My Erasmus (travelogue)

University of Coimbra, Portugal, 2018/2019 1st semester

Hello! I’m a master student at Communication and Media major and I spent the first semester of my second year in the city of Coimbra in Portugal with Campus Mundi scholarship.

Why I applied?
I have always been dreaming of spending one semester abroad during my university studies. However, I’m really family-oriented, so I have never had enough “courage” to leave my home, family and friends behind (even for just a few months). Then my life came to a turning point when I felt I really need radical changes in my life, and if one thing will turn your whole life upside down, it is an Erasmus programme. After all, relatively late, I applied for an Erasmus semester in my second year at Masters. It turned out one of my best decisions of my life, so what I can advise to anybody – even if it’s a cliché – is that it’s never too late and don’t be afraid to say yes to this opportunity.

Why Portugal and Coimbra?
I had a friend form university who also spent one semester with Erasmus in the same place two years ago and his stories really impressed me. Finally, it was a tiny and nonsense reason why I decided to go there. I’m a huge fan of Harry Potter, so when I saw the pictures of the university building and the student’s uniforms and I got to know that – besides many more Portugal cities and places – the city and university of Coimbra was an inspiration for J.K. Rowling for writing the books and also for the visuality of the films, I considered it as a sign from fate; I simply have to go there. Having finished my Erasmus semester, I can say that this was a perfect decision and Coimbra is a perfect place to go for exchange.

Travelling and prices
In general, flight tickets are relatively expensive, although it depends a lot on the time of the year. For example, when I moved out in the beginning of September, my ticket was around 190 EUR, but when I came home finally in the end of January, it was just 80 EUR. Depending on the air company, flights are going to Lisbon and Porto. (Personally, I prefer the airport of Porto, also it’s a bit closer to Coimbra.) From both cities, there are both railway and bus connections to Coimbra for around 10 EUR and you can easily access the stations from the airport by metro (around 2 euros for a single journey). There’s also a Coimbra shuttle service, which is kind of expensive (29 EUR), but it picks you up at the airport or your exact place (if you are going from home to the airport) and takes you directly to the airport or your desired address with comfortable small vans.

All in all, travelling has a normal price, you can reach the biggest and most famous destinations in Portugal from Coimbra by bus or by train, both offer student discount (around 10-20%), but only if you buy the ticket in person at the station. There are local buses operating in Coimbra, but most of the students don’t use them, because as a small city, you can reach almost everything by foot. (Of course, it depends a lot on where you live, most importantly how far from your faculty and from the main square, Praca de Republica.)

In general, we can say that prices are like the ones in Hungary. Hygienic and drugstore products are generally more expensive, but the prices of basic food and grocery are similar. Prices in bars and pubs are also cool, especially compared to other European destinations. A small beer is usually around 80 cents, a small sangria (which is a popular and really tasty long drink there) is 1 euro and
there’s a huge selection of tasty shots from 80 cents. Eating out in a restaurant is popular amongst Portuguese people, but this is one more thing which can be a burden to your budget.

To sum up the financial part, we can say that the amount of scholarship is more than enough to live comfortably in Coimbra, also to travel and usually go out – but it depends on you how often do you do these “extra” activities. The Campus Mundi scholarship can help you a lot to extend your possibilities.

Coimbra

Being a city built around the university and also a popular destination for international students, Coimbra is indeed a student city. It’s a relatively small city built on two sides of the river Mondego. If you read just a little bit about Coimbra, you will know that its historical university building (one of the oldest one in Europe) is a World Heritage Site and the whole city is a “living history”. The main part and student center of the city is on one side of the river and you can reach almost every important part by foot. For example, Praca de Republica is the main square where most of the programme starts. The old touristic part of the university and the Law, Medicine, Arts and Humanities Faculty and the central library is 5 minutes walking, the Economics Faculty is a bit more far, around 20 minutes walking, the train station and the downtown part of the city with moody streets and shops is also 10 minutes. To reach the river, you need to walk around 20 minutes and especially in spring and summer, you should definitely spend your time in the riverside. Coimbra has two big shopping malls, they are not in the center, but at maximum 30 minutes walking from the main square. Although I have never used any, of course there is public transportation in the city, especially buses running over all parts of the city, for a normal price.

