

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

...to the sky

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When she found out she was going to be sent to her third choice destination, Madrid, instead of London, Chiara Bergonzini's first reaction was one of disappointment. But with the wealth of new experiences life in Madrid offers, she ends up feeling 'like the world had finally opened its door to me'. The jury chose this story as the outright winner not just because of the aesthetically satisfying image of the tattoo with which the story starts and concludes (and where we can learn why half the title is missing, see above), but because of the sincerity with which it illuminates the experience of cultural and personal growth which student mobility programmes such as Erasmus have done so much to promote.

I have a tattoo just above my left elbow. It says '...al cielo', which means 'to the sky'. Most people assume it's Italian – I am Italian, after all – but it's actually Spanish. I guess it doesn't really make a difference, because the meaning doesn't change, but I like pointing it out every time someone asks me about it. I had it done in June last year, only a couple of days before leaving Madrid for good. I had spent nine incredible months there, together with the person who had managed to transform from a complete stranger into one of my most treasured friends in a matter of weeks, and surely, we could have come up with more original ideas to represent the impact this experience had on us, but a tattoo seemed like the most permanent trace we could leave on ourselves, and have it dedicated to the city where we met, we laughed, we cried, we learnt, we grew up together just felt right. So, one day we left our apartment in *Cuatro Caminos*, got on the *Metro* to *Lavapiés* and entered a tattoo studio, and 20 minutes later my friend's elbow recited 'De Madrid...' and mine '...al cielo' ('from Madrid to the sky'.)

I personally hate commitment, and tattoos are indeed a commitment. I'm a very insecure person so I never trust myself when I think about possible tattoo ideas, as I always fear that I will regret it sooner or later. This time, though, I didn't have the slightest doubt. But this story isn't only the story of my tattoo; rather, it's the story of how strong of an impact living abroad can have on people.

I lived and studied in Spain for nine months and I can easily say that it was the most overwhelmingly beautiful experience of my life. Sometimes I think back to that spring day when I got the results for my Erasmus+

application and I can't help but laugh at the thought that I was actually disappointed that I hadn't got accepted into the universities in the United Kingdom that I had selected as my first and second choice. I had been to Madrid before, twice, and I had never really fallen in love with that city, contrarily to what usually happens to me when I travel. What I didn't know yet is that Madrid is a city which needs to be lived, experienced, felt. It's not only about visiting the Retiro park or the Royal Palace. Its beauty is hidden in the streets of Malasaña, in the canteens where people of all ages and nationalities sit from dusk to dawn, eating *croquetas* and drinking *sangría*, in the colours the sky takes around 7pm... I have never seen such beautiful sunsets anywhere else in the world.

I arrived on a late summer day, at the beginning of September. The weather was unbearably hot, my apartment was much smaller than I thought and my flat mates all seemed very different from me. I panicked: I was sure I wouldn't make any friends and I wouldn't get to enjoy Spain as much as I wanted to. I couldn't be more wrong.

I soon found out that being an 'Erasmus student' feels like a special condition: when you meet other Erasmus students, you immediately bond, even if they're the kind of people who you'd never bond with in your home country. In the first week alone, I met people from Greece, France, Israel, Brazil... all of them had just arrived and all of them had my same wish: to learn Spanish, to experience the Spanish culture and to explore the city, and the country. The months passed, we all got used to our new lives there, but we kept feeling special. We weren't citizens, but we weren't tourists, either.

During the first months, I transformed. I used to avoid everything that I wasn't sure I would enjoy, but when you find yourself alone in a new place, you either accept to go out and do what other people suggest, or you isolate yourself. I chose the first alternative, and all of a sudden, I found myself enjoying walking around the city centre at 4am after leaving a pub, eating a pizza slice while waiting for our taxi home. At the same time, though, my new friends learnt to enjoy chilling at a café while reading a book or getting homework done. It's incredible how the 'Erasmus status' forces you to open up: to new experiences, but also to new ideas, because meeting people from all corners of the planet makes you curious about everything they have to say, and you can't help but ask endless questions about their lifestyles or opinions. I had never felt so rich in my life, so connected to the world. I had always tried to keep as updated as possible regarding what goes on in all countries, not only the closest ones, but finally my source of knowledge wasn't a newspaper article, rather the voice of other people, who also wanted to hear *my* voice, regarding Italian issues.

In only nine months - ironically, the same length of a pregnancy - a new me was born: I still had my introverted personality and enthusiastic curiosity, but I was much stronger and sure I could face all my insecurities. This wasn't only an experience that let me improve my language skills and learn

about the university system in Spain, it was much more than that. It was proof that I can aspire to great things because I had been able to overcome all the fears that tortured me on the first day. I literally felt like the world had finally opened its door to me, and I had never felt so Italian, and so much of a world citizen at the same time. Madrid represented this door, to me, and that's why my elbow will forever read '[De Madrid] ...al cielo'.

