Kathleen Kuhar: Unconventional Summer Love  
2011 International Education Week Essay

A pint of ice cream, an innumerable amount of tissues, and twenty-four simultaneous plays of Adele’s “I’ll Be Waiting” later, I decided it was time to close the photo box and put away the mementos. I needed to move on, try to forget the bliss I had experienced and heal the burning left from the Band-Aid being peeled off far too early. How many tears are too many to spare for a summer fling? I’ve never truly been in love, but I must have been experiencing the poignant symptoms of heartbreak associated with a first love’s farewell, right? If only I could write a note to express how I felt during this incomparable summer, but it proves to be difficult to write a country a love letter. Oh Slovenia, how I miss thee.

My heart aches for Slovenia every day. Its people, its sidewalk cafes, and its pure natural beauty are burned into my memory and visit me in my dreams on a regular basis. I spent about thirty-six hours in this country of my dreams and had to force myself on to my train back to Italy in the thirty-seventh hour. It may not be the most traditional of loves, but I think my post-Slovenia heartbreak proves it was true love nonetheless. However you define love, it’s hard to deny the connection a person can feel to a particular time and place, even if that connection is established in just thirty-six hours.

Now that the deepness of my connection with Slovenia is understood, I hope to try and explain why I fell head over heels in love with this little-known country in Eastern Europe. Prior to my departure from the U.S. for my summer abroad in Italy, I received a precautionary phone call from my concerned grandfather regarding my potential visit to Slovenia on one of the program’s travel weekends. My grandpa has been talking about traveling to Slovenia, the home of my ancestors, long before I was born, so I must say I was surprised by his warning message about the possible political unrest in the former
Yugoslavia, in which Slovenia is a part. But I was determined to go back to my roots if I could only talk some people from my program in Italy to accompany me on an obscure adventure.

Lucky for me, I was able to lure some friends away from the romance of Paris, the history of Rome, and the parties of Barcelona for a weekend away in Slovenia. While I understand where my grandpa was coming from in his worries about my travels, I ignored his wishes and made my way a couple hours east of my campus to Ljubljana, Slovenia. For me, it was not so much a journey to touch base with my history, but more an off-the-beaten track trip. However, in the end, I ended up walking around with an extreme pride in my heritage and a desire to never leave the heterogeneous terrain of this beautiful country.

My weekend away from campus began with the cutie hostel receptionist looking at my passport and saying, “Well, you have a Slovenian name,” and I had no idea the significance that would bear for me within a few days. Now, I think back on that moment and my heart flutters with delight. I have trouble considering a higher honor than that of having Slovenian blood running through my veins. It is hard to convey the deep connection I felt with this country and how at home I felt in its colorful capital of Ljubljana.

On our first full day in Slovenia, we decided to take a bus to Lake Bled, which is considered one of the more magnificent of natural spots in the country. While we were there I got closer to my ancestors than I ever thought imaginable, and I did not even know it until I returned home. My group pressured me into paying 12 Euros to take a boat out to the island in the middle of Lake Bled, even though all I could think about was how much food that 12 Euros could pay for. After a thirty-minute boat ride through the calmest, most turquoise waters I’ve ever seen, we reached our destination, which had a church, a
monastery, and a café. Apparently, my great-great grandmother worked in the monastery as a young woman, and it was in there that she met my great-great grandfather while he was delivering groceries to the island. Got chills? I sure do. Now, I think about those 12 Euros and I have trouble imagining what kind of food I could have bought with them that would have brought me the joy that this touch with my history has brought me. I love food more than most and I am still unable to think of anything that could compare.

Since I have been back, I have researched every aspect of this country in my hopes to fill the void left from my abrupt "breakup" with Slovenia, my grandpa now tells everyone who will listen about the safety of the country, and my pictures of Slovenia have started showing signs of wear and tear from my constant flipping through them. Not a day passes that I do not think about my summer abroad, and Slovenia is usually the first thing to cross my mind. I do not exaggerate when I talk about the tears and tissues, or the ice cream and music. I am one of the few that has had the privilege to literally touch my history. My heart breaks when I think about the 5,100 miles between Ljubljana and Iowa City, but I’m comforted by the thought that my life will undoubtedly lead me back to Slovenia. The roots to my family tree may be across the world, but they have grabbed a hold of my heart and will not let go until I return. I guess I will just have to oblige.