Erasmus exchange program in Italy 2014/15

Erasmus. A word with full of happiness, joy and adventure. A simple word that can make us smile and can cause endless flashbacks of memories. How do I define Erasmus? Erasmus is a vacation from your life. When I left Hungary, I also left my ‘old life’ at home. I started a journey to a country which I will call as my second ‘home’ for 6 months. The only problem with vacations is that they have an end, and we have to go home. Like only one summer, an Erasmus program also can change us. We won’t be the same person who left their country 6 months ago. During our ‘vacation’ we can get to know a different country with new people, culture, language, traditions…. etc. Erasmus is literally one of the greatest adventure in which you can take part. The most important thing (besides of course studying) is making new friendships. Friendships that we will never forget and hopefully those we can manage through borders and thousands and thousands of kilometres. The Erasmus brings together students from every part of the world. Everybody starts his/her journey like a stranger, but when we arrive to our host country, we suddenly became a kind of family. Why I am saying this? Because we have to cope with the same things, we have the same problems. For example, I met with one of my best friend in the international office in the first days, when we waited hours to get our papers. If you need any help you not even have to think a minute about where you can find help, because there always will be somebody who is in the same situation and who has the same problems like you. These new friends can support you, and help you at any time. Like in the middle of the night, or before an exam. Here, I get to know what unconditional trust is. It is an amazing feeling when you realize that you are not alone anymore, because there are FRIENDS around you. Friends, who are beside you no matter what. Friends, who are crazy, who are hard-working or lazy. Friends who are make you a better person and see the beauty in you. You’ll have the same experiences, you will make memories together, and only you can share the same laughs and the endless list of stories. This is the magic in it. Sometimes we don’t even have to talk just smile, and everybody knows what’s happening. I’m a firm believer that Erasmus can change lives. It’s not a cliché, its reality. It can change your attitude towards life, and not at least the friendships that you make will lasts for a lifetime. It’s totally guaranteed that you will change. The brand new experiences will have a huge impact on your life. You will probably have a better attitude to problem solving and challenges and a more open view to the world, but it could be just a very little change, which you will only realize after you arrive home.

I started my journey with a high level of uncertainty and a lot of doubts. I was not sure about anything. I didn’t speak Italian very well, because I last learned it in elementary school and the only thing I can remember was how to say hello, or what my name is (so, just the basics). I just only hoped that I will survive with my Spanish knowledge. But when I arrived and the university started I suddenly felt comfortable and relaxed. I stopped worrying and I realized that it was such a stupid waste of time, because there always is a solution for everything. I lived in a lovely city, called Forli, because they teach the International Relations and diplomatic affairs there. It was relatively close to Bologna, it was a 40 minutes journey with train. My Italian friend also told me that I’m lucky, because according to him, in a small city you can get a closer experience to the “real Italian life”, than in a big and multicultural city, such as Bologna. For the first time I didn’t
understand it, but at the end of my Erasmus period I understood it. For example, the closer the city is to the sea, the more people use bicycles and walk. They don’t use public transportation.

Italy. The first things what can pop in your mind are fashion, spaghetti, gelato, ancient history, or loads of cities, such as Venice or Rome, which are still popular tourist attraction. I chose Italy, because I’m a big fan of arts and I like Italian culture, history, and not at least, it’s beautiful language. I have to admit, that I was also curious about are the famous stereotypes are true or not. I’ve never been in Italy before, so I couldn’t wait for the new experiences and adventures.

Well, here is the most important thing I have learned and experienced: if you plan to go to Italy, the most crucial thing you have to have is huge pack of patience. Italians do not like organizing things. Italian people do not rush. They walk slowly, they usually go to a cafeteria to drink a coffee before work and just stop in the middle of the street to talk with an another person. They appreciate every moment in life. They really live a 'dolce vita'. Another thing which is important to mention, is that most Italian people (especially over 30) do not speak English, or at least favour their own language. The funniest things that happened to me, when I went to the office to get my fiscal code (same thing as an ID number) and the lady in the office who didn’t speak any English thought that if she spoke louder (yes, Italians really do speak loud, so literally at this point she was shouting) I will understood her. When she realized it won’t lead to any solution she went to look for a translator.

