A semester at UCSC
Account of an exchange semester at Milan
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Introduction – from application to arrival

I have known that I wanted to take part in the Erasmus exchange program as long as I have known it existed – I must have been in the final years of high school. In my mind it had everything I ever wanted and loved – travelling, independence, new languages, cultures, people... and anyway, by the time I get to the point that I can apply to an exchange program I’ll be enough of an adult that moving to another country and taking care of myself won’t be an issue. If I had the chance now to travel back in time and sit down with my high school self, it would be a long conversation about what’s real and what’s not about the picture that is her little head about exchange semesters and university students, but there would be one thing we would most definitely agree on: it is a once in a lifetime experience that brings fundamental changes to your thinking and your approach to the world, and gives you the opportunity to have the time of your life.

I was not aware, for example, of all the preparation and paperwork that goes into choosing the right institution and arranging your arrival and stay. Selecting the right university meant finding the one that offered the courses that can be accepted here at home and making sure they are being held in the right language (which is harder than one would imagine). However, if we make it through the application period, we can finally start preparing for the travel. I myself closed my bags and hopped on a plane on a hot day in mid-August, looking forward to my new life with excitement and a bit of worry. I am an experienced traveller, but this one was different: no friend or family to share it with, and no close date of returning. This time I was all on my own, and I was going to be so for the next six months.

Life in the city, at the University

Milan is one of the biggest, most central cities of North Italy. The first thing to catch my eye upon arrival – beside the summer heat of the Mediterranean – was how similar the city is to Budapest. It is easy to see, especially if you look at the fact that both bare the characteristics of an Austro-Hungarian era city. I almost immediately felt at home in the shadow of the old buildings, ancient trams and cobblestones. Milan is about the size of the Hungarian capital and doesn’t have the feel of a big city, which I didn’t mind for a second. I arrived a few day before university obligations started, so I had some free time to make the pilgrimage to the most important tourist attractions – the Duomo and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele next to it, the Sforza Castle and its enormous park, the Brera district and the lovely ‘mini-Venice’ of the Navigli district.
The rhythm of life of the Milanese people is different from ours – everything happens a few hours later in the day and the locals themselves – even though being from the northern part of the country – are truly Italian. They’re loud, speak just as much with their hand as with words, lovely, heartfelt and open people, especially if you try to speak their language. Knowing a few words can prove really helpful also because they don’t necessarily speak English.

My receiving institution – Universta Cattolica del Sacro Cuore – is one of the best private universities of Europe. About 40 000 students study every year across the five campuses all around Italy, with about 1 800 of them being international students, who are spending either one or two semesters there with Erasmus, or having their whole Bachelors or Masters in the country. The campus in Milan hosts countless faculties, and so students from different disciplines and nationalities meet daily at classes and events. Life just never stops.

One of the courts of the university, in autumn colours.

The life of an exchange student

The life of an exchange student is ever changing and full of challenges in the best way possible. On my part the challenge started with the language barrier – as I didn’t want to let the possibility of having my credits recognised at my home university (and therefore not “losing” the semester) go, most of my courses were held in Italian. All I had as preparation was a stumbling intermediate Italian and a two-week-long, intensive language course at Cattolica, which proved to be just enough to get me through
the first few weeks. I took six courses – *Economia Internazionale*, *Diritto europeo dell’economia*, *Marketing*, *Storia moderna e contemporanea* and *Social Psychology*, out of which most of them were organised for local students. I can say with confidence that I had little time to feel bored during the semester. However, initial difficulties were very much compensated by the brilliant professors and courses I had the good fortune to be part of. I had the opportunity to work on relevant, exciting topics and get deep into ones I knew little of. And besides of what and how was taught at university, the other thrilling thing to discover was just how differently each nation and each person sees the world – even those that are geographically close to us. The joy of finding the tiny differences that can only be noticed if we live with these people for a considerable time is an unexpected, but quite addicting one.

Naturally, an exchange semester is not only about going to university and about spending hours knee-deep in books. In the six months that I spent in Italy, I had the chance to visit some of the more famous sights of the region, often with the other international students or with the girls I shared the flat with. Due to Milan’s central location, our opportunities were countless, and spending the weekend in a nearby city was only a question of hopping on a train. In early autumn, while the weather was still pleasant we spent days hiking around Lake Como or down at the colourful villages of Cinque Terre. When the Mediterranean rains arrived, we went to Florence, Lodi and Venice. Travelling with international students is an experience on its own right, as often each and every member of the group is of a different nationality, which makes for an exciting cultural mix with all the languages and accents, customs and stories we bring with us. And these connections and friendships are the most valuable and thrilling parts of an exchange semester. I spent hours in discussion with some friends about their world and mine, and we were all fascinated about all the small and large thinks we did not know about the world and about how things work in the other corner of the planet.
Conclusion

A conclusion in short would be: everyone should go to study at least a semester abroad. Of course it is not cheap and it is not without some stress, but it is most likely going to be the experience of your life. Spending this much time in a completely new, unknown context teaches you a lot about the world and about yourself. My personal experience – as I cannot speak for others – has been that it has shown me just how much I don’t know about the world and the forces that drive it. It gave me reassurance that I chose the right academic path, it gave me motivation and drive to continue to explore and to strive to understand as much of other cultures and people as I possibly can. It gave me unforgettable memories about amazing people, super trips, a new understanding and even some assimilation into Italian culture. It gave a sense of independence and confidence that I can manage intercultural issues and life.

I expected it to be quite an experience, but oh boy, what an experience it was! I loved it. I just loved it so much. It came with all the surprises, challenges, happiness, smiles and sometimes tears that one could possibly imagine and I feel like it changed the trajectory of my life for forever. In what sense and direction, ask me a few months later, I can’t tell just yet. But a part of me will always be roaming the cobblestones of Milan and I will always remember the majestic atmosphere of Cattolica. It was just six months, but I feel like I gained experiences and memories enough for a whole lifetime.

A Spanish, an Argentinian, a Dutch and Hungarian at Lake Como