

Albania

Stepping off the plane onto the hot pavement I looked around. Mountains surrounded us, and the heat encompassed us. With me were 10 new friends- soon to become family for a month. Here we were, in a foreign and little-known country, with limited contact with our family and friends back home. My life had suddenly gone from mundane and ordinary to new and exciting, my summer adventure in Albania had begun.

The future was unknown, and I was ready to forget the stress I had left behind in America in exchange for a month in the exotic lands of Eastern Europe. We started the trip by examining and contrasting the influence of the religions of Islam and Christianity on Albanian culture, first visiting a mosque and later, multiple chapels, churches, and a cathedral. We interacted with locals in the city square, challenging our Google Translate apps in the real world. Along our journey we hiked, sometimes 4 or 5 miles at a time, tried foreign white berries, and admired the beautiful native flowers. We toured castles in the countryside, chased chickens, and treasured our downtime in a mountain resort. We expanded our worldly perspectives by visiting Greece to explore the famous Prespes Lake and its caves used for housing monks, and then travelled to Macedonia to enjoy walking the cobblestone streets and basking in the sun among sandy beaches.

My family home stay was a chance for me to get pulled out of my comfort zone into the unfamiliar lifestyle of Albanians. I practiced traditional dances with my host mother, bonded with my host sisters over hair braiding, and cherished the view of the fiery sunset from their house at the top of the hill, my new home. As the Americans and the Albanians bonded and grew close, we became a single family unit rather than individuals. We swam in rivers, enjoyed ketchup chips, and treasured each and every minute spent together, regretting the day our bonding would come to an end. The home stay ended with a teary exchange of Snapchats, Instagrams, Facebooks, and WhatsApp information. I arrived as a foreign exchange student, and left a sister, daughter, and friend.

This once-in-a-lifetime experience concluded in Montenegro. We relaxed on beaches across from islands holding castles and forests, admired the beautiful sailboats in the harbors, and feasted on seafood directly from the adjacent Adriatic Sea. We spent our last nights walking on the silent beaches in the dark, enjoying our final moments as a tight knit group before diverging to our different corners of the United States.

We departed from Tirana, as nervous as we had arrived, with silent tears as we said goodbye to our foreign home. We were anxious about the world we had left behind in the West, but excited to be reunited with loved ones. After landing in New York City at JFK, our real goodbye began. The comrades, friends, family we had turned into during the past month was suddenly vanishing. The tears were no longer silent, but clearly apparent. I reluctantly jumped on the plane towards Naples, reminding myself of the blissful existence of technology that would allow us to all stay in touch as we reminisced together, thousands of miles apart.