One of my Italian friends shared an Italian saying with me: in Italy, eating and wearing clothes are not people’s need, but rather a piece of art. It is really important to understand this, is you want to understand the way of living in Italy. For example you can see men riding a bike in a suit. Style is one of the main ways of self-expression. Coffee, especially in the morning and in the afternoon, has a huge importance. In the morning they usually drink cappuccino (especially women), in the afternoon espresso. Once I tried espresso, but it was so strong for me, like a poison. For Italians, the 'real' coffee is espresso and drinking coffee is as a daily habit such as having a shower. So dear prosperous Erasmus student, take into account that if you have decided to study in Italy, you will have a serious addiction to coffee. The coffee shops are really looking like a zoo in the mornings, and if you want to get your coffee you have to be really determined and loud. Italian cuisine, pizza and ice cream, and all kinds of pasta are literally come from heaven and wait for you to eat them. Warning: no you won’t able to stop, even after you eat a hundred slice of pizza, or have your 3rd ice cream during one day. After you know what real Italian pizza tastes, you will never be able to eat a pizza slice from a pizza shop in the corner. Italians are like to go out a lot in every day of the week. They are eating in a restaurant or just go to a bar with to have a drink, with their family and friends. The restaurants and bars are open around 7. I’ve never seen any bar or restaurant empty, or with a few people. What I really liked the so called ‘aperitif’, which means free food, which can be very useful if you are hungry. If you order a drink with your friends in a certain bar, you get a huge plate with prosciutto, formaggio, little slices of pizza, crisps, piadina (special Italian bread)... etc. Italians are also friendly and helpful. They really talk loudly and use heavy gestures while they are speaking. Yes, you can learn this habit very quickly and start to use them without recognizing it. Siesta in the afternoon is also really important. In this time, everybody goes home, have a lunch and talk with their family.
It can be a strange and annoying thing for those who come from another country with different opening hours. Everything is closed from 1pm to 4pm. For me, this was the hardest thing to get used to.

If you worry about how will you learn Italian I have to tell you that you can learn the basics very quickly, especially if you’ve studied Spanish or French before. There is an Italian course (from A1-B1) offered for exchange students (for free), which is a great opportunity to start to learn Italian or just refresh your knowledge. One the other hand you will be forced to use your Italian, even if it means a few words, because they don’t prefer English. One of the greatest thing about languages what I experienced was the language tandem program. It offered a great opportunity to learn the language from a mother tongue person who is not a teacher and who is in the same age as you, or maybe bit older. Actually, it was a language exchange activity, where you could teach your own language in exchange for another. University students offered language lessons for their fellow students, voluntarily. You can really have a wide range of choice. It was a real multicultural experience. These ‘lessons’ were more like an informal talks between two university student. We taught to each other whatever the other wanted to know. It was so much fun. Another bright idea was that the university organized Erasmus ‘aperitif’ nights at every week. They chose a particular country every week who had to prepare some national food for the others students. Besides the Erasmus nights, there were loads of loads of programmes, events, trips, usually organized by the university or an association related to the university, so it was impossible to get bored.

It doesn’t matter in which country you will go, or if your host city is a small university city or a capital, because you will remember the people and the memories you made with them. People make the Erasmus feeling, not the place. One of the best things is when you hear a song in a shop and you suddenly will remember all the memories connected to it. It doesn’t have to be song; it can be a smell, or any small thing you can imagine. I’ve never thought that a Backstreet Boys song will ever be connected to my best memories. These things are unexpected. When you have friends from nearly every part of the world, you will realize how “small” the world is. But its main advantage that wherever you will travel in the future, you will have somebody there you can help you and show the particular city around.

Finally, I just only can encourage everybody to take part in an Erasmus programme. It’s really beneficial in a lot of ways and it’s guaranteed that it will be one of the greatest adventures of your life. The only thing you have to do, is to take the first step and then let the things happen. You will never regret it!

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