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The Greek summer experience, with learning to boot



Five Princeton University students visit the ruins of a Venetian castle in Crete, earlier this summer. Hundreds of students from the US and Canada have traveled to Greece this summer – most for the first time – to study Greek history, drama, business, literature, anthropology, or the Ancient and Modern Greek languages, among other subjects.

By Anna Mazarakis

Harrison Blackman had never been abroad before, but he'd always wanted to see the ancient sites and cities in Greece, so when he saw that a professor from Princeton University would be teaching a summer class in Greece, he jumped at the opportunity to study abroad.

While in Greece, his class studied Greek literature, took Modern Greek language classes and participated in workshops with professional Greek photographers. The students also traveled to various sites across the country to familiarize themselves with the context of the literature and better understand the country's culture and history, Professor Eduardo Cadava said.

"This is my first time abroad, so I feel like I'll go back feeling more like a citizen of the world and not just of Maryland," Blackman said. "I feel like I have a better perspective now on how the world works, evolves and changes."

Blackman is just one of the hundreds of students who have traveled to Greece this summer – most for the first time – to study Greek history, drama, business, literature, anthropology, or the Ancient and Modern Greek languages, among other subjects.

Representatives from the Tourism and Education ministries said they do not record the number of students that come from abroad to take part in programs in Greece organized by their universities, but the number is expected to have increased dramatically since 1998, when New York University launched its Summer in Athens program, which it says was the first of its kind.

In addition to programs in the classroom, a number of universities have taken students to excavation sites in Greece this summer to learn more about archaeology and to research the ancient world.

"In certain years we were excavating at the Greek sanctuary – the altar of Zeus – in other years we were studying the material and other years we are doing architectural surveys, theological surveys, geological surveys," said University of Arizona Greek archaeology professor David Gilman Romano of the Mt Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project, of which he is co-director.

The students spend their days at the various excavation sites drawing architectural plans of the buildings, cataloging finds and researching history and the artifacts that have been found. This work gives them the chance to learn practical skills that can lead to a career in archaeology, University of Alberta professor and director of the Kastro Kallithea archaeological project, Margriet Haagsma, explained.

"Just to see how the technology worked back then, it gives you so much more of a better insight into how people's daily lives worked," said John Manderscheid, a student at the University of Alberta. "We've barely scratched the surface on so many things... Not everything's been answered, not everything's been found and you want to go back and learn more."

While the same classes and skills could be taught at their own universities during the academic year – and some universities do, in fact, teach similar classes at home – Othon Alexandrakis, an assistant professor at York University who is teaching a methods training course for sociocultural anthropology in Athens, explained that the output of student work is quite different in Greece.

“Students end up being much more invested and much more involved and much more passionate about the projects that they do here [in Greece],” Alexandrakis said, explaining that students can more easily immerse themselves into their research since they are out of their comfort zone and away from the familiarities of home.

The students interviewed for this article said their experiences in Greece allow them to better understand the culture as it is associated with their lessons, and they end up feeling like they have a better understanding of Greek life and could imagine returning to Greece again in the future either for recreational or professional purposes.

As a result of a four-course summer program on Crete, Greece is the second most popular overseas employer for Drexel University students, adjunct professor Theodore Katerinakis said. Given the opportunity to network and learn more about Greek businesses during the summer, and given an opportunity to earn a stipend so they can work for six months at an internship on Crete during the academic year, many students take the opportunity to work full-time in Greece after graduation.

However, the financial cost of traveling to Greece can sometimes be difficult for students, they said. Most programs in Greece cost around \$4,000 on average, and although a number offer generous financial aid, the price tag can deter students. The idea of studying abroad in Greece was popular at the University of California, Riverside, assistant professor of history Denver Graninger said, but his proposed class ended up getting canceled when not enough students signed up due to the expense.

In addition to the cost, the heat and the language barrier, students said one disadvantage to studying abroad can be that they sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between vacation time and class time, especially in Greece where the beaches and tourist attractions can be distracting.

“For some students, the biggest adjustment is to see that there are things happening here that are beyond vacation, and sometimes this contrast with their own stereotypes cannot be resolved easily,” Katerinakis said.

Liana Theodoratou, director of the NYU Summer in Athens program, acknowledged that students can sometimes get sidetracked in Greece, but she said that she doesn't see any disadvantage to studying abroad – as long as it is done correctly.

“I really do believe study abroad is amazing – if it's done the right way, if it's done really supervised,” Theodoratou said. “It is not tourism, it is studying abroad, it's different... it is the most important thing that they have someone who teaches them and tells them what to see.”

Though some students said they wished they had more time in the day to explore the city by themselves, most seemed to agree that having faculty there to explain everything makes the experience unique, and they end up feeling more connected to the city and country as a result.

Outside the classrooms, the professors take their students on excursions to popular tourist destinations like the Acropolis and Delphi, nearby islands and beaches, and to museums and theatrical performances. Students are also able to take in the city, its cafes, tavernas and so on in their spare time.

“I don't have the same goals as a tourist, I don't want to go look at all of the touristy things,” Javier Alvarez, a student at York University, said. “To me, the attraction that I see in Athens most is not the historical museums or the monuments and everything, it's the people themselves. They live in a very particular way and communicate in certain ways that really attracts you and makes you want to come back.”

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