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## Ports of Entry

Alaina Handrick

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PORTS OF ENTRY

by

Alaina Handrick

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Journalism and Mass Communication

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Don McLeese  
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2019

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
Journalism and Mass Communication have been completed.

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**Ports of Entry**

Alaina Handrick

Journalism and Mass Communication

Spring 2019

Honors Project

## Introduction

I'm by no means the most seasoned traveler in the world, but I've been on two amazing international journeys so far in my life: four months studying abroad on Semester at Sea and a month-long backpacking trip through Europe with my best friend.

One of the things I've always regretted most about my travels is that I never seemed to get as much out of them as I thought other people did. They all had life-altering, earth-shatteringly deep reflections to share with everyone once they returned. Meanwhile, I couldn't figure out how to tear my gaze away from my future plans long enough to focus inwards.

But, as is the case with most things in life, I just needed a little distance and a little time. Maybe my experiences hadn't been earth-shattering, but they were life-altering, in ways that were both subtle and significant. As it turns out, traveling impacted me more than I had thought, and these five stories helped me figure out how.

## Sea

In September of your sophomore year, you leave the Midwest for the MV World Odyssey, a former German luxury cruise ship only two years younger than you. It now carries 600 students and professors around the world twice every year. Travelers, they say, not tourists. You are not tourists on Semester at Sea. You travel to learn about the world and try to understand the people living in it. The world is your classroom, and home is where the ship is.

On the first day, currents are strong and winds are high, so the entire front section of the ship is closed off. You've spent the past few months imagining sunny poolside days, but the pool is closed because the seas are so rough that most of the water has splashed onto the deck.

Your very first class is Global Studies at 0930 hours. As you walk to the large theater-turned-classroom in the middle of the ship, you notice that crisply folded seasickness bags have appeared in the hallways overnight, empty and ready for use. The crew walks briskly and smoothly through the halls and the students lurch from side to side, grabbing onto railings as the waves toss them around. In the middle of her lecture, your professor runs off stage. She's seasick. You feel nearly as bad. So does everyone else. When she returns, all 600 students erupt into applause. This is the first time you feel like the people on this ship are family.

The next day the sun comes out, the seas calm, and your International Relations class takes a quick break to watch the dolphins swimming alongside the ship. You check a box on your bucket list.

A month later, with memories of seasickness and strong waves long behind you, the captain announces that the currents will not be friendly as the ship sails into Casablanca. You're advised to place your laptop on the floor instead of on the desk and secure your belongings if possible. You sleep on the top bunk and this information is not comforting. But the waves pass, the ship docks, and you have yet to fall out of your bunk bed. In fact, you wonder how you're ever going to be able to sleep without the gentle rocking of the ship and the low hum of the engines. This life is normal now. You don't know how you're supposed to go back after this.

Long after every last student has returned to the ship from the streets of Dakar, a crew member makes an announcement that students should be on the lookout for anyone who doesn't look like they belong on the ship. Later, there is another announcement that crew members should report to their stations to begin a search. You and your friends discuss the situation briefly but receive no further explanation. You finish your homework and get ready for bed, because it was hot in Senegal and you're tired. Before you go to sleep, you write about the announcement in your journal because you don't want to forget to tell your family. Just another blip in a four-month stretch of adventure.

One day you find out that a girl in one of your classes had snuck a dying seagull onto the ship when a video of her holding the bird is airdropped to the entire student population during Global Studies. You later learn that when the bird died, she'd thrown it overboard, something that maritime law apparently makes illegal. When you discover that she's been kicked off the ship, you're not surprised. When you find out that the reason that she was kicked off was simply that she hadn't been attending classes, you are surprised. Not because skipping class was useless when there's nowhere else to go on a small ship, but because you can't believe anyone would jeopardize, waste, or trivialize this experience. You know that this is one of the greatest things you will ever do but the girl with the bird teaches you that not everyone feels the same way.

You don't realize how isolated your shipboard community is until the night of the 2016 presidential election. A few dozen students gather in the theater-turned-classroom to watch the results on MSNBC. Normally your only internet access is to email, but even that access is shut off so that the news livestream can run smoothly. You are at the mercy of the news anchors. The crowd dwindles throughout the night, but you stay until 4:45 in the morning ship time, when Hillary Clinton concedes the election to Donald Trump.

