

Beyond the books and university halls: experiencing European heritage

To me, European Heritage Volunteers has become a path leading to unique and very unlikely experiences; especially for a young heritage practitioner coming from Honduras, which is a small, underdeveloped and usually unaccounted-for country. My town up in the mountains of Central America inhabits a world of its own, and usually people live their lives there without ever leaving the frame of surrounding peaks which they call home. Growing up devouring history books and dreaming of exploring lands with castles and ancient myths, I had a longing for adventure in faraway lands. This is why I crafted an escape plan.

My scheming eventually led me to Germany, where I became a World Heritage student. I discovered this amazing and novel line of studies that assembles different perspectives to build a solid background of theoretical knowledge needed to identify, protect, manage and present cultural and natural heritage. Taken from the official description, the programme incorporates various academic disciplines such as the humanities, architecture, conservation, ecology, management, tourism, and marketing. It thus emphasises the link between culture and nature, tangible and intangible heritage values, conservation and sustainable development. Students of World Heritage are encouraged to reflect upon how heritage is understood

and how it functions in societies all around the world. Nevertheless, although the programme allows for some practical activities, a student cannot really understand the meaning of heritage unless exposed to real, hands-on work in the field.

It would be through my momentous encounter with European Heritage Volunteers however, that I acquired a taste of what it really meant to be a student of heritage. Real understanding of the theoretical knowledge I had studied came as a slow realisation to me as the summer progressed and I joined each different project.

In our World Heritage courses, one of my favourite lectures was about cultural landscapes. In this course, we learned the concept from the perspective of UNESCO as it being a composite landscape, which integrates the works of men to its surrounding nature in an interconnected bond creating a new natural development. We also studied the various types of historical gardens and how these conceptions were developed, interpreted and appreciated by different cultures.

This is why I chose to join the project “Restoration and maintenance of historic parks and gardens” in Weimar’s World Heritage site as my first project with European Heritage Volunteers.

I was delighted to meet the people in charge of the foundation who actually managed these gardens and landscapes with the dedication and knowledge I would have expected from professionals who understood the importance of these sites as well as I. The concepts I had learned in class now had a visual image and an explanation of practical relevance provided by the caretakers of these places. One example was an explanation the gardener provided about how they’re dealing with the death of an old tree which belongs to the controlled scenery of an English garden. He showed us a drawing from the late 18th century which clearly showed this specific tree standing on the spot where the carcass of an old tree now stood, surrounded by several younger trees. He told us that the tree had the important function of creating a natural frame for the view of the small castle in the distance, as seen from the viewpoint we were standing on. Since the position of the tree can’t be changed, the gardeners must take no chances in replacing a dying tree. For this reason, several smaller trees are planted around, one of which will be chosen to remain and replace the deceased tree. This kind of methodic planning and knowledgeable respect for the authenticity and integrity of the site impressed me.

The experience in Weimar allowed me to appreciate the work, complexity

and dedication of the management of heritage sites such as this one, which an uninformed visitor would probably dismiss as simple gardening. It also granted me a more grounded perspective of my field of studies, while igniting in me a curiosity for learning more.

That summer, I also found myself transported to the medieval heart of a stunning cultural landscape in the Middle Rhine Valley. This place is the material for the legends of dragons, mischievous dwarfs and knight heroes, which awoke the spark of excitement in my historian heart. We worked at the Marksburg Castle, which in itself looks like a fairytale location. The scenario of our work was unimaginably exciting for any Honduran, where we only read about castles in books, since our ancient buildings consist of Mayan pyramids and temples. While one week was dedicated to the reconstruction of an access staircase to the castle, the next week involved working with a local community organisation on the conservation of a historic dry stonewall of a traditional vineyard.

Our first task initially didn't seem to be connected to heritage conservation. It was a physical activity that caused the group of young heritage professionals to get tired and muddy. However, when combined with the actual interactions between the castle keeper and his men who worked there with us, we understood the need for this staircase. We

also learned from them the hard work involved in running a monument visited by hundreds of cruise-liner tourists every day. Most of them, who we called "the pirates" due to their ragged looks, had been working at the site for over twenty years and had developed a special bond to their castle. It was a very enriching experience for me to understand a monument from the perspective of those who worked on its upkeep, while also dealing directly with the impacts of – as well as the solutions to – mass tourism. This was all directly from the words of my textbooks, and now I had a chance to actually live it!

