

# EXPLORING EUROPE WITH THE ERASMUS EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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The Erasmus program developed by the European union offers a great opportunity for students to explore the university life and cultures of European countries. Part of the program is the guarantee given by the students home university to recognize the period spent abroad and a grant to help cover the expenses that studying abroad includes. In addition, Erasmus students do not have to pay tuition at the university they spent time at. All in all, this sounds like a great opportunity for students to travel, meet new people and collect experience in their field at a different institute. Although the support for the basics is excellent, organizing yourself for such a stay abroad can present many other challenges to overcome. One thing that can help is to talk to other students that have already participated in the Erasmus program. This short interview with two Erasmus-Alumni may be a good starting point. In the following, Jana and Milja will share some tips from their Erasmus experience and how they went about the organization of their trips.

**Let's start with a small introduction. What are your majors and where did you spend your Erasmus stay?**

Jana: We study Biochemistry and spent our Erasmus stay in Sweden. I went to Gothenburg and Milja went to Stockholm.

**What were your motivations to participate in the Erasmus program?**

Milja: I like the international atmosphere, where I can meet people with different experiences and views on life. Plus, I wanted to improve my language skills in English and Swedish. Moreover, I heard about a very motivated professor at the Stockholm university and in the end it was a great pleasure to participate in a course with him.

Jana: Yes, I had similar motivation. I wanted to improve my English skills and study in an international environment.

**When and how did you decide where you wanted to stay?**

Jana: We could choose between Istanbul (Turkey), Strassbourg (France), and Gothenburg or Stockholm (Sweden) as cooperation partners. From those, Sweden interested me the most and I liked the small town atmosphere in Gothenburg and being close to nature.

Milja: Yes, we had to decide and apply for the Erasmus semester one year before the actual semester abroad. We were three study mates that applied for Sweden, since the lectures are held

in English and we already talked to former Erasmus exchange students that also stayed in Sweden. All in all we had a very positive impression in Sweden.

**Did you need to be able to speak in the native language of your host country and how good are you in that language after your stay?**

Milja: I tried to study some basic Swedish phrases for one semester at RUB, to be able to communicate with locals outside of the campus area. In general, you can get along with just talking in English, but in my case, the A1/A2 Swedish course helped a lot, because I had to find housing on my own using webpages in Swedish. In addition, one member of the guest family only spoke Swedish, so it was very advantageous to know some basics, although I wished to be able to express myself much better when talking to her. For the future, I plan to continue with studying Swedish and other languages and I hope I will have enough time besides my studies.

Jana: I had the experience that you can really get along very well without speaking Swedish in Sweden because everyone spoke English. I also did a short course at the University in Gothenburg to learn some basics. However, it was not necessary.

**When did you start the first preparations for your stay and what were the first things you did?**

Jana: We started around 14 month in advance, because we had to apply quite early. The first steps were to choose the destination and apply for it.

Milja: Hmm, I am not sure when the first event took place, but I started my Swedish course before I knew I would be able to travel to Sweden. So I guess, our faculty coordinator started the preparatory steps at the end of 2016. Wow, time passes by so fast. Well, the first things were that we registered in a list as applicants for a stay abroad, where we stated our destination and when we want to stay there. Then after a few weeks we were invited to talk to the Erasmus coordinator of our faculty and later on we were told to write an application and a motivational letter for the stay abroad.

**Can you walk us a little through the whole preparation process?**

Jana: After we got our acceptance letters, we started looking for an accommodation and applied for the courses at the university. I was lucky and got a place in the student housing from the university.

Milja: Yeah, I wasn't so lucky. As I already mentioned before, I did not receive a place for student accommodation. It took me a while to find a guest family, because it was also very difficult to organize all that from Germany. However, my experience was that if you stay persistent and keep your spirit up, you can manage everything.

**How did the reception at your host university look like? Was it easy for you to settle in and get started?**

Milja: We had an introductory week for all internationals organized by the student union. There were some icebreaker games and meetings, which were a lot of fun and helped in the first steps to meet friends and get used to the new environment. On one afternoon we had an introductory talk for several hours in the aula magna of the university. It was organized as a big spectacle with music and light effects. Besides the fun part, we were also told where to go in case of illness and difficulties during the studies. After the talks there were many small reception tables of university related organizations, where you could get further information on activities of interest for you. For example, I checked out the language cafe and other student clubs.

Jana: We had a very similar program with many welcome events which made it super easy to find friends and get started in the new environment. I felt very welcomed at the new university.

**In what way was your host university different from your home university?**

Jana: The courses were organized differently. Instead of having all classes in parallel and one exam period at the end of the semester, we had one course for half a semester each, including practical trainings, lectures and seminars on the same topic. This allowed deeper insight into the chosen subject. In the second term I did an internship in a working group of the university, where I learned a lot as well.

Milja: I really appreciated the fact that we addressed everybody by their first name, even professors. The courses were smaller compared to the courses during my Bachelor studies and since the groups stayed the same for both courses of the semester, the group really grew together and we worked and studied a lot together and had vivid lectures where we practiced scientific discussion. That was something I missed back home.

**How long did you stay in total and do you feel that the length of your stay was appropriate?**

Milja: We stayed in Sweden from the end of August to the beginning of January, so roughly five months. I feel the length was appropriate because I enjoyed my stay to the fullest but felt that I really wanted to go back home around Christmas time. My friend from my home university, who started the semester abroad with me, stayed one semester longer, so I guess it really depends on you, how long you need to feel ready to come back home.

**After you came back, how has your view of your home university changed?**

Jana: At first, a lot felt different back home. In Sweden, the groups in the courses were smaller than here and the atmosphere was different. The courses included a lot more of discussions with the professor and the fellow students, whereas here its often just the professor lecturing with less student participation.

**All in all, what would you say were the hardest and the best parts about your Erasmus experience?**

Jana: The hardest part for me was being away from my family for a long time but all in all, it was an amazing experience. I met many people from different countries, became more independent, travelled around the country and got to see a lot of beautiful places. I can really recommend going abroad for one semester with Erasmus!

Milja: I agree, I also felt homesick very often. Now back home, I definitely appreciate my family and friends more than ever. Another difficult part of the exchange semester is that you find new, close friends and you have to say goodbye very soon, not knowing when and if you will see them again. The good side is, you have good friends and a new home in the world. I feel that I grew up even more, as I had to make a lot of important decisions. Besides the great study time I also enjoyed travelling in the north of Europe, which also broadened my horizons and I even managed to fulfill my childhood dream to see the Northern Lights. What could I ask for, a marvelous five months! My summary is, try to participate in an Erasmus semester or if this is not possible, try to participate in the Erasmus program of your home university and help the internationals that come from abroad to feel home at your place of study. You gain great experience in both cases.

***The next info session for the Erasmus exchange program of the RUB take place on the 8th of November. Hopefully this small interview could wake your interest in the Erasmus program and help to give an idea of how the process of applying works.***