

Experiential report

ERASMUS+ SMP 2023/24

in Greece, Athens

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1 Introduction

During my undergraduate studies, I contemplated the idea of undertaking an international experience, although it was recommended to postpone such endeavours until the master's level. So, I temporarily set aside the notion. However, upon commencing my master's program, the prospect of engaging in an overseas internship was introduced during the orientation session. From that moment on, the idea persisted in my thoughts, prompting me to explore the university's offerings concerning international placements. Subsequently, it became evident to me that I would pursue this opportunity, and it quickly became apparent where I wanted to go: Greece.

Greece, with its rich cultural heritage and warmth, had captivated my interest in years. Thus, the decision to venture to Athens was unequivocal. Athens, hailed as the cradle of democracy, stood out as a bustling metropolis teeming with cultural richness—an environment markedly different from the mid-sized German city I am from. This fusion of culture, warmth, hospitality, and history with metropolitan life presented an enticing challenge that I was eager to embrace.

2 Preparation for the stay abroad

Once the decision to pursue an international experience was made, along with the determination of the destination, the next step involved the application at Erasmus and talking to my local Erasmus coordinator at the international office at my home university. After completing the application at Erasmus, the next step involved securing a suitable placement in a laboratory for my abroad internship. Approximately four months in advance, I began by researching and reaching out to various institutes that aligned with my interests, with a particular focus on the Neurology department at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens—a field that greatly intrigued me, and where I harboured a strong desire to engage in laboratory work.

Fortunately, I received a prompt and positive response from them, indicating the possibility of undertaking my internship there. Subsequently, I was invited to an online interview. Right from the beginning of the interview, I was warmly welcomed, experiencing first-hand the renowned Greek hospitality. Following the online meeting my supervisor was able to arrange two internships abroad for me, comprising a twelve-week internship in neurology and a six-week internship in oncology, which led to an overall period of 18 weeks. After I received the confirmation of acceptance from my supervisor, the next phase was initiated, which involved the completion of the Learning Agreement by all parties involved. This process proceeded smoothly through email correspondence.

After it became apparent that I would be heading to Greece in just under four months, my focus shifted towards finding an accommodation, arranging insurance coverage (liability and accident insurance) and booking a suiting flight. For accommodation, I turned to [housinganywhere.com](https://www.housinganywhere.com) and quickly found a two-person shared flat with another girl, where I could reside throughout my stay. As for insurance, I arranged it through my local insurance broker.

As another part of my preparations for my study abroad experience, I dedicated myself to learning the Greek language. This endeavour primarily involved utilizing language learning apps and attending classes in my hometown for about four months.

3 Accommodation

As mentioned previously, I found my accommodation through [housinganywhere.com](https://www.housinganywhere.com), a platform that allows individuals worldwide to find apartments or shared flats for a limited period, which can vary in duration, catering to different budgets. In Athens, the options were plentiful. However, being a metropolitan city with limited housing availability, prices were relatively high. I paid 360 euros per month for a 16 square meter room in a two-person flat, including utilities and internet. While my accommodation was on the more affordable side, it was noticeably worn-down, showing its years of hosting Erasmus students temporarily. Nevertheless, it was equipped with all the necessities for daily living, from a bathroom with a shower and hot water to a furnished kitchen, air conditioning with heating, a personal desk, and internet. The highlight was undoubtedly the spacious balcony where one could unwind in the evenings. The apartment was situated in Kipseli, a lively neighbourhood popular among students and known for its abundance of shopping opportunities, restaurants, cafes, bars, and convenient public transportation.

In hindsight, I would likely approach the housing situation differently, if I had to do a second time around. While websites like [housinganywhere.com](https://www.housinganywhere.com) offer a wide range of apartments and easy booking, the accommodations are often expensive. During my stay, I learned from other Erasmus students that the Facebook marketplace is an excellent resource for finding apartments from private individuals, which are typically less commercially rented out. Consequently, these options are often more affordable, offer more space for the price, and are in better overall condition.

4 Studying at the host university

Due to undertaking an international internship as part of my scientific studies (Master of Science in Biochemistry), my experience did not entail traditional 'study' per se. Instead, I was engaged in laboratory work within the field of Alzheimer's research throughout my first internship and Multiple Myeloma research in my second internship.

Our laboratory routine typically commenced around 10 to 11 a.m. Given that life in Greece tends to unfold in the evenings, unlike in Germany, our workday began accordingly.