Nothing feels real. It's too late at night, too early in the morning for this. You go back to your cabin to sleep for a few hours before returning to Global Studies. Your little shipboard community feels like it's been cracked down the middle when the professors decide to discuss the election during class and ask for student participation. Tensions are far too high, we are too far from home, and there are students who simply walk out. There's nobody who doesn't feel

alienated. You wonder if your absentee ballot ever made it to its destination. You wonder if it even matters. You cocoon yourself in a ship life bubble, forgetting everything but the ocean and endless horizons and the wind that ties your hair into knots when you're up on the deck. A few days later you dock in Brazil, and everyone lets six days of street music erase the memory of what awaits us back home.

A girl in one of your classes leaves the program in Brazil. Homesickness, she says. You can't imagine leaving your shipboard life voluntarily, can't imagine wanting to go home early after all the world you've seen. You'd forgotten that maybe nonstop, breathtaking, exhausting traveling isn't for everyone, and have to keep telling yourself that just because it made you stronger doesn't mean that everyone grows the same.

When you do return to the States, you can't let go of your journey yet. Instead of flying home, you take a train across the country because constant movement in a tiny train car feels more like home than your parents' house does. When you get back, you won't be a traveler anymore, at least not for a while. You hold onto the nostalgia as long as you can even though it hurts, trusting that it will eventually turn to wanderlust. It does.

In two years you take off again, this time alone and with nothing but a backpack. For the old you, this kind of adventure would've been unthinkable. Now, nothing is.

## Morocco

The fourth time my head rolled forward and I jerked awake, the guy sitting next to me finally offered to let me rest my head on his shoulder. His name was Alex, and we'd met just a couple hours earlier when we were crammed together in the back row of our van, the last of three in our little caravan through the mountains.

At 5am that day, all 46 of us had been perched on top of our backpacks in the middle of the road in the Port of Casablanca, waiting patiently for the vans to collect us. The trip organizer was a Canadian college student named Steven. He'd gotten us an incredible deal—a 4-day trip into the Moroccan desert, complete with camel trekking and a stay in a nomad camp—for less than \$200 each.

The advantage of a trip like this was that I didn't have to plan it. The disadvantage, naturally, was that absolutely none of us had any idea what was going on. By the time the tour guides were two hours late, the sun was up and I was beginning to feel sorry for Steven, who, in an attempt to figure out what was happening, had taken off running the mile and a half to the port entrance. By the time he got back, the vans had showed up and we had piled in, ready to experience everything Morocco had to offer.

But we were in Casablanca, and the desert is a long drive from the coast nearly to the Algerian border. We drove over 12 hours through winding, foggy mountain roads with a driver who, whenever I looked up to the front of the van, wasn't touching the steering wheel. It took a few hours for me to realize that I'd left my headphones, water, and food in my backpack, which was stowed away somewhere in the trunk. It took much less time than that to notice that the back row of this van was not necessarily designed to comfortably accommodate people who were over 5 feet tall. I didn't mind the lack of comfort as much as I minded that I hadn't been prepared. I was practically an infant in terms of international travel, and I hadn't quite gotten the hang of it.

But I had my new friend Alex to keep me company. We chatted about crazy American tourists we'd encountered and camels and how it was going to be incredibly hot for the rest of our journey through Africa.

As we drove along one of the narrow roads winding through the Atlas Mountains, our driver swerved to avoid a parked car, nearly running down a bicyclist in the process. Alex and I watched out our window as the driver pulled the van over to the side of the road, got out, and

yelled at the other driver for a few minutes. The bicyclist had seemed fine with it—he just kept going, disappearing alarmingly quickly into the fog.

I didn't mind our brief pitstop, even though we'd come pretty close to careening over the side of the mountain or losing our driver in some sort of physical altercation. I was just watching events unfold with a kind of mild interest, a side effect of a life of relative privilege. Tragedies had never seemed to make their way too close to me, the result being an unwavering faith that everything would always be okay.

The little things—a stranger talking to me on the street, a local noticing everything I was doing wrong—could still make me nervous, but an unexpectedly long journey into a foreign country with a driver who didn't seem entirely confident in his route was so completely out of my control that I felt I had no business being too concerned about the outcome. Besides, I had chosen to be there, and I'd never felt anything but contempt for travelers who bemoan every minor inconvenience as a life-altering disaster.

