CEMS semester abroad at ESADE in Barcelona

My name is Fanni Szűcs, I am a Management and Leadership master student at Corvinus University of Budapest. I spent my 3rd semester (Fall 2018) abroad with the CEMS Programme. In this summary I would like to share some useful information about my experience.

Accommodation

First of all, it is important to know that ESADE is not located in Barcelona. It is in the next town, called Sant Cugat. First you need to decide whether you prefer living in Sant Cugat or in Barcelona. In Sant Cugat, on campus there is a dormitory the advantage of which is its proximity to the university. However, the monthly fee is EUR 800-900. You can also rent a room in the town of Sant Cugat. The other option is to stay in Barcelona. There I would recommend renting a room which is walking distance from one of the FGC stations, which is the train that takes you to Sant Cugat, in order to minimize the travel time. Depending on where you get on the train you travel 20-30 minutes with it, and after getting off in Sant Cugat you need to walk good 15 minutes to the university. There is a bus that takes you from the station to the school but comes rarely and you still need to walk from the stop to the university building. I personally never took it during the 4 months, and the 30 minutes of daily walk made me pretty fit. All the FGCs leave from Plaza Catalunya which is the biggest traffic hub of the city. Anything close to this or to the next stations (Provença, Gràcia, Sant Gervasi/Plaza Molina, Muntaner) is a great area to live in. Everybody who has lived in Barcelona before suggested to go for a room in Barcelona because most of the programs take place there. I completely agree with them and this is what I also recommend. I lived next to the Sant Gervasi station and paid EUR 430 per month.

The next big question is where to look for a room. I think it is a good idea to start with Facebook. I suggest joining many groups related to housing in Barcelona. There are several posts a day, it can be annoying but this way you can get an idea about the housing situation in the city. You can identify the most important parameters such as location, price, equipment. There are several webpages which offer rooms as well, for example Idealista, Uniplaces, HousingAnywhere. I found my place on the app called Badi. I really like its structure, the places are located on a map with prices and if you click on them you can find the description of the flat and you can also check the profile of the owner. In addition, there are many agencies as well, some of them are willing to visit the room instead of you, however, you need to pay an agency fee for their service. There is a new initiative of ESADE, the students have the option to register their rooms with the most important parameters in a google form and this data is shared with the incoming students of the next semester in the hope of finding a match. Finally, what many people do is arriving prior to the beginning of the semester to Barcelona, staying in a hostel and looking for places in person. This is the safest option, though I find it quite stressful arriving without having a place.

I have to admit that it can be very difficult to find a decent room in Barcelona, just like in any other big cities. There are many scams and some owners/landlords ask for a lot of money and offer very low-key rooms. I advise you not to pay in advance for anybody (except for agencies),
first visit the room and talk to the owner/landlord. In most of the cases deposit needs to be paid (which equals the rent of one or two months). I heard that many landlords are not willing to give it back at the end of the semester, so I would suggest making pictures of the room and common places in the beginning to be able to prove that no harm was done by yourself (if really no harm was done by yourself). Fortunately, my landlord dispensed me from paying the deposit.

When is it advisable to start looking for a room? I don’t think there is a perfect receipt. Probably the earlier, the better and the more places you check upon, the more probable you will find a place. I personally started searching in the summer, this might have been a bit late (but I need to note here that most of the advertised rooms are available immediately, so if you cannot move soon, they will probably give it to someone who can). I have to admit that I couldn’t find anything for a long time, I had skyped with many people, but somehow all of the rooms had a feature that I was not satisfied with. Also, I did not contact any agencies because I was not willing to pay extra for their services. However, contacting an agency might be the simplest and least stressful way to find a room. In the end, I found my room two days before my departure to Barcelona. Huh, just in time!

What are the important parameters that need to be taken into account? I already mentioned the location and the price. Moreover, for me it was also important to have all the basic equipment in the room and in the kitchen because I was not willing to buy blankets or pans (some of the advertised rooms are not even furnished…). Then heating is also an important issue. In November and December it is already pretty cold (but I was told that January and February are the coldest months) and without heating the rooms cool down a lot. Interestingly, the heating system as such is not existing in all of the houses. Many students gave up on it, I was insisting. In my room there was a radiator but since the gas is very expensive in Barcelona my landlady only turned it on occasionally. In some places you need to pay extra if you want to use the heating. I advise you to talk about this in advance. Furthermore, always ask about the flat mates, who are they, what are they doing. Finally, it is good to know that many rooms in Barcelona are interior which means that their window opens to the inner yard. This means they often are darker but they are less noisy too.

