

LEONARDO WORK PLACEMENT CASE STUDY

Name: Swyn Angharad Spencer

Destination city: Florence, Italy

Placement: Riding for the Disabled centre in Florence: Horse riding stables delivering opportunities for therapy, achievement and enjoyment for both children and adults with disabilities.

Dates: 17/09/2010 – 17/12/2010

My Placement

I was extremely fortunate in my given placement at the horse stables which provides horse riding classes for disabled students. It truly combined everything for me as it was an opportunity to work with people, to learn Italian, and work with animals. My background experiences are diverse, but I have a lot of hands on experience teaching and working with children and adults, as well as animals. Therefore this experience in Italy really provided me with further building blocks to my work and personal interests.

This opportunity in Florence allowed me to work both behind the scene in the preparation of the horses, and during the students riding lessons. My tasks included brushing, picking horse's hooves, and tacking up (putting on Saddle and Bridle), and ensuring the horses were warm enough by providing them with horse coats. I also lead the horses and ponies around the indoor horse classroom, and led them back to the stables at the end. Of course I was also able to build a strong bond with the students, and assisted the students with their individual needs before, during and after the lessons. Occasionally young Italian volunteers would come to help with the preparation and I would guide them and show them what was needed to do for efficient team working.



Students would brush the horses and ponies before their ride.



Students were encouraged to take responsibilities where possible – therefore they were encouraged to measure up their own stirrup size before riding the horse.



Me at work hooves picking one of the ponies – the work was physical but rewarding. It certainly made me fitter!

If I were to do the placement again, I would choose the stables all over again. I have been fortunate. And I loved going to work everyday. I also heard a lot of Italian, and gradually became confident in the vocabulary and phrases I needed at work.

No visit to Florence is complete without visiting some of its famous art galleries and climbing to the top of the enormous Duomo (cathedral). Through visiting art museums in Florence my eyes were exposed to beautiful and very old art work. A very important part of Florence culture. I even met up with famous sculpture of warrior and hero David in his original form in the Academia museum and his replica in Piazza Signoria.

I also visited a farmers market where I tasted a variety of Florentine gastronomy, and during my three months tasted as much pasta or gnocchi with Truffa's, and traditionally baked Italian pizza as possible. "Che buono"! (very tasty!)

Job related skills

The whole experience at my placement was fantastic to build on my previous experiences, I was valued in the placement as a worker and using my initiative was essential as I had a lot of responsibilities. I felt I was needed every day. I was able to use my people and animal skills, by working in a team as well as on my own, and by working confidently and kindly with the horse. I worked in the afternoons Monday – Friday, and the work was physical and practical.

I had always been interested in horses and throughout the years I have had various opportunities to ride and handle horses, and even volunteered at a local riding for the Disabled Centre when I was in secondary school, but certainly I was and still not an equine expert. For this project they wanted enthusiasm, good communication skills, and someone they could rely on to be on time every day, and to carry out the tasks. During my placement in Italy I wasn't there to ride, in fact I didn't ride once. My responsibilities were strictly for preparing the horses and ponies for class, and working with the students to help them during mounting, stirrup measuring and class activities. I am extremely happy with what I was able to give to the placement through my previous skill, as well as what I have gained from this project.

Language Skills and intercultural awareness

Working with the disabled students and in a team with my work placement tutor Francesca and other volunteers came naturally. We communicated very well even though there was a language barrier, as I was a beginner in the Italian language. However I was fortunate to be fluent in Spanish, and as both Italian and Spanish are similar I was able to understand fairly well, and pick vocabulary up quickly more or less from the first day. My advice would be learning as much as you can before you go. I benefited greatly by the fact that I had language advantage.

As I worked in the afternoons I found an affordable language school and attend Italian class in the centre of Florence for two hours in the mornings. Everybody in my class was from diverse backgrounds. There were students from Brazil, Ukraine, Peru, Iraq, America, Morocco, France and Scotland in my class. Our teacher was from Sicilia the South of Italy and was very enthusiastic and friendly. Also the Italian classes organised by the Leonardo Da Vinci program at another language school was a good introduction to the language at the start, and a good opportunity to get to know other Leonardo participants.

Enjoyed most

Enjoyed the bond formed with people and horses at my placement, as well as people that I met socially in my spare time. I had a full social life, and made firm friendships time with other Leonardo Participants from both the Welsh

and Spanish group. We had lots of fun together. We arranged dinners, and days out to places such as Sienna, San Gimignano, and Lucca. I was able to learn not only Italian, but also to practice my Spanish during my 3 month stay. Can I do it all over again?



The above photos are of me and black horse D-Rex. I was able to form a bond with all the six horses that I worked with at the stables.

Challenges

It takes time to make bonds with local people to be able use the Italian I had learnt, because they already go about their daily lives. Especially in such a touristic city as Florence which is the art capital of the world. However to overcome this I arranged one to one language exchanges through contacts I found in the local English paper 'The Florentine', and through a social network site. I certainly had to make an effort to ensure that I was using Italian daily.

Right at the end of the project I was faced with the unexpected challenge of having to organise accommodation, and dealing with new arrangements due to the cancellation of my flight. Thanks Jane for all your support and getting me back home in time for xmas eve!

Highs and lows

To be completely honest I didn't have any lows. I embraced the opportunity 110%. Made the most of my social and work time, as well as visiting places at the weekend. I even arranged to volunteer some Saturdays at the local Zoology museum helping with activities with children. I believe I was fortunate to be able to feel like this as I had previously travelled and worked abroad. As I was 30 taking part I also had experience on my side. However I respect that people have culture shock and that it takes time to adapt. However it is a fantastic learning curve for all as new people, new language and new surroundings always bring new challenges.

Due to the bad weather that cancelled my flight I was unable to fly back on my given day. This allowed me to enjoy snow in Florence – has to be a high!

This is a photo of Laura, Kat, and Me (Swyn) on Venice Beach – during a short visit to Venice, making the most of our time in Italy:



What I'm doing now

The Leonardo project has enriched my experiences by giving me the opportunity to work with disabled people which will be of great advantage in my career. The experience has also definitely spurred me on to help out at local horse stables in my free time, a good way to keep fit and keep in touch with horses.

I have secured a job in north Wales running educational programmes for the Forestry Commission.