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Patrick O'Connor – ESOF Report 2010

Words, words, words... They hardly seem capable of fulfilling the mammoth task that I require of them in moments like these. Admittedly, the task I ask of them is no mean feat- to convey the moments of sheer elation, the feelings of pure joy and the overall nostalgia that was and still is the Euroscience Open Forum, Torino 2010. Alas this journey of self discovery that I shared with 5 lucky Australians needs to be documented. So here goes nothing... Throughout my domestic commute to Sydney I was welcomed by some familiar faces and equally so by some fresh ones, the Sydney International Airport was original assembly point of the ESOF 2010 "crew" and boy, were we excited. The smiles and welcomes that were abundant amongst all really should have given me an indication of what lay ahead of me, but in the end I don't think anything could have paved the way for the excitement of such a trip. Some 36 hours after departing my humble abode in Goondiwindi, Australia I arrived in Torino, Italy. Some may say I was a long way from home (i.e. Geoff), but I had other thoughts. Even without my huge procession of tangible materialistic objects that was my luggage, I felt as if Italy was a home away from home- within an hour of grounding my feet in Europe. The lacklustre customs that welcomed us in Torino gave me my first taste of the Italian lifestyle. You could smell the culture in the air, quite literally, gelato, the burning rubber of a vesper (moped) pounding the pavement, coffee, pizzas backing, spaghetti boiling, all mixed in with the humidity characteristic of the Italian summer.



The infamous Nutella Pizza

Upon our arrival in Torino, I thought that I would be desperate for sleep, but

a sudden surge of adrenalin encompassed me as I realised the endless possibilities of sites to see, souvenirs to buy and not to forget the food to EAT. We started off slowly taking in the openly exhibited statues in the spacious piazzas that seemed to be more abundant than people before working our way up to the "big guns" like the the Cinema Museum, the Egyptian Museum, the Mole Antonelliana tower, the Royal Palace of Savoy and of course the glorious cathedral that situated itself atop of the hill, the Basilica di Superga. The critically acclaimed food that Italy possesses did not disappoint in my first few days either, all of my gastronomical fantasies had been fulfilled and I had even added a few that I never thought I would experience like eating a Nutella Pizza (although I did notice a distinct lack of Spaghetti Bolognese or "Spag Bol" as it became infamously known amongst the group). Even before ESOF had begun I would have been satisfied with my accomplishment of many goals on my cultural tick list, but the fun had only just begun.

After Nathan's prowess in debating had been sufficiently tested, we eventually convinced Geoff to let us "suite up" for the opening ceremony of ESOF- a ceremony like no other, I could feel the intelligence and innovation pulsate throughout the room, as over 4000 of Europe's brightest minds and 7 delegates of the National Youth Science Forum descended on the city of Torino. The ESOF advertising committee had certainly hit the nail on the head; science was truly in the air. It only took a few minutes of "sticky beaking" to comprehend the immensity of the situation that I found myself in. At reception a Suisse PhD student was conversing with an Albanian researcher about the Plenary Lecture that they had just attended on Aquaporin water channels. In the line at the cafeteria a Spanish couple were discussing epigenetics and changes in genome function that control differentiation, stem cells tumours and ageing- at least I presume so considering they were speaking entirely in their natural dialect; and in the lounge sat a young Australian lad who while somewhat overwhelmed by the scientific figure heads that he found himself mingling with, was relishing every single moment

of every single lecture, of every single ounce of time he spent networking.



The Trademark ESOF Bubbles

The thing that made ESOF special to me was that, no matter how many textbooks that I scimmaged through, no matter how many EEI's that I wrote, no matter how many questions that I asked my Biology teacher I would never come remotely close to the amount of cutting edge science that was at my finger tips ready for me to explore during those 6 days at the Lingotto Centre and that is exactly what I did, I explored the infinite possibilities that science has to offer society as a whole. At the beginning of this year, not even the far distant reaches of my imaginations would have been able to house the possibility of sitting in a lecture entitles: "Dietary Polyphenols- Combating Chronic Disease" or walking the hallways with Aldo Fasolo, a neurobiologist specialising in the olfactory system or the one and only Carl Johan Sundberg- a licensed physician and associate professor at the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology, where his research group focuses on physical activity and the molecular mechanisms of angiogenesis and mitochondrial biogenesis in human skeletal muscle. What a marvel to be walking the same hallways as these men, little own to converse with them about fields of science that they are currently heading. As was explained in one of the lectures I attended, at some point in their lives, more than likely this moment would have occurred quite recently- these research scientists were the single most knowledgeable person on this planet, in regards to their research field.

