

Marzo: Escaping Northern Italy

By Giuliana Castillo

The first week of March was the “new” normal. No school. No parties. But, we were free to go out. My exchange student friends came on the bus to spend the night at my place. I visited with my friend several times. I went to Cuneo, and returned home on the bus. On Tuesday, we received the news a friend of ours was going home. On Wednesday, our Rotarians said we could not take the train to see her. On Thursday, I spent the entire afternoon and evening alone, and cried when my host parents left after lunch. On Friday, my friend Gustavo and his dad took me to the mountains to get some fresh air. On Saturday, my host mom left for the south of Italy while my real mom left for Cuba. That evening, my friend and I went to McDonalds since it was the ONLY place open. On Sunday, I told my real dad on video call that in my heart I wanted to go home, but my head was telling me to stay.

Monday, March 9. I woke up feeling good, then everything took a nosedive. My host family asked me to stay at home then they emailed my dad suggesting I return to the US. I took a deep breath, and made the decision. My head wanted to go home, and so did my heart. I had become too big of a responsibility for my host family. The situation had deteriorated so much that for the remainder of my exchange, it would not return to normal. My mental health was struggling with each passing day. We told It's

Your World Travel I would take the flight for Thursday. I cried during dinner with my host dad.

Tuesday, March 10. After packing all night, I woke up at 7 am to do laundry for the first and last time in Italy. My host dad told me he would not make it to lunch, again. Gustavo came over to make me lunch. We said our goodbyes, one of only two I was able to make. That evening came the news: all of Italy is going on quarantine. I scrambled to get all the documentation necessary for us to get to the airport, everything citing my travel was essential, only to learn my flight was cancelled.

Wednesday, March 11. I awoke panicked at the thought of being stuck in the house until April 3 and left home alone for the majority of the day since my host mom was in the south. Fortunately, Gustavo offered a solution: I go to stay with him and his parents until I get a flight out. I wouldn't be alone. There was a cat and two dogs. His brother's room was empty. It wasn't that far from my host family's house, but it was in another town. It was perfect, for the circumstances. We scrambled to get all the logistics together, talking to my dad, rotary, and his parents. I would go that night, but remained under the responsibility of my host dad.

Thursday, March 12. I adjusted to my new temporary "host" family. His mom did my nails, and after we took a walk in the fields of fruit. I was told there might be a flight for the 14th.

Friday, March 13. I was packing when I received an email from KLM: my flight from Turin to Amsterdam was canceled. It's Your World Travel suggested I go to the airport anyway, because the

Delta website showed it as active. If the flight was indeed cancelled, I rebook at the airport, and leave just the same.

Saturday, March 14. I woke up early, said goodbye to Gustavo for the second time, and went to the airport with my host dad. We spent an hour talking to the five people at ticketing and information just to be turned away seeing as all KLM flights were cancelled out of Italy. And, it was too risky for them to rebook me since most US connections were being cancelled and I would've run the risk of getting stuck somewhere in Europe, alone. So we went home. I cried on the phone with my mom, I hadn't had the chance to speak with her the entire week since she had no cell phone service while traveling. Then I returned to Gustavo's house. Since it was Saturday night, we had pizza for dinner.

Sunday to Thursday, March 15 - 19. The most normal of days. I took afternoon naps. Went for walks with Gustavo's mom. Watched Netflix. Wrote in my journal. Video called my friends or parents. And above all, pet the cat. On the 17th my parents booked a flight for the 26th on Delta out of Turin. The 19th was Father's day in Italy, so we had a cookout in the courtyard.

Friday, March 20. Probably the laziest day ever. I woke up around 11, took a shower, ate lunch, then Gustavo and I watched Netflix the entire rest of the day. Around 9:30 pm, my mom called me. My flight was cancelled; Delta cancelled all flights out of Italy. She told me there was a flight at 7 in the morning the next day, from Milan on Alitalia that went through Rome going to New York then Nashville. I hesitated. I told my mom I was afraid. I asked Gustavo if I was making the right choice. Then I pushed the fear away and

put on my calm facade and did what I had to do, just as I had each time before. I messaged my host dad at 11 after the ticket was purchased and issued, that it was a go. We had to leave at 2:30 am to make it to the airport at 5 am for check in. After packing, calling my parents one more time, and saying goodbye to Gustavo's parents, I finished the movie with Gustavo. We quietly pet his cat while we waited for my alarm to go off at 1:45.

