



RETURNEE OF THE MONTH

NOVEMBER 2019



BLAKE HESSON

Program: UVA in Lyon, spring 2019

Background: 4th year from Lincoln, VA

Major: Global Development Studies & French double major

Affiliations: President of Queer Student Union; LGBTQ center intern

WHY DID YOU GO ON THE UVA IN LYON PROGRAM?

I chose this program because of the many testimonials from former French House residents who went abroad, and from meeting French exchange students from Lyon that talked about the school and the city. The program was as in a city that I hadn't been to, which was something that I was hoping for since Paris was somewhere I had previously been.

NUMBER ONE WAY THE EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR GROWTH

I think this experience made me so much more independent as it really is something that you do alone, which is not to say that you have no one to support you, but it is to say that you have to do a lot of things by yourself and for yourself.



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HOW WAS STUDYING ABROAD DIFFERENT THAN YOU EXPECTED?

Study abroad was a lot different than I anticipated. I think in the US we have a tendency to romanticize Europe as the zenith of culture and experience, while glossing over real and potential issues with the region and countries. For France, I had been to Paris and was exposed to French culture in a very insular way, while Lyon was more expansive. I expected to become best friends with French people, which was not my experience at all. I found it hard to connect with the French people I met, not meaning that there was no connection at all, but for them it was very conditional, since I wasn't going to be there permanently. The majority of the friends I made were other exchange students from all around the world. In retrospect, I am more grateful for these friendships as I got to meet people who I probably would not have met otherwise, and now I am not localized to friendships from just one area of the globe.



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EDUCATION
ABROAD

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DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR A STUDENT TRAVELING ABROAD?

It may be hard to form a community directly with French people, but it's not impossible. My strongest queer community was with other study abroad students, so I would say find community where you can. Also, I would recommend to be open about how you're feeling with yourself and with others because there is this pressure to constantly be happy and having fun while abroad, but you will miss home and that's okay, it's just about realizing it's happening and being aware of your feelings. Finding someone to talk to about what's going on, either a mental health professional or a friend, would be really beneficial in making yourself feel more at home in your new home.

BEST MEMORY?

My best memory has to be when me and friends from Australia, the UK, and the US climbed to the top of Fourvière, a tall hill and landmark, late one night after going to a jazz show. We found the perfect view of the city and it was the perfect temperature. It is definitely one of the memories that I think about often. Another of my favorite memories was going to Lisbon, Portugal with my roommate Addie (pictured) — it was just an amazing city and is definitely underrated.

HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR ACADEMIC OR CAREER GOALS?

My courses definitely contributed to my career path and academic path as a Global Development Studies major and a French major as I got to put my French speaking skills to the test and improve them through school and home life in a homestay, where I stayed in a local French household. The courses at Sciences Po aligned perfectly with my majors and were the best and most interesting that I took while abroad.

