

I arrived in Florence via train around 8:30PM, the Italian air was thick as the warm wind blew my hair, quite the change from the weather I am used to in Denmark. As I walked down the dark and bustling platform I was greeted by the familiar and comforting faces of my friends, their water bottles and backpacks sticking out in the sea of handbags, leather, and animal print. We walked to their abroad home, modern technology allowing us to talk as if we hadn't been living in separate countries for the past two months.

Our three days together were filled with all of the 'must do' things in Florence. We took the hike to the top of Piazzale Michelangelo, sweated profusely as we twisted up the Duomo steps, all to get the best views of Florence. We ate at the most popular restaurants, drank at their favorite bars, and made sure to document each incredible experience. I never wanted my time in Florence to end, feeling so comfortable settling back into life with my roommates from home, just this time in a different country.

With an early flight the next morning, a trip to Paris lurking over me, I felt the urge to just get on with it. I needed to rip off the band aid, say goodbye to my friends, and get on the plane to start what everyone has assured me is a must do abroad, a solo travel.

Instead of trying to navigate the Florence streets at an odd time of morning, I instead thought it best to just leave early, get to the airport, and wait it out there, knowing that at the least I would definitely be on time.

I said my goodbyes and once more went over the directions to the nearest taxi stand- *straight until the red sign, left at the gelato shop, take the street until you see Santa Croce*-perfect, taxis will be lined up and I will be on my way!

Five minutes later, backpack in tow, I look up at the yellow sign with the letters loudly spelling out TAXI above me. I definitely am in the right place. The dark sky was illuminated by

the surrounding lamps, the grand spectacle that is the Duomo my only point of reference. The warm air began to feel stiff as my eyes darted around every which way, no cars in sight. I definitely could be in the wrong place.

Panic slightly begins to set in as I begin to look around, thinking that of course I must be at the wrong taxi stand, and the real one has to be nearby.

“Honestly, not one bloody taxi in this whole square, that just can’t be right, it can’t!” A blur of long colorful dresses begin to come into focus, as I make out two women, a thin figure with a short brown bob beside a curvy woman, her long curly hair just reaching her waist.

“Excuse me girl, have you seen any taxi’s around, it seems that there are none which simply makes no sense!” Coming down from my bit of panic, a sense of relief seeming to waft over me, I found myself speechless as they looked at me, finally blurting out that I was on my way to the airport.

Speaking as if I wasn’t standing between them the woman with the bob turned to her friend, slurring, “We must help the girl, oh Josephine we just—” A taxi turned into view, the light on top switched on, and off the thin woman went, the cab driver swerving around her to a stop.

The other woman, Josephine, to my surprise began to speak Italian to the driver, pointing at me saying, “la ragazza all’aeroporto, si si andiamo!” In the small car we piled, the scent of smoke and alcohol enclosing me as the women started their questions, “Where do you come from originally? Are you a backpacker, traveling the world? How many places have you explored so far? Oh what an adventure, to be young!”

Their eagerness slowly faded but their polite smiles remained as I explained how I was studying abroad, just visiting some friends for a few days, but now am off to Paris, “But what about you two, what brings you to Florence?”

It turns out that Josephine and Elizabeth had lives just as colorful as their dresses and adventures just as wild as their personalities. The pair met in London aspiring to design jewelry and decorate the interior of homes. By day they worked in cafes and department stores, by night networking with the most fabulous of people at the most popular clubs. They finally decided that Florence was going to be their new home, “London, oh have you been, it really is something dreadful. Gray skies all the time, food is nothing to rave about, and everyone keeps trying to bomb us, it was just time to leave.”

The car came to a stop and the ladies paid the entirety of the fair, kissed me on the cheek, and skipped up the street turning and yelling to me, “Be sure to follow us on Instagram dear!”

Wow I thought, can’t wait to be so free and effortless, just traveling the world like that. My excitement to get to the airport and get to Paris grew as my driver turned up the radio, the upbeat Italian lyrics playing like a soundtrack to the start of my first solo adventure.

