Bedazzled by Bocconi

SMU undergraduate KELVIN SAM recalls the old-world charm of Milan, a city in which he spent four months as an exchange student.

SITUATED in one of the fashion capitals of the world, Bocconi University was everything I had expected. Although the city campus exuded the quintessential charm of a European university, the vibrant energy exhibited by its stylish students gave the surroundings an undeniable buzz.

I walked along corridors full of students who could have doubled up as runway models. The same students had Dior shades perched on their heads, carried elegant Gucci sling bags and radiated poise with their every movement.

These students were everywhere: smoking in cafes, chatting outside classrooms and promoting student-organised parties. One had to wonder if they ever got any studying done.

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Management University students attending seminars back home in small classes were always motivating. A question from a professor would result in either frenzied participation or a puzzled silence. The conclusion of a seminar would see the professor being swarmed by a crowd of eager students, all of them vying to ask questions.

I soon discovered that the Italians had valid reasons for their diligence. Top-tier management consulting firms looked for Italian candidates with nothing less than perfect scores.

The best students were amply rewarded with the university's nurturing environment. Bocconi Career Day was an excellent example. With its reputation as one of the best business schools in Europe, Bocconi University's annual career fair was a fair sight for my sore eyes.

The cream of the cream of the corporate world were all present. The giant universal banks thundered about their mammoth balance sheets, the boutique investment banks chanted mantras about the sophistication of their deals and the management consulting firms sang their siren songs of sustainable competitive advantage.

Needless to say, I was overawed at the sheer grandeur and scale of it all. Despite the wonderful opportunities that were available to the Italian students, they exhibited a warm, all-embracing friendliness that never failed to charm.

Warm hospitality

Take my Italian student host, Vito Mennella, for example. Vito was the first person I saw upon my arrival in Milan. Over the next four months of my exchange, my hospitable Italian host took me around Milan, introduced me to his Italian friends and even cooked a farewell dinner for both my friends and me.

And then there was Elisabetta. Elisabetta was a complete stranger from southern Italy who befriended my Singaporean friends and me when we were seated in the same train carriage. After spending merely two hours talking about Italian celebrities and politics, she extended an invitation to a home-cooked dinner at her place. During our somewhat emotional farewell dinner, Elisabetta extended yet another invitation. This time, it was an invite to her wedding, three years hence.

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— Kelvin Sam (trying to straighten the Leaning Tower of Pisa)

The Italians nurtured an emotional separation of a Canadian MBA student and a 19-year-old Thai student. Both of them had spent the final month of their time doing every single thing together.

During their tear-filled parting, the Canadian gave one half of a two-piece jigsaw puzzle to the Thai student with the promise that they would meet someday to complete the puzzle. Reciprocating his touching gesture, the Thai student gave him a diamond pendant that had been bestowed on her by her mother. Again, the intention was for the Canadian to return the pendant to her someday. Farewells were tough indeed.

Addio, dolce vita. That’s “goodbye, sweet life” in Italian. I guess this phrase doubles up as a final farewell to the wonderful country that has hosted me so graciously for the past four months.