

An American's Perspective on the Relaxed Nature of Europe

Traveling to Europe a few summers ago was probably one of the more eye opening experiences I have had. I remember looking forward to seeing all of the “must-see” things like the Eiffel Tower and the Coliseum. While these types of monuments and attractions are definitely a must, there is another aspect of Europe that enamored me maybe even more: the relaxed lifestyle.

One night, walking down the narrow streets of Venice with my family, I remember passing an open set of doors, the mellow sounds of a symphony sweeping through them into the gentle summer air. As far as I can remember, there were a few people sitting on a porch that led to the doors. My family and I were surprised when we saw this; whether for safety or another reason, this would probably be seen as peculiar in America. However, in Venice, the soft melody added to the already calm atmosphere of the laidback city.

Thinking back, I am able to recall a similar experience that occurred very soon after we arrived in Venice. Tired and disoriented upon arriving a few feet from endless canals, bags and suitcases in hand, my family and I were not too pleased when we came across a bridge made entirely of steps. At one point on the way up, a man stopped and asked my sister if she would like him to carry her bag to the top. At first, we were very taken aback, wondering why we would put our belongings into the hands of a stranger. Yet reflecting on it now, after experiencing so many other similar instances across the various places we traveled in Europe, this could simply be another example of the relaxed attitude. In other words, it seems like, in general, whether demonstrated by the open

doors or friendliness of a passerby, people are much more trustworthy of strangers there, perhaps a result of such a seemingly carefree lifestyle.

In Austria, our next stop, we were driving through the light blue mountains, when my dad, a photographer, stopped the car and got out to take a picture. In the meantime, while waiting, a little girl of about four or five approached our car in bright pink shorts and no shirt. She started speaking to us, but having no knowledge of German other than my sister's experience in school, about all we got out of it was something relating to grandma and music. When she was called back, while we could not make out the words, there was no recognizable alarm in the adult's voice, which might be expected to an American due to the fact that she was talking to strangers, a very common "don't" here. While it is not that big of a deal, even something as small as a kid not wearing a shirt can sometimes be seen as out of place. Again, between that and the causality of the girl aimlessly wandering over to us, I felt a lack of structure in the way of life.

While seeming to be a complete shift in focus, I would now like to point out the difference in the idea of consumerism in Europe. Coming from a very consumer-based society, the people of Europe seem to take much more sentiment in craftsmanship of their products, which I feel can sometimes be lost in America due to our focus on mass production and efficiency. While I do not remember the exact place, I believe it might have been Venice again, near the Rialto Bridge, where we encountered a man sitting under a tent hand-making journals. This had a very personal nature and a feeling of a slower pace. I feel as though, where I come from, apart from craft fairs or antique stores, the focus would often be on producing as many journals as possible rather than the uniqueness of each one. Perhaps it is not that Europeans do not care as much about

material things, for the man certainly cared about his journals, but that they are less focused on mass production, but instead take the time and effort not to lose the craftsmanship.

This idea of always wanting more in America was further contrasted by things as simple as food. In Europe, the portions of food were much more practical. You could clear your plate and feel not like you overate, but merely satisfied. Also, while eating in an alley in Rome, it was not uncommon to have to pull your chair in to let a small car squeeze on by. Just the fact that a car was small enough that it could fit through such a narrow space demonstrates again a lesser focus on the “bigger is better” mentality often present back home.

While this relaxed environment and less consumer-based society could seem unrelated, perhaps it is this apathy towards efficiency and consumption that allows for a more relaxed, slow-paced environment. People are less governed by the rigid structure and fast pace that seems to supplement an efficiency-focused society. While the consumer mindset of America is not necessarily negative because it certainly has its perks, it was riveting to experience such a different ambiance. Therefore, while I fell victim to the materialism of my home country, originally expecting to be captivated by the physical things like gondolas and castles (and while I was certainly not disappointed), what fascinated me most was the intangible: the laidback, authentic culture of a place so different from my own.