
My Erasmus Story

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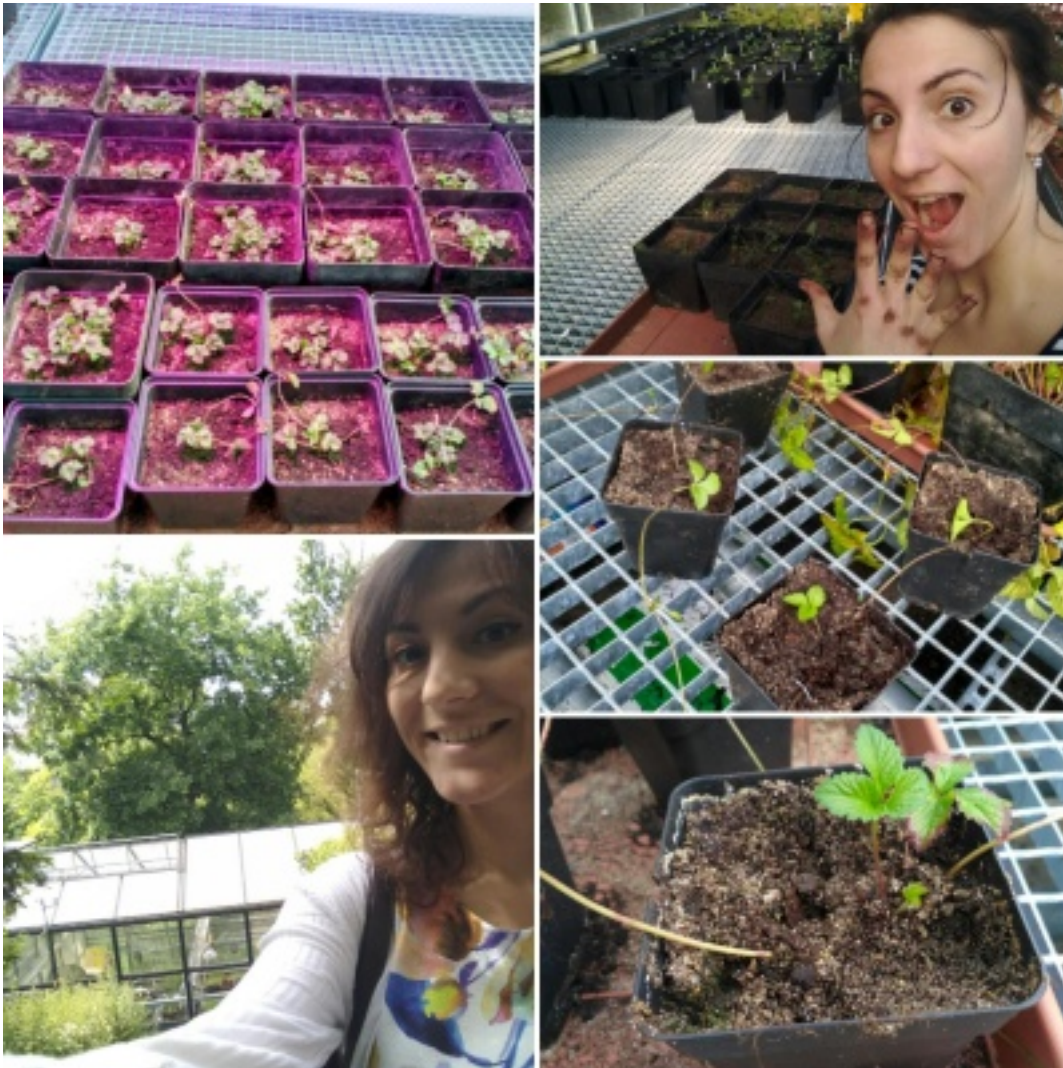
Elena Ungureanu, who wrote the following essay to celebrate the 30 years anniversary of the Erasmus programme, is an Erasmus student of Biology from the West University of Timisoara in Romania. In summer semester 2016/2017, she is hosted by the Faculty of Science of Charles University. She is a citizen of the Republic of Moldova and hence, Erasmus is already her second experience with studying abroad (after joining a Romanian university for her studies) – which she really enjoys.

We all have desires, aspirations and a lot of expectations for our lives when we are little. Unfortunately, there are only a few lucky people who become who they wanted to be in childhood and who did not need to change the direction they wanted their lives to go in. I am not a part of that exceptional group.