Saturday, March 21. I washed my face. Cried for the third time saying goodbye to Gustavo. At this point, it just felt like torture. I didn't sleep in the car; I felt too anxious. The sunrise in the airport was surreal. I had a whirl of anxiety in my head that the flight would be cancelled. Everyone wore masks and gloves. There were only 10 flights on the board for the day, all regional, because all international flights from Milan had been cancelled. I was in the epicenter of the epicenter of the epidemic in Europe. I fell asleep instantly on the flight. We landed in Rome, and I was filled with anxiety over my next flight being cancelled. I was so worried. I feared we would be in the middle of the Atlantic and the government would send us back to Rome. The airport workers gave out masks to those lacking, and yelled at us to stay one meter apart. I stiffly stood between two older men as we slowly inched our way towards the jet way. I was assigned an aisle seat in the middle row of four. On the other end, I noticed a young girl crying. I put my gloved hand on the seat, and asked if she was okay. She said she was just sad because she had just spent seven months on exchange in Rome. I told her it was going to be okay, and that this was for the best. I tried to sleep for the majority of the flight, because I wanted to cry at the idea of how the sun I watched rise that morning would now set over Italy while I chased

the light to New York. We landed in New York. It took an hour for me to get off the plane as they were checking our temperature as we deplaned. After dropping my bag off after passport control and customs, my mom called to tell me my flight was delayed two and a half hours. She guided me over the phone to the JFK Delta rebooking desk. I rebooked for a flight to Atlanta to Knoxville. After passing through security, my Delta app dinged: my flight was delayed and I would miss my connection to Knoxville. So, I got the flight changed back to Nashville. I went to the gate. I awoke out of a daze of sleep to see the Delta agent closed the door to my flight: I missed it. Probably out of pity for the deer in headlights look on my face, she rebooked me on the first flight to Atlanta the next morning at 6 am. It was around 8/9 o'clock. I stayed at the TWA hotel attached to Terminal 5. I took a shower before touching anything then got in bed. Unfortunately, sleep did not come easy. The last time on the clock I saw was 2 am and I had to be up by 4 am.

Sunday, March 22. I awoke like a ball of adrenaline to my mom's call at 3:57 am. I had slept through my alarm and her first two calls! Eight minutes after hanging up, I called my mom on my way to the airtrain after dropping my key off in the lobby. -- I need to brag a moment: I repacked the mess I made the night before, changed clothes, AND remembered to take my charger. -- Stress was oozing from me as I waited in line for security and stress was radiating off me as TSA opened both my backpack and my carryon. I repacked for the second time that morning, and my clothes touched the surface of a bench in an airport in the most populous city in a state with half of all cases in the US. My flight was delayed 30 minutes as we waited for the tower to come back

online. One of the air traffic controllers tested positive the night before. I slept for an hour and wrote for an hour on the flight. In Atlanta, I went directly to my gate and watched the news to stay awake. The quick 30 minute flight was very, very bumpy and the thought crossed my mind, "I swear if this plane crashes, I'm killing someone." We landed. I got my bag redirected to be delivered to my house when it arrived in Knoxville from Nashville. Then, I walked outside. I hugged my mask covered dad. At home I hugged my mask covered mother and sister, then was put on "self isolation" downstairs for 14 days. In the evening when I woke up from my nap, I had a fever.

Monday, March 23. I had a fever on and off all day. I felt like crap, but had no cough.

Tuesday, March 24. We called the health department because they still hadn't responded to the message we left on Sunday. They wanted me tested that day due to my recent travel history. It was a rather unpleasant test.

Wednesday - Friday, March 25 - 27. Everything was normal. I didn't feel my best, but I no longer had a fever. I watched Netflix. Called my friends. Talked with my parents on the stairs in isolation. And sat outside listening to music. Friday afternoon I got a call from a "scam likely" number. I had received a voicemail from the same caller from the health department, so I answered. "It's negative." After getting the all clear that I could leave quarantine, I ran up the stairs. It was over.

Now I'm dealing with social distancing like all my fellow Americans, but I also have to adjust back to my own culture. I sit writing this and I'm grieving. Small things irritate me. I find parallels in everything and miss Italy. I cry because I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to so many people and so many places. The realization of the last moments I had, which I didn't realize were the last, come to me randomly. There's so much I didn't get a chance to do. I feel an inner anger because I know I should be in Italy. My head knows I should be at home, but my heart longs to be in Italy. I feel lost, like I'm stranded between two worlds. My mind thinks it would be better to be back: mentally crumbling in a poor situation far from my family just to hold on to the fragments left of the life I created. Yet I made my decision, and I stand by it. It was no longer my exchange. There was no longer a place for me. No matter how much it hurts to admit, the experience I loved so dearly left me, and I had to go.

My heart goes to all those affected by Covid 19. May we fight this together, not only as a nation, but as the world.