Following an introduction and tour on my first day, I delved into my research work in the laboratory. I was assigned under a PhD student conducting their doctoral thesis in the research area, contributing to their dissertation with my own research topic. Additionally, our laboratory comprised a student working on their Bachelor's thesis, another on their Master's thesis, and a medical practitioner seeking practical laboratory experience. Thus, we formed a team of five members. From the very first day, I was warmly welcomed and immediately felt embraced as if I had always been part of the team. I developed strong bonds with everyone, including my supervisor, and experienced the warmth of Greek hospitality throughout. I looked forward to going to the lab every day, not only because of my passion for the research field but also because I eagerly anticipated seeing my laboratory colleagues anew.

As part of the laboratory routine, in addition to the work within the lab, I also participated in weekly journal clubs and seminars every Wednesday. I actively engaged in these sessions and was fully included in the discussions and activities.

During my time abroad, I completed two internships. Following the period of my 12-week internship in Neurology, I transitioned to Oncology for a six-week placement. Once again, I was warmly received and seamlessly integrated into the existing research theme, enabling me to conduct intensive research on my topic over the six-week period.

5 Daily life and leisure

My daily life was naturally shaped by my routine in the laboratory, where I spent most of my weekdays. Additionally, I had about an hour-long commute to the university, mainly due to the dense and congested traffic in Athens, despite living only about 6 kilometres away from campus.

During the week, I could only meet with people in the evenings to grab a bite to eat and enjoy a drink in my neighbourhood. Fortunately, a good friend of mine happened to be in Athens for an Erasmus exchange at the same time and lived in the same neighbourhood. Through his experience as a classic Erasmus student, pursuing studies abroad, I got to know more Erasmus people. Together, we explored the city, visited museums, hosted game nights, and participated in Erasmus events organized by the ESN, such as hikes, bar hopping, or karaoke nights. Since my friend drove to Athens by car, we also took weekend trips out of the city to visit the seaside, ancient historical sites, or simply enjoy beautiful hikes.

Despite my stay spanning the fall and winter seasons, the weather in Athens was delightful, encouraging us to spend a lot of time outdoors, whether strolling through the streets of Athens or indulging in classic sightseeing of the city's landmarks.

One of the highlights of my experience was indulging in Athens' food culture. I spent a significant portion of my free time brunching with friends and acquaintances, having a coffee, exploring trendy and hip restaurants, or just trying traditional Greek cuisine.

6 Conclusion

Reflecting on my Erasmus experience, I can confidently say it was an incredibly enriching and fulfilling journey. Overall, it was a positive experience that I would wholeheartedly embark on again and highly recommend to others. However I would approach the accommodation selection process differently a second time around, as mentioned previously.

One valuable piece of advice I would offer to those considering studying abroad in Greece or other Mediterranean countries is to opt for a stay during the winter semester. This allows for a pleasant climate that isn't too hot or cold, which can be particularly advantageous for individuals coming from more northern regions seeking to avoid the harsh winter conditions.

I wholeheartedly endorse Greece as a destination for an Erasmus exchange. The warmth, friendliness, and hospitality of people, despite any challenges, make it an incredibly welcoming environment. Although Athens may not be the most aesthetically pleasing city and can be hectic at times, the genuine kindness and helpfulness of its residents more than compensate for any shortcomings. It's worth noting that in my experience, people in Athens were always willing to take the time to assist and engage in meaningful interactions, rather than brushing off inquiries. As mentioned in the first paragraph of this text, I also dedicated time to learning the language beforehand. Moreover, during my stay in Greece, I further immersed myself in the language by continuing to use language learning apps and seizing every opportunity to converse with locals. Whether it was a question about the bus schedule, placing orders at restaurants, or engaging in small talk with my laboratory teammates, I made sure to utilize my language skills. Over the course of my brief four and a half months' stay, I observed a significant improvement in my language proficiency. Additionally, I found that Greeks are incredibly appreciative when individuals try to learn their language and address them in their native tongue. I was warmly welcomed and encouraged to continue my language learning journey, further reinforcing my linguistic growth.

As a woman, I consistently felt safe and secure in the city. While there are certain areas one may want to avoid, such as Omonia Square, during the evenings or nights, overall, I felt well-protected and welcomed. Additionally, Greece's status as one of the lower-income countries in the EU contributes to the affordability of living expenses. This affordability allows students from abroad to explore and experience a wide range of activities and opportunities, further enhancing the overall Erasmus experience.