I wish you patience and also luck with the housing issue. Don’t worry, sooner or later everybody finds a nice room!

**Public transportation**

The region is divided into zones. The city of Barcelona is zone 1 and Sant Cugat is zone 2. The best and most cost-effective solution is to buy a pass for the 2 zones for 3 months (unfortunately you cannot buy it for 4 months). The version for anyone under the age of 25 costs EUR 142 and can be used on any means of transport. I went for this pass and for the last month I bought a monthly pass with the same conditions.

Several students, especially the boys rented a scooter and commuted with that between Barcelona and Sant Cugat.
ESADE is a private institution and is part of the Ramon Llull University. ESADE consists of two schools, a business school located in Sant Cugat and a law school located in Barcelona. As the CEMS Programme belongs to the business school all our classes are held on the Sant Cugat campus. (Yes, in the beginning I was also hoping that I will have my classes in Barcelona.)

The fall term begins with a facultative intensive 2 week long Spanish language course in August. The course is free of charge. I who is crazy about the Spanish language and culture of course participated. All you need to do is register for the course and then you will be sent a language leveling test and put into the appropriate group. I learned a lot during these two weeks, even though I was in the C1 group. The course is open to the bachelor exchange students too, and most of my classmates were those guys, I only had one CEMSi in my group. However, in general the CEMSies start to arrive during those 2 weeks, so you can already meet your future classmates prior to the beginning of the classes. I definitely recommend participating in the Spanish intensive course because additionally you can make cool programs in the afternoons, as the workload is not that big yet. During the intensive course there are also orientation programs for the exchange students, such as presentation of the local police with safety instructions, introduction of some student organizations and sightseeing tours.

The first mandatory program of the semester is the block seminar. At ESADE they offer three different block seminars and you need to create your preference list in the spring on the CEMS webpage. The three topics are: corporate culture, strategy and sustainability. I went for the last one, as I already had courses related to the other two and I wanted to learn something new. The block seminar is held in a small town in Catalonia in a very cozy hotel. It lasts 5 days with lectures, guest speakers, company presentations and ends with the presentations of the students. This is the first time the CEMSies officially meet each other. Super exciting!

Afterwards we continue with the Business Communication Skill Seminar, held on campus. This is a very useful 4-day seminar with active participation of the students. This week the CEMS Club Barcelona organized social events every day which helped us to get to know each other.

The regular courses only start at the end of September. The core course of the fall term for us is the Corporate Strategy, which is worth 7 ECTS and is the most work intensive course. Then there is a longer list of elective courses from which the students can choose. There is a minimum number of ECTS that need to be taken but if you want to lessen the workload of your next semester you can take more courses abroad. This is what I was trying to do (as I didn’t take CEMS courses at Corvinus prior to my CEMS year) and this is how I had altogether 12 courses at ESADE. Besides the block seminar and the Business Communication Skill Seminar I had two other skill seminars (as we need to acquire 1 ECTS for skill seminars besides the Business Communication). Then I had six courses during the semester: Corporate Strategy, Seis Fundamentos para la Estrategia, Where is the World Going, Digital Transformation of Business, Recognizing Where You Are: Understanding Spanish Businessmen through Recent History and Art and the Spanish C1
course. As I mentioned I am really into Spain, so I wanted to learn as much Spanish as possible, this is why I took the Seis Fundamentos course, the only business course taught in Spanish. I have to admit that I couldn’t really become one with the content as it was about strategy from a philosophical perspective, but at least the professor was speaking in Spanish (however his slides and the readings were in English). The Spanish language course was very intense, we had three classes of three hours per week. On the C1 level we were learning business Spanish, we had to write papers and do presentation in business related topics. I do believe that my Spanish improved a lot during the semester. The structure of the B2 course is the same but the lower level courses are a bit different, I think they are less intense. My favorite elective course was the Recognizing where you are course. It was about Spain, we learned about history, politics, art. The professor was always up to date and gave very good recommendations about exhibitions and restaurants in Barcelona. We had one off-campus session where we visited two museums guided by him and he also organized a farewell lunch in an authentic Catalan restaurant. Thanks to him I could make the most of my stay in Spain. Moreover, there are two intensive weeks during the term, one in November and another in December. On these weeks the regular classes are not held, instead there are intensive courses. I registered for an intensive course for December, called Power and Influence in Organizations, this was my seventh course during the semester. The registration for the courses is in the beginning of summer with a bidding system. First you need to set up your preference list and then allocate points to all the courses, the more points you allocate, the higher your chances to get into the course. ESADE will inform you about this process in detail. I personally got into all the courses I wanted to, I think it is a quite smooth process. On the whole, I am very satisfied with the courses I took, I learned a lot from my professors and from my peers. The courses required quite a lot of work, there were readings from week to week, we were supposed to participate actively in the class discussions, we had to write papers and do presentations, both individually and in groups, and in some of the courses we had exams too. All the exams are held before Christmas but some of the final papers are due in January, so you might need to work a bit in January too, but you don’t need to be physically in Spain anymore.