Accommodation

Although there is a dormitory system of the university and you can apply online to reserve a room, I don’t recommend that one, because I applied in the beginning of August but haven’t received any reply till my departure. When I got there, I asked in the office and they told me I shouldn’t wait for their answer because that system doesn’t work well, so I should better look after a room by myself. I did that and I can say that there are plenty of opportunities so – as my example shows – you can find a decent accommodation even after the semester started... However, I strongly recommend you to try and find something before you go, to avoid the stress of “hunting” for a room right after you arrived. There are approved online systems where you can search (e.g. Uniplaces, Erasmusu), but most of the hosts use different Facebook groups to promote their places and there you can contact them easily. But be careful, because some pictures are “fake” and some rooms are in much worse condition compared to how they look like. Also pay attention to clearly agree about the price (average price for a room is around 200 euros per months), especially if it involves expenses (like water, gas, electricity, wifi, cleaning service, etc) and don’t be surprised if landlords don’t sign any contract with you as it’s not so common there. I recommend you to stay in a so-called “Erasmus house”; they are usually big houses with lots of rooms for around 15-20 people from all over the world, creating a good community and an atmosphere in which you can truly live the Erasmus lifestyle in every minute 😊

University and courses

Although I’m studying Communication and Media masters at Corvinus, I had to apply to the Faculty of Economics. I don’t regret it at all, because I could find courses similar to mine at Corvinus and it was also a good way to extend my knowledge. At all, I completed 30 ECTS credits with five subjects (each for 6 ECTS): Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Ethics, Transport Economics,
Services’ Marketing, Marketing Management and Portuguese language beginner. Teaching and account methods are similar to the Hungarian system; we had several projects through the semester with presentations, essays, etc. and also written exams at the end of the semester (or in some cases in the middle). In general, teachers are nice and helpful and Portuguese students are open to international students. Also, the colleagues of the international office at the faculty are kind and there to help you in anything you need.

Everyday life

Portuguese are the kindest and most helpful people I have ever met. I don’t want to use clichés but indeed most of the people you can meet, even just on the streets are happy, smiling and willing to help. Some typical Latin stereotypes are true for them, too, such as they tend to leave from everywhere (even in official situations), they do not really stress on anything and in general they are optimistic and enjoy life. They like to spend their free time in restaurants and coffee places with friends; eating, drinking and chatting for hours. This habit is also common in weekday nights, they usually work till late afternoon and start to live their social lives after. (And I’m not talking solely about students, also working adults are usually hang out at night.)

Portuguese cuisine is not so extraordinary, but fine and tasty. They eat lots of meat, fish with rice, fries and salad, vegetables and fruits. Their bakery culture is worth to mention; they have plenty of ‘pastelarias’ always full of people, with huge variety of bakeries, and they really love and use tons of sugar… If you have a sweet tooth, you will love it (just don’t forget to go also to gym).

Besides enjoying the beauty and fascinating lifestyle of Coimbra, I highly recommend you to travel through Portugal as it has sooo many parts you have to see... ESN and some other companies organize trips through the whole semester, but you can easily do it on your own along with friends.

(ESN) events and nightlife

ESN Coimbra is pretty famous about quality and I can only confirm this statement. They are working really hard and give their best to fulfill students’ needs. They organize programs through the whole semester, but especially in the ‘Welcome month’ to help everyone make friendships and fit in. They do much more than parties... they have social/cultural section organizing charity events (e.g. charity beerpong where you can play if you bring there some donation for the ones in need) or trips to get to know Coimbra or other sights of Portugal and their culture. Of course, parties are on of the best thing in Coimbra… especially in the first months of the semester, almost every night, students gather around the main square (in the pub especially for Erasmus and ESN people or if the weather is good, the square itself is full of people) and they are drinking and chatting until around 2 or 3 am and after they are going to places where they can also dance together - and in the biggest nights, Portuguese can do it till 6 or 7 in the morning, which is at first maybe a bit unusual, but you can get used to it 😊.

About university life, you should know about their famous “student festival”, the bigger one in May and another (also huge one) in October. It’s a week without university classes, with everyday party (completely like a festival) and one day of a student parade, similar to carnivals; they wear funny clothes and walk together in a big crowd through the whole city, singing, dancing and enjoying all the traditions around this event – you have to be there and live it to understand what is it about exactly. One more important thing about ESN people is that they are sooo open, helpful and direct that you can indeed make real friendships 😊.
All in all – of course I’m a bit prejudiced as I spent a great semester there - I can honestly say that Coimbra can be a perfect choice for Erasmus destination as it is a hidden gem of Portugal which in general has a cool and relaxing atmosphere. Although it isn’t such a big city like Lisbon or Porto, it’s a real student cosmopolis (it’s also affordable and you can still find everything what you will need) with a prestigious university and high-quality education. After a few weeks, you won’t notice it exactly when it comes, but one day you will just think about it and you realize that you can really call Coimbra to your home and its habitants will be your friends and it’s one of the best thing about Erasmus.

In case of any questions or for more exact and detailed stories, tips or anything, do not hesitate to contact me via email or Facebook: tina.pap17@gmail.com or facebook.com/bettina.pap.75

Hope you will grab your chance and go to Erasmus... it would be just an additional pleasure if I convinced you about my beloved Coimbra 😊

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