

THIRD PLACE, ESSAY
Study Abroad Storytelling Contest 2025

“A Greek Awakening (Don’t try this at home)”

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Never could I have imagined that I would be sitting in a Greek emergency room three days into my winter study abroad program.

My story starts a few days before embarking on the trip of a lifetime to Athens, Greece for three weeks. I was ecstatic to be journeying for such a length of time that felt so foreign to me. It was daunting, of course, but I was suspiciously calm about the whole ordeal.

While my mind was at ease, something in my subconscious must have been stirring. My lifelong struggle with insomnia had almost become a matter of the past in college, but it suddenly resurfaced shortly before I left for Greece. I began experiencing sleepless nights for the first time in my life and their severity only increased. I started imagining just how bad it would be should this whole sleeping problem follow me to Greece (spoiler alert: I have a masters degree in self sabotaging).

Two nights before the trip began, I did not sleep. And I mean laying in my bed for 8 hours and not dozing off for a single second. I was dumbfounded. But more so I was terrified. I’ll fast forward through the next few days but you’ll see that things don’t improve after departure either. My body forced me into an hour or two of sleep on the plane and for the next few nights at our accommodations in Athens. On the third day I was so desperate for a wink of rest that I dragged my professor to the euroclinic in hopes that they would be able to prescribe me some sort of sleeping pill, to no avail. In fact, the entire experience, having been my first ever time in the ER let alone the *Greek* ER, seemed to inflame my anxiety. I went that entire night without sleeping.

I didn't 'wake up' that next morning but rather opened my eyes out of my overnight battle for sleep. My body was shaky, my vision blurry, and it felt like the world was crashing down around me. I approached my professor and our institution hosts with teary eyes in desperation.

At this point there were three weeks ahead of me and surviving them seemed almost unimaginable were this issue to persist. I was anxiety ridden and devastated, feeling like this once in a lifetime experience was being stripped away from me. But deep down, I knew there was no way I was going to let that happen. I was determined to give my sleeplessness a run for its money.

The thought of leaving my room felt impossible after six sleepless nights. But I decided that if I wasn't going to sleep, I might as well go out and experience the city. I walked the streets of Athens and soaked in my surroundings. Sitting around a fireplace with new friends, the stunning acropolis was in sight- a view I'll never get over. For that split second, nothing else really mattered.

My nightly struggle constituted just eight hours of my day. But I left no room for it during the other sixteen. The remainder of the trip entailed a prolonged adrenaline rush that propelled me through the exhaustion. We climbed 1200 steps to see three acropoleis, visited four additional cities, trekked up four monasteries, and explored over ten museums and archaeological sites. I walked the same steep hills day after day and met some of the kindest locals who were eager to share their culture. We tasted olive oil, made plaster masks, swam in lakes, learned Greek, played with stray cats, and sat in the hellenic parliament. I visited the Melissa Network and learned of countless refugee women who have struggled to survive in their own countries and escaped to Greece for a better life. Suddenly my sleep issues were just a star

amongst the large blanket of the sky.

Not to mention the content of our class, competition in ancient Greece, was my mental inspiration. I internalized the resilience and philosophies of the ancient Greeks and envisioned myself as one of them. A Greek olympian wouldn't falter just because of a little sleeplessness. The true silver lining was the connection my insomnia drove between me and my community. I had reached a new level of vulnerability amongst my peers. Through this I bonded with them as we went through this unfamiliar but beautiful new experience together. My friends were always checking in on me, my professor gave me some of the most sincere advice, and I found a parent-like figure in our institution host. I can't imagine having studied abroad without those people. I consider myself incredibly lucky.

So I laughed about my problems in class at the Athens center and ate spanakopita on a bench with tired eyes and power napped at the top of the Acrocorinth while listening to Mamma Mia. But I filled every second with joy. And by letting go and immersing myself into this new country I realized that the trip was coming to a close before my eyes. We had dinner on the last night at the same restaurant we started the trip with. This time I was surrounded by friends instead of strangers, and my heart was full of peace instead of uncertainty.

My personal story didn't end when I returned home. But I came home with the richest experiences and as a better person. It taught me to let go of what you can't immediately fix and make the most of what's right in front of you. Greece has been the catalyst for a change in my life that needed to happen long before I visited. And for that, I am grateful. As I'm sure the ancient Greeks would endorse, the human mind and body are capable of so much more than you could ever imagine.