Our stop put us behind schedule, and the two vans carrying the rest our group had long since vanished up the road. By the time we got to the little town on the edge of the desert, the sun had set. We meandered slowly up and down the streets, and at one point our driver rolled down his window to talk to some people on the sidewalk.

I am nosier than I like to admit. It's part of the reason that I like to learn languages—I want to know everything. I couldn't resist tapping the girl in front of me on the shoulder to ask what was going on.

She said, "The rumor going around the bus is that the driver is lost."

I said, "Okay, cool, just checking."

About half the people in the van were asleep by this point at night, and as far as I was concerned the situation was more funny than anything. We were van full of 20-year-old white kids lost in the desert with no cell service and zero knowledge of the Arabic language. Alex had the same nonchalant attitude I did, and I wasn't sure if he really was just a go-with-the-flow kind of guy or if, like me, the hours of driving had simply depleted him of the energy to be truly concerned about anything. We were making plans in case we had to live on the bus forever when, after some probably unplanned off-roading, we stumbled upon the other two vans and the rest of our tour group.

Everything that happened after that point seemed like a dream, an otherworldly experience that would've been worthwhile after a far more harrowing journey than the one we'd taken. We wrapped scarves around our heads to shield our eyes from blowing sand and rode camels an hour into the desert to our camp. Our guide spoke five languages, and after dinner he led us up the side of a sand dune while telling us that he liked American tourists better than European tourists. I'd never heard of anyone liking American tourists before, and I never heard it again after that. Maybe he was just trying to be nice.

The sand was softer than any beach I'd ever been to and a 21-year-old named Dan taught us all about astrology while we looked up at the stars shooting across the sky. I don't remember exactly what he said about the stars, but I do remember what it felt like to listen. And I remember thinking that nothing I ever do in my life will be quite like this.

## Peru

The first day the ship docks in Peru, my friends and I ride a bus along the coast and jump into freezing cold ocean to swim with sea lions.

The second day, I need to find a ride into Lima. The Port of Callao is not a place where girls walk alone, and word around the ship is that the taxis—or rather, the taxi drivers—are not always trustworthy. But this isn't like it was in Athens, where “not trustworthy” just meant that tourists would probably get charged higher rates. Here in this industrial port city just outside of Lima, the concerns are things like kidnapping and robbery. I can't ask anyone to come with me, because I am the only one invited on this particular excursion.

It's not like I studied abroad with the sole purpose of witnessing a tiny slice of South American history in person, though that turns out to be one of the side effects. Before I left for Semester at Sea, I'd learned that my mom's landlady was good friends with the new first lady of Peru. We had talked about arranging a meeting. I had thought it would end in nothing, but it turns out that I'd underestimated the power and politeness of a network of Midwestern women.

The only way I can get from the Port of Callao to the president's house is Uber, which I've learned by now is usually the safest option anyway.

I assess my options. The port has no wifi to order an Uber and the ship's wifi is limited to email. We've been specifically instructed not to take the taxis that congregate outside our ship. I also realize that the crew has just begun a surprise lifeboat drill, which means that no one is allowed off the ship for the next hour or so.

It would once have been more in character for me to simply give up and send an apology email, but my character seems to have changed somewhat since the beginning of this voyage.

So I do what any other 20-year-old girl would do. I email my mom, praying that the fact that she sits in front of a computer at work all day means that she's looking at her email. I get lucky. From her desk in the Wisconsin state capitol, my mom downloads the Uber app and tries to choose the right pick up location.

I get lucky again. The Uber driver miraculously finds me in the parking lot of the port when I'm finally allowed to disembark. I smile when he shows me that my mom has been

messaging him constantly with updates about what I look like and how to find me in English, a language the driver does not speak.

During our drive he asks me if I have a novio. I say sí, automatically. I'm very single but it's usually safer to pretend I'm not. At this point in my travels it's become a reflex. He asks me how long we've been dating. I say casi un año y media. That's when he tells me that he has a girlfriend of nine years and I feel a little guilty for assuming he was doing anything other than making conversation. Not guilty enough to ever change my answer, but still.