Then we joined the work of a group of very nice heritage enthusiasts from the small village of Spay along the Rhine. These people had committed themselves to the conservation of their village's cultural identity within a World Heritage landscape. From them, we learned how to restore dry stone walls. The project also provided interesting insight to a community involved in heritage conservation within a place where a living culture was still cherished and celebrated. We were guests at the village's celebrations, joining the band playing traditional German folk music and trying the local food, as well as learning about its history as a place surrounded by tourist destinations without ever becoming one. As a World Heritage student, I found this a fascinating example of authenticity surviving the onslaught of mass tourism.

These experiences in the Middle Rhine Valley illustrated the kind of educational voyages that European Heritage Volunteers Projects provide. In a way, the projects transform lecture halls of the university into villages like Spay where the heritage students can understand the theoretical concepts of heritage and culture while actually living them and participating in the action.

This excited curiosity took me later to Albania, an exotic location I'd never imagined visiting. We worked on the restoration of the roof of an 11th century church atop a hill in the middle of a mostly abandoned mountain village. This trip was one of the most magical experiences of my life, and without a doubt has changed my own interpretation of the meaning of my professional path. It was an experience of joy to stand at the top of that hill with the Ionian Sea below and contemplate how far I had come: from my days as a law student in Central America to helping restore this ancient building in a faraway land. In this moment, I had an epiphany that I was now really a heritage professional.

The work in Albania was, as in the previous projects, an occasion for networking amongst the participants with different heritage-related backgrounds. Throughout the project, we had during the hard labor great bonding moments. It was an enriching experience to learn from my peers about so many topics



related to my professional interests and discuss them in a context outside of the university halls.

I think this aspect of the European Heritage Volunteers Programme is one of the most important elements, which is faultlessly considered on each project. I found a well-balanced group of diverse young professionals on each project, creating the perfect environment for cultivating interesting interactions and conversations.

However, to me personally, the most important takeaway from my involvement in these projects as a professional has been the opportunity to understand the meaning of my work and its possible effects on the people who live and interact with their own heritage. The community-oriented projects of European Heritage Volunteers allowed me to see how my work can have a real impact in communities. It also granted me the privileged chance to actively use and share my knowledge, ascertaining

that my World Heritage studies don't have to be all about the theoretical notions I learned in the hopes of securing an office job at UNESCO.

The best example for this was at the end of our work in Albania. Before we began the reconstruction of the roof in the old church, amongst the dirty interior of the ruined structure, we found several traditional Christian-Orthodox icons of saints hanging from the iconostasis. Behind the images, we discovered written messages, which we later learned were prayers by devotees asking for special favors or protection dating back decades. One of the participants made it her own personal task to clean each icon and hang it back on the wall or place them in the niches behind the altar where we had found them once we finished working. As we were sweeping the floor and getting the place ready for the re-inauguration, we helped her to carefully place the clean icons back in their places. As we did, a small old lady came in and kissed some of the icons and lit a candle by the iconostasis. Then she turned to us and said a prayer in her language with a glow of happiness in her small wrinkly face, her eyes full of gratitude. She then left and we sat down in silence, staring at the faint light of the candle. We all had tears in our eyes; we were exhausted but satisfied. It was there and then that I understood I'd made the right choice when I left home to study World Heritage in Germany.

It was also during the project in Albania that I found myself to be part of a heritage community that transcends borders and that speaks the same language, regardless of cultural or national backgrounds. I also felt at ease to continue working to preserve European heritage while being a non-European. Through these projects and being welcomed as a Latin American, I truly learned that heritage is simply human and that we are all sharing this wonderful experience of being humans together in colourful diversity.

After this, I decided to join more European Heritage Volunteers and became an active endorser of the programme amongst my colleagues at the World Heritage studies programme. I believe this to be the best opportunity for students to grasp hands-on activities, and it is also an inspirational experience to motivate us in this challenging area of study. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee is a highly politicised entity. This international organisation needs to be more grounded in the realities of the communities that live and experience heritage in order to remember the purpose of heritage conservation. It is through the hard work of wonderful people like the team at European Heritage Volunteers that this idealistic approach is kept alive, staying true to the purpose of those who inspired and crafted the World Heritage Convention.

■ *Juan Carlos Barrientos*