



REFLECTIONS *on the Canal*



“Getting ‘the most’ out of an experience can look like so many different things.”

—Gillian Giles, study abroad alum

As Gillian Giles sketches a tree in the backyard of their family's Chicago home or contemplates which types of plants native to Illinois will attract pollinators to their planned butterfly garden, you would likely sense that Gillian is one of those old souls who can slow down and appreciate life at a more relaxed pace, someone adept at savoring moments of quiet amid the buzz of the city.

But slowing down is harder than it sounds. It's a skill that takes practice and patience, all the more so when you're a college student with a sense of adventure and a passport, as Gillian can attest.

Gillian only had six weeks in Amsterdam that summer before their final year at Sarah Lawrence College. But after years of awaiting their first-ever international travel experience, and with the looming sense that the window of opportunity to travel so freely would close upon graduation, they were eager to make those six weeks count.

“The thing about study abroad is it's so compact. You have a short amount of time and you're expected to do a lot. You're expected to be able to adjust quickly, to explore the city, to participate in physically demanding walking tours. You're encouraged to travel all over. All while studying in an academically rigorous program.”

Gillian often questioned whether they were making full use out of the precious little time they had abroad. It wasn't enough to stay in Amsterdam; they'd miss out on other Dutch cities. It wasn't enough to stay in the Netherlands; they'd miss out on other destinations throughout Europe. For six weeks, Gillian was often on the move, making trips to Delft, Haarlem, Berlin, London.

Name:

Gillian Giles

Home Institution:

Sarah Lawrence College

Major:

Sociology

Programs:

IES Abroad

Destination:

Amsterdam, Netherlands

But at some point, it had to be enough.

Gillian had to set some boundaries for the sake of their physical and mental health. Otherwise overexertion and fatigue could trigger flare-ups of myasthenia gravis, a chronic condition. To quell their anxiety (and their family's), Gillian got a medical bracelet and found a doctor in Amsterdam who could help if need be. As an accommodation for ADHD and mental health issues, IES arranged for Gillian to receive extended time on tests and assignments, which was helpful. But for the most part, the best course of action was inaction.

“Self-care meant not doing some things. It meant hanging back sometimes and really being cognizant of my limits. It meant going to sleep a little bit earlier than other folks at times.”

Of course there are times when Gillian wishes that they had somehow squeezed even more out of their six weeks abroad. But overall, those six weeks abroad instilled in Gillian a greater appreciation of simply being instead of doing.

“Exploring the city does not mean overexerting yourself. Sometimes it's as simple as walking down to the canals just to sit and look at boats, or going up to the roof to take in the scenery. Or making the time to be with people you have met there, to enjoy their company and get to know them. Getting ‘the most’ out of an experience can look like so many different things.”

“The exchange program and my identity intersected.”

For Gillian, the study abroad course on “Society, Culture & Gender in Amsterdam” offered through IES Abroad was the right fit, both academically and personally. Throughout college, they had been layering their studies in sociology with the interdisciplinary lenses of gender, sex and sexuality. The IES program in Amsterdam seemed to be one of the few international exchange programs exploring those themes. Gillian also identifies as a queer person and was drawn to Amsterdam's reputation of being very progressive and LGBTQ friendly.

Gillian is a queer person, but they are also a queer person of color, a community known as QPOC or QTPOC to include transgender people of color. With this convergence of identities, Gillian is as attuned to the social dynamics of power and race as they are to those of gender and sexuality. When Gillian applied this lens to their observations and



interactions in Amsterdam, the city's glittering facade of a tolerant, progressive world destination began to tarnish.

Gillian began to notice Amsterdam's anti-black treatment of its black residents, and especially immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Morocco, Nigeria, Suriname and throughout the African diaspora. They recall one particularly unnerving yet revealing experience sitting down at an otherwise empty local café in their host neighborhood. As Gillian scanned the menu, the staff had stared at Gillian icily, suspiciously, even aggressively... that is, until they heard Gillian speak.