After graduating from musical school, my life got stuck for a few years because I did not feel any passion for anything in particular, but I clearly remember that I loved to help injured animals and studying flowers since I was little. I knew that helping people was too ordinary for me in this world dominated by doctors, lawyers and economists. In 2015 my biology life began at the West University of Timisoara, Romania. As all the future “healers”, I also wanted to start “helping” the plants I studied in my very first year. Even though our faculty has a very small budget and there are only a few teachers, they do their best to give us as much experience in the environmental science field as they can.

My home city is Chisinau in the Republic of Moldova. Coming to a university in another country, with 800 km distance, was a huge challenge for me right after high school. Despite all the difficulties I had to go through, I always desired more. It was clear that my place is in Timisoara, with people of similar culture, the same language and almost same way of thinking, but it made me feel like I was caught in a cage. Questions like: “*Is that all? Is it all that a university can give me? Is there something more somewhere else?*” hadn’t left my mind for several months. And then there was a poster „*Erasmus+ – apply now!*” hanging on the faculty wall, in other university buildings, in the local journal, astonishing photos of my ex-classmates taken during their studies abroad... All of these things were whispering to me “*Try..try..try... NOW!*” I informed myself about my possibilities; Charles

University in Prague was the best university on our list of partner institutions and was in the top universities in the



world.

My grades were high enough to give it a try and luckily I won the place. It was my second international big step done with no one's help. I am living on my own budget, so I have to simultaneously study and work for survival. When I got selected for the exchange, it overlapped with the beginning of an ecological project which took place in the Republic of Moldova in which I was one of the coordinators. Studying at the university, working full-time to earn my living and part-time to assist with the Moldovan ecological project, it made my third bachelor semester extremely difficult. Then our project won a prize at the "Danube River Awards" organised by the European Commission and my colleague (and friend) and I participated at the official award ceremony in Austria. I have to say that there are not many people who really stood by me in my life and one of the most important and closest to me, to whom I owe a lot, is my friend, novelist, economist, project founder and colleague, Alexandr Iscenco.

Halfway between all these beautiful moments, a black day came into my life when I was informed that I have to send € 200 in advance to secure the university accommodation in Prague. I started to work harder; exams were coming as winter vacation was over. I skipped going home for the winter vacation and I did my best to save all money I could. When I arrived to Prague, I felt like I left all my life behind and a new, better life was rising over the horizon. It was the perfect truth: an amazing city with historical architecture, nice people with passion for their jobs, breathtaking landscapes and so on. On the second day of my Erasmus journey we went to a trip in the mountains, organized by my host faculty (the Faculty of Science) from Prague to the snow-covered Šumava Mountains. It was my first time in the mountains; I went cross-country skiing for the first time in my life despite the fact that I did not have any suitable clothing because I had no special equipment or money to buy it.

The first days of my Erasmus passed swiftly and I started to love the Czech Republic with all my heart. In one of the courses I have taken I assist with research work of one of my teachers. In the beginning of the class, a young man with a warm voice came to me and said simply: "Hi, how are you? From now on, we will be working together." and so our cooperation started. A few times a week I have spent time in the greenhouse, and I still do that with the same great pleasure as three months ago, when it all started. I can say that I found my inner self; I now know who I am and what I want to do.

Erasmus is famous for the inter-cultural exchange, many parties and a lot of photos to remember and share the experience you've had. For me, it is more than that. I can proudly say that I made two best friends through this experience, and we went through a lot of important life situations together (staying at a hospital, getting lost, living through ups and downs, going on trips) which showed me the beauty of their personalities. I met a lot of interesting teachers and colleagues in my faculty who do not only take their research or study field as our only possible common conversational topic but who can also share a lot about their impressive hobbies and experiences.

In the Hvězda Hall of Residence we have a room with a piano we can use free of charge. After three years of not playing piano, I have finally begun to rediscover it daily. Have you ever suddenly realised that you have lived life feeling like you're missing something, but then the small, neglected thing returns, and you finally feel harmony with yourself? This is what the piano was for me – it was the key to my inner balance. Some people do yoga, paint, or ride a bike, but not me – I sing, play piano and study biology. I believe that no one can expect to become a professional in their study field, to find themselves and to enjoy their life at its maximum by simply signing an Erasmus agreement. But this is exactly what happened to me.

My message to all future students is to not hesitate and to apply to this life-changing experience and to have no expectations, because there will be so many surprises during your Erasmus experience that even a thick book cannot chronicle. My book is still a work in progress and I want it to never end. Dare to desire, dare to do, dare to live!

Nicola Wheeler is a Erasmus student from the University of Kent in the United Kingdom, studying English and American Literature, and is in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. She is passionate about literature and history, and has a keen interest in current affairs. Nicola believes that writing for the international iForum is a fantastic opportunity to broaden her editing and creative skill whilst studying on her year abroad.