Of course this opportunity in itself would have suitably quenched my thirst for scientific interaction, but ESOF was full of surprises. Enter the ESOF party, the Youth Party and a variety of other social gatherings that Torino had put on

for its Science in the City Event. The entirety of the group consequently immersed itself in Italian culture, assimilating and watching the Soccer World Cup Final being played out on a huge screen in an Italian Palazzo surrounded by picturesque Italian vistas, dancing along the shores of the river Po and frequently stopping for mass servings of Gelato, pizza and pasta- we were clearly living the harsh life in Torino.



Gentlemen at the University of Gastronomy drinking copious quantities of apple juice.



Enjoying ourselves at the Vatican Post Office

On completion of the Euroscience Open Forum, we had to bid farewell to what had truly become our Italian home, so much so that we nearly missed our 1st Class Train ride to Florence!! And what wonders Florence had in store for us, a city with a magnitude of cultural history that I thought the banks of Arno River may well bulge under the pressures of Galileo, Michelangelo, Rafael and Botticelli. But alas they held and our days in Florence encompassed some of the true delights of Italian heritage, be that the Galleria degli Uffizi- home to Botticelli's Venus, the Duomo, the Ponte Vecchio or even Michelangelo's David. In true NYSF fashion we were able to re-enact many of these famous monuments in our unique yet quirky sort of worship, thankfully we do not stray like one of our fellow countrymen did some years ago and

attack the foot of David. Safely to say this man may well have been disowned in the minds of the NYSF cohort that visited these places. For us these monuments were not just a pretty sight but rather they epitomised the human condition, the immense capacity that our civilisation has for scientific and cultural endeavour. The next thing we came to idolise was not a monument, painting or even an item of food but rather his great-grandfather published the first edition of Pinocchio! His name was Francesco Marconi, a friend of a friend- that friend, well the second friend being none other than the NSSF chairman Hans Bachor. Francesco took us on a scientist's tour of Firenze, which including the Duomo, Galileo Museum, Museum of Natural History and Zoology, as well as the quantum physics section of the University of Torino. He also took us to the roof of one of the tallest buildings in the city and what view that was! To me however, the most important place that Francesco guided us around was Galileo's villa. This may sound like a tourist attraction, but only an extremely exclusive group of people have entered the building where the famous man finally came to his demise. Our five days in Florence finally came to an end and boy did we go out with a bang, attending a quaint performance of the opera Tosca- a tale of truly epic proportions.

Exit Florence and enter Rome, a city that is bustling with tourists 24/7. It was a far stretch from the seemingly quiet and relaxed atmosphere of Torino, but I guess in a city that houses the Colosseum, Trevi Fountain, Pantheon, Roman Forum, Palatine Hill, Ponte Sant Angelo, Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, Capitoline Hill, Villa Borghese, Spanish Steps and the Vatican (encompassing the Vatican Museums, the Sistine Chapel, St Peter's Basilica, the Tomb of St Peter, the Swiss Guard and St Peter's Square) it is no wonder that 19.5 million people visit the city each year. With the said checklist, it seemed near impossible to tick everything off, but we gave it a shot. Unfortunately these landmarks are not given justice, no matter how many pictures you see, stories you hear or times you watch the Lizzie McGuire Movie- they really are a must see and I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to witness their

glory first hand.



Jack and I re-enacting Michelangelo's Creation of Man

Unfortunately our time in Italia soon drew to an unwanted end, although not without an unprecedented amount of last minute shopping for presents that needed to be distributed to all of those poor souls still stranded in Australia. The true immensity of the trip however, did not hit me until what seemed the wee hours of an unknown time zone somewhere over the Pacific Ocean (I think)- it was then that I realised where I had just been and what an amazing opportunity that Sandra, Geoff and all of the other amazing individuals that serve the NYSF with such unconditional love had presented me with, so in turn I must thank them for everything that they have done for me. My most humble gratitude must be given to all those whom have made my NYSF dream into reality. Without the help of these people and their ongoing support I may never have been able to participate in the wondrous 3 weeks that was ESOF. To Mr Paul Merry and Mr Kerry Barker for their support and helpful words of advice and assurance that they continually offered during Interact Meetings. My final vote of thanks undoubtedly goes to the five other NYSF students who toured the vast countryside of Italy with me. Without them I would never of had the experience of searching through Galileo's villa to find his 600 year old wine cellar despite the security tape that we couldn't understand because it was written in Italian. I would never have been able to pose as a gladiator in the colosseum despite how corny it may have seemed to the innocent bystanders chuckling under their breaths. I would never have been able to have the journey of my lifetime in the streets of Turin during which we were told on several occasions to find a taxi (but we thought the

walk was all the more entertaining). So to Kristy, Jack, Nathan, Isabella and Johnson I am eternally grateful for blessing me with your company on this "trip of a lifetime".



Nathan Jack and I salute Italy, ESOF and the National Youth Science Forum