We arrive in a neighborhood of large houses and sparse traffic. The president's house is easy to spot because it's the one with a security guard out front.

As soon as he asks me to show him my ID I realize that wearing a money belt under a dress was not at all a good decision. While I extract it, I explain to him that I'm here to see the First Lady, Nancy. The look he gives me in response is not comforting and I search deep in the recesses of my mind for the words to explain that she invited me.

I like to think it's a testament to our shared Midwestern upbringing that Nancy still welcomes me into her home, sweaty, stressed, and nearly 2 hours late.

"Across the street there is a pre-Incan pyramid," she says when we come to a short pause in our conversation about the weather.

I hadn't even noticed. I'd been too busy being intimidated by the security guard.

The sounds of constant construction emanate from the high-rise apartment buildings surrounding us. The makeshift slums crawl up the sides of the mountains as the country's population pours into Lima.

She tells me that this city is an arid desert by the ocean, but inside her husband's courtyard, vines climb the walls and pink flowers grow all around the swimming pool. I act like I'm not disappointed that her husband isn't there.

It's pleasantly warm. Lima doesn't really have weather like we both knew back in Wisconsin.

I set down my glass of Coke; she puts aside her cup of tea. I pull the black journal I bought from the school store out of my purse and hand it to Nancy. "It's the traditional Semester at Sea gift," I tell her.

She asks her housekeeper for a few soles and we walk across the street to the museum at the bottom of the pyramid. The tour guide is ecstatic to see Nancy—it's not every day that the First Lady of Peru walks into your museum and asks you for a tour.

Nancy translates for me because I only understand about a third of what our guide says. We learn about the textiles they've unearthed and the type of stone used to build the pyramid. We leave. Her security guards help me catch a cab back to the port and Nancy goes home.

Two years later, I read in the news that her husband, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, has resigned the presidency. He'd barely survived his first impeachment, and a second was coming. The article says something about corruption, something about illegal payments. I don't know enough to fully understand it.

Nancy is living in the States now, visiting her sick daughter who goes to school here. If it hadn't been for her child's serious illness, Nancy may not have even been allowed to leave Peru. Her husband is still there and she has trouble getting a hold of him.

She's from an even smaller Wisconsin town than I am. She met the future Peruvian president in Australia and has been to more countries than anyone else I know combined. Now she's back, and I wonder if I'll ever get so far from home.

## **Ireland**

According to a online quiz I once took, my greatest strength is that I am futuristic. That's absolutely true, although I'm not sure I would call it a strength. I'm a daydreamer. I idealize the future. When I travel, I can't help but long eagerly for the next destination when I should be focusing on enjoying where I am at the moment. My trip to Europe was no different.

In Denmark, I thought of France. In France, I daydreamed of returning to Italy. In Italy, I was eager for the sun-kissed new adventures that would be Croatia. After leaving Croatia, we hit the streets of Athens and although I was struck by how much nostalgic love I had for that city, I couldn't help but think of where I would be next.

This is probably why my travels never turn out quite as picture-perfect as I want them to. I've thought many times about trying to control my unrealistic expectations and live in the moment, but I was so wildly excited for my next stop that my flight out of Athens was almost painful.

Ireland.

It's always held a special place on the far too long list of destinations I want to visit before I die. My friend and I had parted ways in Monastiraki Square in Athens. She left for a family wedding in India, and I flew to Dublin.

I'd always wanted to travel solo. It seemed like something all the real travelers did, the ones who were effortlessly adventurous and always knew what they were doing. I wasn't afraid of traveling alone, and although I certainly didn't expect everything to go perfectly, I held onto hope that it might. For once, I was not disappointed.

The only thing that went wrong was that I did not spend nearly enough time there. And although I fell in love with every Irish city along the way, Galway fulfilled my wildest dreams in a way that nowhere else ever had.

I spent the train ride there watching the sun rise over the countryside and talking to an Irish gentleman in his sixties who was on his way back home from a business trip in Dublin. We chatted about the many attractions of Dublin, and he promised that I would love Galway, his hometown.

I spent the morning wandering up and down the streets with a smile on my face, fidgeting with my new Claddagh ring. Hands, heart, crown. Just like the one my grandmother wore, and purchased from the same ring maker that had sold a nearly identical design to Queen Victoria.

