I did try to learn Welsh before going to Wales. You know, that language that looks like someone forgot to use any vowels and the one that’s slowly dying out. I proudly understood the welcome our study abroad coordinator gave us: “Prynhawn da! Croeso a Prifysgol Abertawe,” and almost never heard a word of Welsh after. But the inapplicability of the language simply meant I had other things to learn. I learned Welsh in the sense that I discovered how to be Welsh; I learned the culture, the humour—sorry, humor—the food, and more. To me, “learning Welsh” also mean learning about myself and growing towards the person I want to be.

It rains a lot in Wales. My Welsh friends asked me, “Why are you so happy about rain?” and I told them, “I’m from the desert. Rain is a cause for rejoicing.” I was unabashedly excited about everything, for I was in a new place and the world was wonderous. I learned to be aware of this wonder.

My closest friends were my quidditch team. They laughed at my accent and my questions; they introduced me to all sorts of new things; they were my family. One of the biggest, personal-growth-type things I had to learn was to not be shy of making good friends whom I knew I would leave. My tendency in such cases is to keep a bit of an emotional distance. However, I was absolutely crazy about the quidditch team (and the sport). I discovered how to become one of the group even as the outsider, even with the nagging remembrance that I would have to say goodbye in a relatively short amount of time. I left during practice one day, a day that I’d gone just to see everybody one last time. I didn’t want to make a big deal about it (or cry), so I quietly walked away during a scrimmage. But then, when I’d gone about thirty feet, I heard a noise behind me. “Emily!” they were shouting, running full-tilt down the hill after me.
“Do you call that a proper goodbye?” At once they were hugging me, telling me they loved me, that I must start a quidditch team back home. This is what it is to fall in love with new friends: sweeter than the sadness of leaving.

Frankly, I learned how to better balance my school life. Taking pass/fail classes rather than GPA-value ones allowed my honors-student brain to relax a bit. This semester, I learned how to go to the beach after practice rather than going home to do homework. I learned that time is negotiable and that I have a lot more of it than I think. It’s all about how you organize the time. I found it to be worthwhile to stay up until midnight doing homework one day so that I could go learn to surf after class the next day.

I discovered the secret of Back-Doors. There are ways around everything that seems hopeless. My first experience with this was when I was unable to get in the classes I needed, and thus feared that I wouldn’t be able to graduate on time (and other drastic things). Eventually I was given permission by a department chair at Swansea to go ahead and take the overlapping classes, missing class when I needed to. Something that seemed temporally unalterable turned out to not be so strict, proving to me that there are ways to solve such problems. Perhaps my biggest experience in solving unsolvable problems came when, while travelling in Belgium over spring break, I lost my passport and phone. After sorting that out, I felt like I could take on pretty much anything.

I miss seeing Welsh alongside English on every road sign. I miss quidditch and castles and how the Welsh don’t refrigerate eggs. The small details of life are what throw me off at home—what do you mean you don’t have any black tea? It’s the only sort of tea there is. No, “hiya” isn’t karate, it’s a greeting. Ta for understanding. When I arrived in Wales six months ago, I felt awfully brave breathing that first breath of cool Welsh air. Sometime in those six
months, Swansea became a home. I miss it. It feels unspeakably weird to not be returning. At least I had the time that I did.

And now I’m back. When I’m asked a hundred times here at home: “Wow, what was your favorite part?” I cannot pick a favorite. “Learning Welsh,” I say, “learning all of Welsh.”
A Brief History in Photos

Every city has a castle. This is Swansea’s:

Swansea Bay at low tide:
Here’s my team at the British Quidditch Cup (Oxford), with the Welsh flag.

Notre Dame in Paris, during spring break:
The view from atop Mt Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales:
Rhossili Beach, where I learned how to surf:
Typical Welsh countryside. This photo was taken on an expedition to find a Bronze-Age ring cairn, or stone circle.