“Ciao! Grazie Mille!” I closed the door to the cab, skipped up the stairs in front of me, shot a smile at the security guard staring at me from inside the airport, and continued to push the door open. With a blank stare he looked at me, looked around at the empty lobby, and said, “You can’t be here, the airport is closed, won’t open until 4AM tomorrow”

“I can’t just stay here until my flight, I can’t go back into Florence now?” He stared blankly at me, not an ounce of pity as he walked me outside, saying I could wait out here if I’d like. How kind.

Soon realizing the situation I was in I called my friend to let her know that I was on my way back, “So it turns out that airports actually do close.”

To my right I saw a line of cars, their drivers all huddled together smoking their cigarettes. I approached the group tenaciously, determined to get in a cab and go right back to where I came from without letting my now watery eyes get the best of me.

My one year of Italian seemed to merge with that one year of Spanish I took, making getting a cab that took credit cards seemingly just as hard for them as it was for me. Finally, an older gentleman pointed in his cab, showing me the card reader, and once more, my phone came to my aid, as I typed into my translator exactly where I needed him to take me. I gave him my phone, he put on his glasses, and read my directions for what felt like an eternity. With a thumbs up, he smiled purposefully, and off we went.

As we pulled in front of the apartment I had felt like I had left weeks ago, the man took off his hat revealing his thinning white hair. He pointed to the door, the cab, and his watch, once again giving me a thumbs up, the pity in his eyes meeting mine as he gave me a soft smile patting my shoulder. My watery eyes definitely got the best of me.

As I sat up with my friend, waiting for what would hopefully be my third and final cab of the night, I couldn't help but feel the urge to just cancel my flight, stay in Florence with my friends, and make a flight back to Copenhagen that wasn't so early in the morning.

I was crying because I was confused if I should call home and tell my parents my tale. I was mad because every movie I had watched never showed the airport being closed. But, mostly I was sad because this just wasn't what traveling was supposed to be. In between the tourist stops and the pictures, this travel, this part, was this really it?

I hated that I was scared, I hated that no one spoke English, I hated that I had to leave my friends who made a place feel so comfortable, but mostly I hated that I wasn't flourishing in this solo travel.

I referred to the popular millennial Odyssey articles that inspired me to take the plunge, titles like: *5 Reasons I Decided To Travel Solo (And Why You Should, Too)*. Except this time I read other ones: *Solo Travel Isn't For Everyone—And That's 100% OK*. I was confused, and honestly couldn't relate to either at this moment. 'Don't be afraid of the journey', a classic quote included in both articles, but taking on such different meanings for myself.

My alarm rang, mixing with the sound of a car horn honking. I ran to the window to see the same black taxi waiting for me once more. I rushed down the stairs and hopped in the cab, "Andiamo Signore!" This time, I would make it.

It could be because I hadn't yet slept, or maybe there are different rules at 3AM, but either way, red lights don't seem to mean much at this hour. When we finally pulled back in front of the airport that had turned me away mere hours ago, I couldn't help but smile with utter relief, my last and final Mario Kart taxi in Florence, grazie mille.

I waited to board my plane to Paris, my excitement level definitely not where it should be for a flight that would take me to a brand new country, to see the postcard photos of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe in person. Yet, my mood remained wishing I was still in Florence, or Copenhagen, or even back home, and not en route to The City of Lights.

Two incredibly short hours later I woke up to the flight attendant's gentle tap. After regaining a bit of consciousness British voices and taxi cars filtered through my head as I recalled the hours preceding. So that really did all happen.

A combination of lack of sleep and a bit of paranoia hindered me from doing much of anything besides go straight to my airbnb. If I was with people, would I be exploring the city right now? If I was still in Florence, would I regret not coming here? I just don't understand the

positives of this solo travel. The questions running through my mind reminded me of Josephine and Elizabeth, so carefree as they traveled. But they had each other I thought, and I am alone.