I spent the night dancing from pub to pub with strangers I'd met in the lobby of my hostel. A woman from Georgia who'd spent the past year teaching English in Thailand and who was getting married as soon as she returned home. A brother and sister from Canada who were traveling together for the first time, the sister a seasoned nomad and the brother a relative homebody. A girl from Michigan who bought a hula hoop at every stop on her journey so she could dance with it whenever the opportunity arose. An Irishman named Paddy Ryan, who'd come up from Dublin to play the Uilleann pipes with a band at a pub on Quay Street.

My favorite thing about Galway was the music. The street we walked down was lined with musicians and Paddy Ryan stopped at every single one, setting aside his Uilleann pipes to coax an instrument out of a busker's hands so that he could try it for himself. The pub he was going to was only five minutes from our hostel, but it took us nearly an hour to get there. I didn't care. I was too busy laughing and ducking out of the way when we ended up in the middle of an impromptu rugby match in the middle of the street.

There's nothing I could say to accurately describe what it was like to stand in a crowded pub in the middle of Galway with a pint of Guinness in my hands, listening to the same Irish folk songs I'd grown up with. I wasn't thinking about the next few hours or the next day or my rapidly approaching flight back home. Every time the band played a tune I recognized I felt like I was just a little bit more anchored in the present and just a little less prone to drifting off into the future.

The night eventually dwindled, like nights do. The girl from Michigan disappeared first, then Paddy Ryan. The woman from Georgia was long gone. The Canadians and I made plans to see the Cliffs of Moher the next day before making our way back to the hostel.

The worst part about finding a place that finally captured and held my attention was knowing I had to leave.

I have never been homesick a day in my life, but there is always something appealing about going home at the end of a long journey. I expected, after a month of living out of a backpack, to be burned out and eager for the familiarity of the Midwest. I was wrong. I didn't want to leave Ireland.

On the flight home, I started making a list of all the things that I hadn't had time to do. Seeing the Burren. Kissing the Blarney Stone. Sailing out to the Aran Islands. Visiting the castle that bares my grandmother's maiden name.

My week in Ireland was longer than I'd ever spent in any other country but somehow it didn't feel like enough. I want to go back someday, but even if I never make it I'll always have that week. That week when I finally figured out how to stop neglecting the present to make room for the future. A week had at least been enough to learn how to do that.

## Athens

On our last full day in Athens, we awoke to rain that was supposed to continue all day. We looked out the window, looked up the forecast on our phones, and decided that maybe staying in was okay.

It was the summer after our junior year, and my best friend and I were doing the most stereotypical thing two college kids could do—we were backpacking around Europe. Semester at Sea had given me both the courage to travel abroad and an insatiable, almost painful desire to go everywhere I possibly could. My dad thought I was crazy, because broke college kids aren't supposed to travel. I didn't care. Maybe the reason that backpacking is so popular among college students is that we're used to being homeless. In and out of dorm rooms, hauling futons from apartment to apartment for four years. Back and forth between home and school, our extra belongings piled in our childhood closets. Constant movement.

But on our last day in Athens, we decided we were going to stay put. This was the first time in a month that we'd had a room to ourselves, generally preferring to stay in crowded hostels filled with bunk beds because they were cheaper. Athens was already pretty inexpensive, so we'd treated ourselves to our own room for this last stop on our journey. Being alone made it easier to take this break—we didn't feel like we had to compete with all the other backpackers for the title of Who Did the Most Today.

Anyone who's ever traveled knows that there's a strong stigma against taking breaks. Travelers are supposed to be nonstop from the moment they step off of the plane to the moment their journey comes to an end. If we don't cram as much as humanly possible into each day without regard for sleep, we're ungrateful travelers who don't know what we're missing.

Luckily the friend I was traveling with felt, as I did, that the rain was a sign that it was time for us to catch up on our rest. She was less susceptible to the outside pressure to be a perfect traveler, and I'd been to Athens a couple years earlier. We were both able to accomplish the miraculous feat of taking a break in the middle of an adventure without feeling too guilty.

Our day began at noon, when we finally ventured out of the hostel in search of the donut shop we'd found a few days earlier. We were staying only a block or two from Monastiraki

Square, which, among other things, was an entrance to a flea market. Since the rain had let up a little, we wandered for a while before turning around and heading back home.

