

**Malmo Reflection Paper 1**  
**Fall 2008**  
**Malmö, Sweden**

I can finally answer the infamous question, “So how was your time abroad?” It was the best thing I have ever done in my life. Despite “Why Sweden?” being the second most popular question, I am still unable to completely answer it. I think I chose Sweden because it was the longest exchange program (5 full months), it had an amazing three week orientation program, and because I never wanted to go or live there so why not? Really the only things I knew about Sweden were the stereotypes of blondes, meatballs and ABBA... which both turned out to be true. The women really were tall, blonde, and stunningly beautiful. The bizarre thing about it was that no one noticed. They were so used to it that it didn't matter at all. We had meatballs at every single university event. A Swedish friend on my hall even had a meatball making party. She also made all of the students on my hall an amazing recipe book full of Swedish traditional food and her various specialties before we all left. ABBA is also as popular as the story goes. No one will claim that they love ABBA... they say it's just classic, old school music. Then they play it at every party and nightclub and everyone goes crazy. One of the strangest experiences of my life was during the first couple weeks I was there. They had a really awesome festival in Malmö, when the weather was fantastic, with a wacky crayfish party and concerts every night. At one of these concerts was an ABBA *imitation* group and literally thousands of people went crazy singing and dancing on tables as if they were the real thing. Weird.

The weather was something else I had heard about and got to experience first hand. August was amazing. Never above 75, but so pleasant. The sun shone, I often rode my bike to the beach with friends and enjoyed the incredible views. (Side note: everybody says to buy a bicycle. Do it. It is so useful and not that expensive) Slowly, however, the days got shorter and the weather worse. One time did I get stuck in a torrential down pour on my way to class and had to sit through the two hour lecture soaking wet. The daylight was an issue. By December, it was pitch black outside at 3 in the afternoon... and Malmö is in southern Sweden! By Christmas, I was so sun-deprived that when I stayed with my friend's family in southern Italy, I would just stand outside in the morning and at sunset to soak it in and talked about how fantastic sun was while my friend's family thought I was crazy. For the weather alone, I will never live in Sweden again. That is something I learned... people can adapt to any situation. I never thought I would live in Sweden and I never want to again, but I learned to and I did. Though I may never want to again, I *could*. I could live in any situation. This is not to say that I don't like Sweden. It is fantastically beautiful and I have to go back... next time in the summer. I was nervous about going to Sweden because I wanted a real “cultural experience,” and I didn't think I would get that there. I was wrong. Sweden may still be part of the “West” but they are FAR from American culture. Nakedness and sex are normal and common. A

welfare state is not evil; it's the way the government runs. The state provides everything and even pays you to be a university student! They believe in extreme equality in a way that America has never considered. These are some of the good things I learned about Sweden that have given me such a valuable understanding of a different way of approaching social problems... and not just from a textbook, but from the inside.

There were some bad things I learned too. While I hate the fake American friendliness, in Sweden people on the street don't care that you exist. They don't move out of the way and they overall are very cold people. My Swedish friends were quite the opposite, but on the street it was like this. Also, while Sweden prides itself in taking in more refugees than any other country in the world, immigrants can never become truly Swedish. There is an underlying racism and superiority in what it means to be "Swedish." You could be a 5<sup>th</sup> generation Iranian immigrant, have learned Swedish as your first language, and never even been to Iran and yet still you are considered a "5<sup>th</sup> generation Iranian immigrant." Not Swedish. Not Swedish-Iranian. This was so perplexing to me in my classes and made me appreciate America and what it stands for more than ever. As one of only 2 Americans on the exchange, I was often the representative of America in every setting, both in and out of class. This was challenging and incredible, and an experience that I would highly recommend.

The classroom setting at Malmö University was significantly easier than at JMU. In Sweden, you only take one class a month. You also have the right to retake any class as much as you want until you get the desired grade. My time in Sweden was not academically strenuous, but it was in every other way possible. I have never been away from my family so long and never not at home for Thanksgiving or Christmas. But you learn to deal with it and it makes you better for it. I talked to them on Skype for both holidays. I also ended up having the most incredible Thanksgiving and Christmas of my life. I threw a Thanksgiving party where everyone brought food from their home countries. We had the most incredible array of food from around the world. I also made two turkeys (literally the most succulent, delicious ones I have ever eaten... I don't know how that happened!), stuffing, and green bean casserole. There were about 60 students and we all ate at tables together after I shared the Thanksgiving story and we all went around and said something we were thankful for. It was literally the coolest most meaningful Thanksgiving, and I doubt I will ever have one to match it.

The very best thing about my time in Sweden was not only the amazing personal growth I went through, but also the incredible people I met. I have friends from literally all over the world now. I stay in touch with them all (thank God for the internet!) and some are coming to visit as well as me going to see them this summer. My biggest piece of advice would be to take any opportunity you get and just do it. I traveled to Norway, Poland, Denmark, and Italy. I befriended people from all over the world, and learned how similar we all are despite our differences and am a better person because of it. I never even really wanted to go to Sweden, and I now could not imagine not having gone. There

is nothing I would change about my experience. I tried to learn love Swedish language and food (unsuccessfully), heard and now hate ABBA more then ever, greatly improved my Spanish (strange but true!), experienced the best birthday of my life by far, went to Hamlet's castle, made cinnamon buns on National Cinnamon Bun Day, played in Europe's oldest theme park, fell even more in love with H&M, took pictures with the real Little Mermaid, traveled through glaciers and fjords, drank spiced wine in Christmas light decorated streets, dressed up as a fat American for a "National Clichés" party, danced to more techno/house music then I could ever want, spread American sayings like "Talk to the hand 'cuz the face ain't listening!" and developed myself as a person more then I ever could staying at JMU. Literally, it was the most amazing experience of my life and has forever impacted who I am.