"Once they could tell I was American, their tone changed immediately. They could tell I wasn't a local, that I was a tourist. That distinction was different from anything I had personally experienced in the United States. I had to learn that one of the biggest identifiers for me next to race was also nationality."

In contrast with experiences laden by anti-blackness, Gillian's spirit was buoyed by at least two identity-affirming events during their travels that held space for Black joy, celebration, and community that heightened their sense of pan-African solidarity.

One was the Surinamese Independence Day Festival held in Amsterdam. "Keti Koti," a phrase meaning "Broken Chains," observes the end of Dutch colonization in Suriname. Gillian joined in on the festivities alongside Amsterdam's large community of Afro-Surinamese residents, many of whom arrived in the city after independence.

And perhaps Gillian's most cherished experience during their time abroad was attending Pride in London as well as UK Black Pride, which is Europe's largest celebration for African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Caribbean-heritage LGBTQI+ people.

"I have never been around so many people who share a similar identity to me. There was so much joy and love in that."

Post-Trip Unpacking

After returning home, Gillian continued to reflect on their layers of identity in the context of their experiences abroad and in the United States.

"I'm much more cognizant of folks who are immigrants and who are undocumented and are of different



nationalities and the different privileges they carry. I really had to think past my own oppression in the United States.”

Gillian also recognizes how financial privilege literally afforded them the opportunity to go abroad:

"I was pretty privileged in my experience. I was able to go because I am an upper middle-class black person and I had the family support and money to go. A lot of black people, a lot of people of color do not. Financially it's hard for folks to go on study abroad, and that's a barrier in access."

Other barriers to study abroad access which Gillian would like international educators to consider are those which impact students with disabilities, whether it's identifying accessible housing and tours by bus to reduce the physically demanding aspects of travel, or whether it's identifying mentors and networks of mental health support for students who might otherwise feel isolated away from their usual support networks.

"I think that seeing things outside of your own context gives you the ability to dream. Amsterdam helped me with that; I was able to dream of more spaces that were inclusive of me."

After spending time with family and volunteering in mutual aid projects in Chicago, Gillian plans to embark on their next overseas journey in Morocco. No doubt the trip will serve yet another set of infinite possibilities for Gillian to explore not just the sites but also their identity and context in the world. And they might find a still moment to sit and sketch. ■



Gillian's tips for maintaining your brain while abroad

1. Try not to judge yourself or compare yourself to others on the trip.

"It can be easy to look at the experiences of your friends who have gone abroad or the people in your program and feel as though you're not doing enough. That's why it's important to ground yourself and your expectations. Your study abroad experience is unique to you and will not look like anyone else's, even if you're on the same program. If you find yourself judging yourself while abroad, check your expectations and judgement, and challenge them."

2. Challenge your negative thoughts with new experiences.

"Negative thoughts happen to everyone. If you start to experience negative thoughts, pay attention to your environment. Being present and mindful of what's around you makes you less focused on what's happening in your head. New experiences are a great way to refocus that attention, and while abroad you will have a lot of them! To refocus your attention and ground yourself, try something new, such as going out to a new place with friends, visiting attractions, or simply exploring your area. Alternatively, checking out local cafes and parks or just getting out, even if it's on your own, can help challenge negative thoughts."

3. Seek support.

"Sometimes there are times when you need to reach out to others for help and support. In addition to your home support of family, friends, and partners, you can also build a support system of friends while abroad as you are all going through the same wonderful and challenging experiences and can relate to each other. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can be hard yet helpful, as others can provide good insight and contextualize your feelings and experiences. This can, in turn, make coping with hard experiences easier. If necessary, reach out for further support from the program staff or a therapist. Do not be afraid to reach out and ask for what you need!"

Adapted and reprinted from "Mental Health Matters: Maintaining Your Brain While Abroad," by Gillian Giles for the IES Abroad blog at iesabroad.org/blogs