefully preserved Roman ruins and natural beauty the students enjoyed at every turn.

“It’s hard to reconcile with this beautiful place,” agreed another student, Allie Colonna '23 from Ridgefield, Connecticut. But reconciling, or at least understanding, how such hate can exist in a land of love is precisely the kind of education the program seeks to provide. Although Colonna has visited Italy twice before — once on a cruise and once through her high school — this immersion offered a special affirmation. “I was nervous about the

prospect of living with Italian students for six weeks, but having done so made me more confident to put myself out there,” she said. “I’ll be more open to opportunities in the future.”

Boylan says Bologna is an ideal location for students like Colonna to develop greater ease in foreign lands. Bologna is a university town and home to the world’s oldest continuously operating university, the University of Bologna. “This has its advantages over some of other ‘destination’ cities such as Rome, Florence and Venice,” observed Boylan. “Students are part of the community’s fabric, and Italians there are more likely to speak Italian to you ... even if they know you’re American. That’s not often the case in the bigger cities.”

Of course, studying abroad not only teaches us about another culture, it also teaches us about ourselves. A late-night chat with some Italian students revealed that some Italians think of Americans as “too focused on the individual at the

In addition to the Bologna program, COLA has launched these new study abroad programs in recent years:

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expense of community.” A fair shot, to be sure, but one that could be qualified when it was later revealed that some Italian students learned how to speak English by watching “The Kardashians.”

Still, Colonna was impressed by a sense that Bolognese life was slower yet somehow fuller than back home. “You can go out at one o’clock in the morning and see people sipping drinks, having little appetizers and just socializing with friends, even on the weekdays,” she recalled. “People seemed less stressed than in the U.S.”

Dill concurs. “I have such fond memories of everyone sitting outside, laughing and clapping at the films in the open air, everyone together,” she said. “It made me want to be more social, so I’ve begun sitting outside in public areas if I’m having lunch, not sitting inside alone staring at a screen,” she reflected.

Surely, careers in diplomacy have been built on less sturdy foundations than this.

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