

My (slightly different) ERASMUS Experience – An experience report about ERASMUS+ stay in Malta

At the beginning, I want to say that even though my ERASMUS experience was nothing at all like one would imagine their university experience abroad and it was hard and challenging quite a majority of the time, I do not want to miss one single moment of it. But let me start at the very beginning.

I arrived at my chosen destination Malta on the second of February, a Sunday, one day before the official start at University. The very first things, I noticed on the island were the humidity, the smell of the ocean everywhere, the sun and the left-hand traffic with which I should struggle the whole five months of my stay. I arrived at my new home for the upcoming months, in a small town called Iklin, around lunchtime, had lunch with my landlords and had time to settle in, do the first grocery shopping and stop by the sea quickly, which was my main goal at that time, to be honest.

The next day, I had to attend the Orientation Session at the University of Malta campus, which wasn't the most exciting part of my stay, but an opportunity to find my first and best friend in Malta, Vanessa, a 24 year old Swede from Malmö. With her, I spent most of the time as long as everything was normal and got the feeling of how the typical ERASMUS experience feels like for about a month.

A week of organisational and bureaucratic fun started, but also a week of getting to know campus life, as well as wandering around and exploring Malta. After that week of settling in, it started to feel normal to do your readings in the breaks outside (in February!!!) on a campus from which it was possible to see the ocean and to having a big canteen like in movies where cats jumped around the tables. In general, no matter where you were on that campus, cats were there as well, in the canteen, in the class rooms, in the library or next to the coffee stand.

Apart from the whole campus life, university in Malta was pretty similar to home, except for the language, of course. The courses and seminars I attended were structured similar to here, the professors were all super nice and smart, and the group discussions were similarly hard at the beginning, as it is in every course at the very beginning.

Vanessa, some other friends and me also started building a normal student's life in Malta. We took boxing classes, went to the beach after school, were disappointed about the canteen food, which is why we started food prepping, and went out and had a lot of fun, of course. To be honest, we all weren't the biggest fans of the ESN spirit and their events, which is why we started to explore Malta's nightlife ourselves and found the nicest bars and also met Maltese people, which I am really glad about with the upcoming events in mind.

I still remember quite well when Malta introduced a mandatory quarantine of 14 days at the beginning of March when the COVID-19 cases on the island were still really low. It was around the same time, when Austria introduced harsher measures, schools, universities, restaurants and shops started to close already, and the government announced a lockdown from Monday 16th of March on. In Austria everyone started to become very nervous about the virus the week before the lockdown. Also, the situation among the ERASMUS+ students on the island started becoming more tense, but life on the island was still normal, everything was still opened, and people just continued to live their lives.

On Friday, the 13th of March, I went to University of Malta in the early afternoon for a course I had. When I entered the campus, a friend from the United States, who also attended this course, came towards me, was very nervous and explained to me that she had to go to her house immediately, as rumour had it that university would close down by Monday, and the States also planned on closing the countries' borders and she had to figure out what to do. I decided to still attend the study unit. As I arrived at the classroom, the feeling started to become weird. There weren't many students waiting – which was very unusual for the courses in Malta. After twenty minutes of waiting, our professor showed up, told us that the course is cancelled, and Uni would really close down from Monday on, and that he and the other professors had an emergency meeting to figure out how to keep the studies flowing in the most normal way possible.

So, Vanessa and I decided to go to Valetta and enjoy our early weekend. But also, there, the situation felt weird and uncertain. Bars and stores, which usually opened back up around 4 p.m. after a short "siesta". But that day, most of them remained closed. In the end, we found a bar, which was opened and enjoyed our evening until

my landlord texted me, that we all should do some shopping as we might go on lockdown the following days (which luckily did not happen that fast).

The following week was probably the most stressful of my whole stay. One should think that it would have been exam week, but no. A general uncertainty arose, which grew bigger and worse each day. At the beginning, most of my friends and I said we will stay in Malta, it won't be that bad. But every day, news reached us from our home countries about the situation getting worse and worse, worried parents told their children to come home, airports shutting down, and in the end also Malta's government announcing to close the borders of the whole island. That was the moment, where also the last remaining people decided to leave the island. Because of a few factors at home, as well as my inner guts telling me to stay, I stayed on the island. Alone. With no one knowing how long this state of things will continue or evolve.

The following week, also Malta introduced a lockdown. With all stores, restaurants and bars remaining closed, except for supermarkets and pharmacies. Public transport was still going, but drastically reduced and it was ok to go outside for taking walks, but no gatherings of people allowed in public and strict social distancing rules, which the police fined very radically if they were broken.

The following two months were pretty unspectacular, not to say boring. I spent most of my days in the sun in my, luckily, big yard with pool. Out there, I followed my courses, read a lot, took deep and intense sun baths and finished two Sudoku books. Sometimes I took walks at the beach, but not that often as I had to travel there by bus.

During living through it, this time felt like an eternity, alone, "trapped" in my house, with nothing to do and my family and friends thousands of kilometres away and not being able to hug or be there for me. Looking back, this was one of the most challenging, yet educational times of my life. Of course, educational also in a scholastic way of speaking, but even more educational about myself. I learned to trust my inner feeling, as through my decision to stay I had a long overdue period of finding back to myself, be alone with myself and improve skills I was lacking before,

like patience or accepting the fact that I cannot change some situations and occurrences.

The only human contact I had were my two roommates, but also only occasionally, as they both worked a lot and we only spent about an hour per day together in the evening, and one friend I met in Malta, which I took walks with and spent time with about once a week.

After approximately two months, the government in Malta announced to ease the restrictions which we were living with, but not opening the borders back up. This meant, life on the island started to get back to a state which could be compared to “normal” but also not really. Places opened back up, it was possible to buy a snack or drink at beach bars again or visit a restaurant. It still did not feel like Malta before, as – what I did not really recognize before – the island lives through and of tourists.

In the following five weeks, I regained a bit of a typical “ERASMUS feeling,” as I was in the final phase of the semester and had to write a few essays and exams (with still no presence attendance, everything online). I made new friends, and we did the best we could to make the rest of our stay, with trips to the beach each day, boat and snorkelling trips, dinners and fun nights together.

The only worrying aspect during that time was, that I had still no idea when I could return home, as the airport was still shut down. My only goal was to be home for my birthday, which worked out in the end, although it was not clear for a long time if it would. In the end, I returned home on the 2nd of July, which was only five days after I originally planned.

As mentioned before, this time probably was one of the most challenging throughout my whole life, with all this uncertainty and loneliness. Still, I do not want to miss one single thing, as I learned a lot about myself, improved skills like patience and inner calmness, and made at least some friends, which will stay. One of them, which did an ERASMUS Mondo on Malta now even is my roommate back home.