

The Erasmus Experience in Thessaloniki

Nervousness, maybe fear- those are probably the dominating feelings that an Erasmus student experiences whilst packing their suitcase ready to move to a foreign country, with a different language and a new set of rules and expectations- with little more to arm themselves other than their learning agreement in one hand and a Ryanair ticket (presumably) in the other. For many this is their first taste of independence, the first shaky steps away from the meticulously created bubble, the first attempt to rid themselves of the constricting security blanket that has coddled them for so long. However for me the governing emotion was pure excitement. I couldn't wait to move to Thessaloniki (in fact my eagerness was so overabundant that I ended up moving to Greece officially 3 months before the start of the semester). Thankfully my primary instincts did not fail me and choosing to do this Erasmus programme was one of the best decisions I made and I can only wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone either on the fence, deliberating or slightly intrigued about this opportunity.

Preparation

This was potentially the easiest part of the process. My home institution was very supportive – organising meetings to talk us through the application and the decision was easy for me because I was set on where I wanted to go. The incomings-team in Aristotle was also great. They were very responsive, sent out regular emails and reminders keeping us updated long before the start of the semester.

Academic Study

1) Admin

It may be surprising that admin needed its own section in this reflective essay but believe me, the admin side of things could have been a whole essay in itself. This may also be my only point of contention about Aristotle University (or the Erasmus system as a whole?) The sheer amount of bureaucracy you are confronted with is ASTOUNDING to say the least. I understand that it is necessary for the efficient and effective functioning of this whole process but my god was the paperwork involved overwhelming. The issue that follows this specifically in Thessaloniki is that on their side things are a bit....slower and more disorganised. This means you have to be prepared to send emails and then follow-up emails and potentially even chase people until you get what you need. A lot of the time it will also be unclear exactly what is necessary so be prepared to liaise with your home institution quite a bit and understand what the specific documents you require are because there are a lot of them and nobody really explains them to you. If you are going to the partner university with a group of students definitely designate someone as document-status- checker i.e. someone who is 10 steps ahead of you, already has made a list of what admin needs to be completed, has already printed everything off and has

gotten it signed before you have even checked your emails and found out what is pending (thanks Kaan, I owe you my entire Erasmus Grant which 10000% would have been taken back by the department due to my appalling but unintentional (I swear) disregard for anything of this sort). Coincidentally this leads me to my biggest tip which is actually admin related and it is the following: DO NOT LEAVE EVERYTHING UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE (painful mistake I learned the hard way). Trust me it is more difficult than it sounds to be receiving emails from country A (home institution) trying to communicate this to country B (host institution) all whilst living in country C (current location). In hindsight, whilst writing this (in the middle of the night, approximately 3 minutes before the deadline and with the very real threat of my Grant being taken away from me looming over my head) I realise that a lot of the admin elements also had to do with me, but, because two wrongs don't make a right, this didactic and cautionary tale is here to prevent you from becoming the type of student that Erasmus departments cry themselves to sleep about. I guess "reflective" really was the operative word here.

2) Teaching

For all you admin-lovers out there who were happy to skip the previous section and were reading this essay in order to find out more about the quality of teaching in a different university- I've got you. Studying in Thessaloniki has definitely been an enlightening experience and one that most certainly differs in any way, shape or form to any teaching standards I was used to in London. Writing this I am still not sure if it would qualify as a better or worse teaching experience. Keeping in mind that a university whose primary taught courses are in a different language can only offer so much, I can't say that I was inundated with a selection of courses to choose from. However here I cannot completely fault Aristotle University. The programme I was doing at my home institution was very specific (IP and IT law) so arguably it would have been difficult to find corresponding courses no matter where I went. Still, despite the fact that all of my courses were incredibly interesting (I'm looking at you cybercrime) there was not much of a link between the classes I was attending in Hanover and those I was attending in Thessaloniki such as Foreign Investment Arbitration or Sociology of law. Also, in a lot of European countries, we are used to being required to turn in homework regularly, but this seems to only be the case with certain classes in Greece. I found that the only work to be turned in to the professor are perhaps an essay or two, and an exam to be taken near the close of the semester. Similar courses in other countries require students to turn in almost weekly assignments and take periodic quizzes and/or exams during duration of the semester, which meant that the semester was an unprecedented welcome break from the usual barrage of assignments I was accustomed to elsewhere.

As with every university the teaching itself is largely based on each individual professor. The structure of the classes was generally lectures or smaller tutorials. Some will tell you about the Greek teaching mentality or about how classes are dependent on a professor's mood-if he wants to show up he will, if he wants to

cancel a class he will, if he wants to just send a teaching assistant for the entire year he can. These are all malicious rumours. All English-speaking classes are targeted almost solely at Erasmus students. This means not only that they are small and you have the opportunity to ask questions but they are also highly interactive and there is less focus on one-sided lectures and more emphasis on engaging, stimulating and thought-provoking discussions. It is incredibly interesting and goes beyond just learning compulsory material off by heart in order to pass an exam. Professors care about the students progression and this shows and it is definitely a motivating factor.

Accommodation

Thessaloniki is a lot harder to find accommodation in than one would expect. Agencies/landlords are reluctant to give accommodation for such a short time-span and furnished accommodation is a rarity in Greece. There are some places that specifically cater to Erasmus students. These are furnished and include all bills but personally I found the price not to be reflective of what was offered. It isn't impossible to find accommodation, it just takes a while so think about it ahead of time and start looking before. I managed to find an amazing flat in a very central location (I would easily move there until I turn of pensionable age and then continue living there) but it takes patience, luck (and some begging in Greek). The university does offer a platform on which they advertise accommodation but they are just facilitators so they don't intervene in any way they simply enable communication with English-speaking landlords. Aristotle University does have student halls but they are not available to Erasmus students.

Money

Everyone's favourite topic; I know it's what you came here for, so I have good news. EVERYTHING IS CHEAP. The food is insanely inexpensive even for Greek standards. You can get pizza for 99 cents, a souvlaki (which constitutes a full meal by Greek standards FYI) for less than 2.50 EUR. If 99 cents seems extortionate then you can always go to the university. As long as you have your pass with you, you are entitled to eat breakfast lunch and dinner for free. Every. Day. (If that alone isn't reason enough to move to a country I don't know what is). Transportation is very cheap as well. You can get a bus pass for around 10 euros a month and a single ticket costs 50 cents or 1 EUR to the airport.

Social Life/Travelling

I know that there is a very big Erasmus scene in Thessaloniki. There are a lot of students and there is a known Erasmus club and bar. There are parties that happen every week and events are organised all the time to ensure the transition is as smooth as possible. As far as I know there was even an Erasmus society run by

Greek students dedicated to helping out newcomers and making them feel welcome. I wasn't really involved in the Erasmus side of things, I was much more present in 'local' social life so if immersing yourself in the culture of the country you are in is your thing, you definitely won't be disappointed there is so much to do at night in Thessaloniki!

Thessaloniki is also a great springboard for travel. Tickets are cheap you will always find a train or bus that can get you wherever you need to be. Greece is beautiful and has over 3000 islands it would be a waste not to travel around and your schedule will most likely be flexible enough to accommodate a plethora of trips.

Conclusions:

YES, 10 out of 10, 100% would recommend to a friend. No matter how you phrase it, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity and Thessaloniki is most definitely the best Erasmus destination to select!