This was a time where travel was supposed to challenge me, and everyone said it would, but then why don't I feel empowered or brave even? Instead, just feeling sorry for myself. I aimlessly went on my phone, looking at the photos of people all around the world, their smiles and joy blurring past as I scrolled more. My sadness seemed to be masked by a bit of anger for my current situation, making me determined to get myself together just the slightest. I was headed for the 'quintessential' part of Paris, to see the Eiffel Tower sparkle and shine at dusk.

As much as I didn't want to like it, as much as I thought it was a tourist trap, I still stood there in awe with just how beautiful the site in front of me was. Of course there were rats running every which way, and people trying to sell little trinkets and wine everywhere, but standing in that moment, taking in this iconic piece of Paris, I for a split second thought that maybe I am doing this travel thing right. I was overcoming fears left and right, picking myself up when I was down, independence, freedom, I have got it all— "Em excuse me miss, you have the weed?"

I looked up startled because these two French men couldn't possibly be talking to me, the only person standing, looking about as American as I could get-what a ridiculous question. After saying no with a bit of a laugh I simply couldn't help, the questions continued.

"How long are you here for?" Not long. "What have you seen so far?" Oh, a lot. "Do you like it here?" Paris is really nice. "Have you been to Republique, we can show you around there?" Early flight tomorrow, I'll pass.

This seemed to be going on for long enough that I felt I should look for my way out. I glanced behind me, silently thanking my choice to stand next to the couple having themselves

quite the spread, the women's bright pink hat almost competing with the spectacle in front of us all. We made eye contact as my gaze went once more to the men before me.

At last they seemed to grow tired of my answers, shaking my hand as they walked off, "If only you didn't have such an early flight!" If only, I thought.

After their departure I decided to stick around a bit longer and soak in more of the view, it only seemed right. A pink hat began to block my view just a minute later, "Hi there! I don't mean to bother you, but I wanted to let you know that my husband over there and I saw those men talking to you"

I was half listening to her comforting English accent, but found myself more distracted by the humongous ring on her left hand, I wonder if she got engaged in Paris, I thought to myself.

"But we wanted to let you know that they are still standing back there, so you are more than welcome to come sit with us until they leave" My mind jumped back into the present.

I don't know if I was more uncomfortable by the fact that I hadn't noticed this fact, that my moment of feeling just a fraction of freedom was crushed with fear, or that this had to happen in the first place. Why did this now have to be a part of my 'solo travel experience'. This moment didn't make my Instagram or get a tag on Facebook. This was a real moment of travel, not the online real that can be so easily reflected.

I think the people that I encountered made my trip what it was, and without a doubt made me realize how lucky I am to find people who restored a little faith in this art of solo traveling. But, as much as their aid was helpful, appreciated, and a good tale to tell in the end, I can't help but think that these hiccups in my trip might not have happened if I were not traveling alone.

Instead of having another person to bounce an idea off of, to navigate, to laugh with, I was alone, lost, and scared. Is this what travel is really all about, is this the great adventure I thought I would come out with when I decided to travel by myself?

In between the snapshots on top of Piazzale Michelangelo and in front of the Eiffel Tower, those very real moments, I was not prepared for. I was experiencing things, both good and bad, all by myself, did that make them great adventures?

Going through this trip by myself I briefly felt this self-satisfaction of just being, this simple act of being present-if only for a moment-felt real, felt authentic. I came out of this solo trip questioning the art of travel, which is why one month later I once again embarked on a solo travel, this time to Bergen, Norway.

I once again got lost and I once again experienced loneliness, but somehow this trip was still different. Leaving this second solo trip, I realized that solo travel doesn't get easier, it doesn't even get better, you just get better at embracing all that this 'must do' adventure is. I found myself become comfortable with being uncomfortable, and thankful for my time spent alone, but even more thankful for the time I spent being able to share these stories with others. I really don't think I mastered all of the five reasons to travel solo, except #5: *You will learn more*. I learned that solo travel isn't for everyone, and that's okay.