There are two canteens on campus, both have pretty much the same offer. I reckon they are expensive, the price of the coffee and the sandwich is acceptable but one apple or banana cost EUR 1. There is a lunch menu for EUR 7,75 which includes 3 courses plus a drink, a coffee and bread. I often went for it because I was lazy to prepare lunch at home. Regarding grocery shopping, if one goes to the right place one can find pretty similar prices to those in Budapest. I did most of my grocery shopping in the supermarkets Dia and Consum, but Mercadona is also affordable.

CEMS Club Barcelona was very active throughout the semester, the Event Committee organized quite many programs for us. We had several social as well as company events. In addition, at ESADE there were two career fairs during the fall term. I think it’s worth participating to get some idea about job search on an international level.
In the summer CEMS Club Barcelona started to recruit for the fall term. I applied for the Finance and Accounting Committee and I got to be the head of it. It was such an honor! I had another girl in my committee and we were dealing with our budget, of course. It was a very useful experience to be part of an organization full of international students.

**A few words about Barcelona**

Barcelona is the city of dreams. The Catalan capital is located between the sea and the mountains, which makes it very special. The view from Tibidabo or Bunkers is gorgeous, you can admire the whole city and the infinite sea from above. The weather until the end of September, beginning of October is suitable for swimming in the sea. I advise you to make the most of it and spend as much time by the sea as possible. I often went before or after classes to the beach. I mean, how cool is that?

The city is packed with tourists, which means that the top sites are always crowded. If you would like to visit something, you need to plan and buy the tickets in advance. In addition, there are many pickpockets, so you need to be extremely careful on the streets and on the public transportation. Fortunately, nobody ever tried to rob me, but I had classmates who were robbed even in restaurants.

I tried to explore the city as much as possible, often walked hours in the sunny weather. The buildings are beautiful and there are lots of classy museums as well. The entry for example to the buildings of Gaudí is pretty expensive but many other museums can be visited free of charge on specific days (e.g. every first Sunday of the month).

The food is another remarkable point. It is all about sharing, nothing is better than ordering a big plate of paella or several tapas and a pitcher of sangría and sharing it with your friends. If you like seafood, you will be even better off. Eating out in Barcelona is slightly more expensive than in Budapest, but if you don’t do it every day, you will be fine.

I advise you to explore the city in depth, walk, see beautiful things, talk to lovely people. You don’t need to worry if you don’t speak Spanish, you can easily get along with English as well. However, Spanish is a beautiful language and you can learn it for free at ESADE so I would definitely do that.

**Travel around Spain**

When I found out that I was going to spend my semester abroad in Spain, I knew I was going to travel as much as I can afford. In Catalonia one can do very nice day trips to the surrounding towns. We did a day trip to Andorra as well, which is already another country, so for a travel addict it’s definitely a must. There are several organizations, for example Erasmus Barcelona, who organize trips especially for students. If one wants to go further, I recommend checking the domestic flights, they can be very cheap. I for example managed to fly to Santander for 11 euros. Spain has a very good railway system; however, those tickets can be very expensive. The country is huge and diverse, where ever you go, you will see something different, something special.
By the end of my exchange I had the chance to visit six autonomous communities out of the seventeen: Catalonia, Cantabria, Basque Country, Andalusia, Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha. Altogether I have been to 17 new cities. I would like to enhance that I only skipped one day of school because of traveling.

If you have any questions related to the university, to the city or to traveling, don’t hesitate to contact me via email (szucs.fanni0329@gmail.com) or on Facebook. I’m also happy to share some very cool tricks about when to visit the Park Güell for free, how I got in to the El Clásico or how to buy tickets for a good price to the opera house. In the followings I attach some teasing pictures.
Spectacular sunrise in Park Güell

El Clásico in Camp Nou
Last day at ESADE