The whole day was one of those dreamy experiences that seems both to drag on forever and slip by in a few moments. We drifted in and out of the hostel a few more times to find a snack and then to find dinner, but for the most part we stayed inside, listening to the rain hit the window and thinking about how we would be back in the States soon. Back to my summer sublease, then to on-campus housing, then to wherever I ended up after graduation. Always moving, always changing.

Bouncing from country to country reminded me of the feeling I usually get when someone asks me where my hometown is. Is it the town where I was born? Do I tell them it's the city I went to preschool in, or the one I where I attended elementary school, or middle school, or high school? Is it where my dad lives or where my mom lives? They're all different places. I never know what to say. Maybe that's why backpacking didn't feel as strange as I thought it would. On Semester at Sea, no matter where we went, we always had a place to come home to. Home was where the ship was. But this kind of travel was much more familiar. The act of packing up everything and heading off to the next adventure, never quite sure whether or not I had everything I needed, felt natural.

So maybe it didn't matter that more than one place felt like home to me. Change came so naturally that I wasn't sure how I would handle putting down roots anyway. As I sat on my hostel bed in Athens, eating fruit I'd bought on the street for a euro, I counted all the places I'd visited and all the places I'd ever called home, and thought for the first time that maybe I was lucky to have so many.

## SJMC Honors Project Evaluative Component

I've never been very good at reflecting. I prefer to take things as they come and trust that I'm growing from my experiences without ever giving much thought to how they've changed me. I didn't anticipate that this project, a collection of stories from the time I've spent outside the United States, would be any different, and I'm glad I was wrong. This project gave me the opportunity to reflect not only on how I've grown through my travels, but also how I've grown as a writer through studying journalism.

At the beginning of the semester I viewed this endeavor as a simple exercise in creative writing, a chance to flex the muscles that I haven't used since I got to college and started writing nothing but essays and research-focused articles. And it certainly has given me that chance—I've had the freedom to write how I want during this project, in whichever style I feel is best. While I thought that these stories would have very little to do with the Journalism education I've received, looking back through what I've written I can see how studying Journalism has impacted my writing. I'm less flowery and more concise than I used to be. I make fewer mistakes. The language I use is more readable. I've gotten infinitely better at sharing my work and accepting criticism, something which used to be extremely difficult for me. These are all things that my Journalism education gave me without my even noticing, and a project that I thought wouldn't reflect the reality of my major very well ended up being the perfect capstone.

In addition to growing as a writer, I was surprised to find how much I've grown as a person and a traveler. While I know that traveling expands our horizons and changes us for the better, because that's what I've always been told, writing about my experiences was the first time that I noticed how much I've actually grown. I kept a blog on Semester at Sea because that's what everyone did, but my focus was simply on chronicling everything I'd done in each city without giving much thought to what it all meant. My journals, when I remembered to write in them, were the same. This project challenged me to dive deeper into my experiences and think about how they affected the way I see the world. I didn't realize just how much I've grown since I boarded my first flight across the Atlantic. When I began Semester at Sea, I was 19 years old and afraid of everything, and it showed in the way I traveled. By the time I went to Ireland I was nearly 22 and bold enough to do pretty much anything I wanted. I see my education at Iowa reflected in this transformation: traveling wasn't the only thing that pushed me out of my

comfort zone. So did journalism. Learning to walk up to strangers in the street and ask for an interview is a lot like learning to ask for help when you're in a foreign country and you don't know how the metro works.

The most difficult thing about this project was the freedom of it. For most of our academic lives, we're given specific parameters for every assignment. We learn to operate under strict instructions and forget how to do things without guidance. Part of the reason I was interested in doing an honors project was a desire to see if I could complete an entire project of my own devising, without instructions or very much extrinsic motivation. The skill of doing something, and doing it well, for my own benefit and not for a grade or because there's a deadline coming up is difficult to master. While I certainly have not mastered it, this project has reminded me that writing for the sake of writing is a valuable use of time.

More than anything, I've learned to use writing to be more thoughtful about my experiences, especially the ones as life-changing as international travel. I have the skill set to use storytelling in a meaningful way—that's the whole point of studying journalism. I just had to learn how to apply it in a way that makes sense for me.