

ERASMUS

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

A SEMESTER ABROAD



Introduction

“Where are you from?” is how every conversation starts when you meet someone new in your erasmus semester. And the answer to that question is always delightfully different, leading to more interesting conversations and in time, to strong and lasting friendships all over Europe. Here’s the report of my experience abroad in the heart of it, with all the amazing discoveries and struggles it involved, and my tips to someone who’d like to follow the same path up to Brussels.

The Choice Of Brussels

Being in a travellers' family, the decision to spend a semester abroad was a fairly easy one. I love discovering new cultures, and I'm never quite happy staying where I am, plus spending several months in another country is an amazing opportunity to learn and grow as a person. So for me, the question wasn't *if* I was going to go, but *where*.

Many people choose their destination based on the language they could learn or improve there, and even though I know I should work on my spanish, that was not my drive for this time.

I grew up in a village in France with a french father and a german mother, and moved to Munich after my graduation to study business, since the french study system didn't suit me. Studying in Germany is great and I've met some wonderful people here, but I've always felt like the french-speaking part of me was left behind when I chose to come here. I wanted to revive that part of me, and above all, know where it would take me in an exciting, freeing student life in a busy city.

During some previous travels, I had met quite a number of belgians, and every single one of them had been a kind, open, funny and interesting friend. In France, Belgium is perceived as a more relaxed and more fun version of the hexagon, bathed in beer, cheese and comic books. Brussels' role in the center of Europe and as home to the european commission, parliament and council makes it a portal to the rest of Europe and its bilingualism reinforces that intercultural feeling. It also has seen a lot of great artists pass through it, like the painter Magritte and the singer Jacques Brel, and carries its load of historical happenings. And so the choice to spend my semester there was quickly made, and I embarked on this adventure with high expectations and excitement.

Finding An Accomodation

Our partner university in Brussels, ICHEC Management School, has a very good introduction system. I got contacted by my buddy fairly quickly, and I got a pdf with several pages about the school, the courses, the city and some practical information. Included there was a guide on how to find an accomodation, with some advice on which parts of Brussels they recommend for living

(safe neighbourhoods, not too far from the campus and from the center). On their website, some students offer their room while they're away on erasmus, which can be a very good deal, but unfortunately I didn't get any of them. There's also a student house for international students just ten minutes walking from the main campus. Since it said on the introduction document that this house was just for students who come from other continents, I didn't apply for it, but I met quite a few erasmus people who got it anyway, so it is worth a shot if one's looking for a cheap place to stay, surrounded by young people from all over the world. The other possibilities the document recommended were websites and facebook groups. Brussels seems to be a city where a lot of people come and go, so there's always a lot of offers that come up everyday.

One thing that I saw a lot was the possibility to rent a room in a family home. This is a cheap option and guarantees a safe and clean environment, but I wanted to have the real student experience there, so I preferred to look for a shared flat with other students or young workers. After some days of unfruitful texting around and scrolling through websites, I finally found the ad of my dreams on a facebook group: a two-stories house in a calm neighbourhood, that I would share with four other people, and it said they were looking for someone who would enjoy movie nights with pizza and going out from time to time. The price was 450€ per month, everything included. It was perfect. I texted the guy who posted it and showed him my great enthusiasm, and he agreed to give me the room after a short skype call. The uncertainty of the place actually existing was nerve-racking but when I arrived to Brussels a month later, the place existed and I met my four roommates who were going to become some of my greatest friends there.

The City

One of the most notable thing about Brussels is the bilingualism of it. As you might know, Belgium is separated in three regions: Wallonia, the french-speaking part, Flanders, the dutch-speaking part, and Brussels, the bilingual part, although french is the more dominant language there. There is some animosity between the people of the different regions, so avoid speaking french in the dutch region and vice versa.

The region of Brussels is divided in nineteen municipalities, including Brussels city, the capital, though it feels less like a whole region and more like a big city with different districts: the public transport operates between them and there's no separation between them except for a sign stating the name of the commune you're entering.

It is truly a beautiful city. Many of the houses are made of red and brown bricks, they have different sizes, colours, shapes and decorations, and create quirky alleys and impressive streets. There's a few huge beautiful parks, like the Parc du Cinquantenaire and the Parc de Woluwe, perfect for a stroll or a jog. Some neighbourhoods are very calm and peaceful, with family homes and big gardens, and some are very lively and busy.

The center is the prettiest part of the city: old paved streets, big stone churches and adorable chocolate shops all over. The Grand Place, main square of the city, is surrounded by golden and stone buildings, just as gorgeous by day than by night, and not quite unlike the Marienplatz in Munich. Near there, the famous Manneken Pis does his neverending deed in the grey fountain, and never ceases to disappoint any tourist who had some expectations about it. It is ridiculously small and it is quite astounding to see how many tourists still go have a selfie with it - the only nice part about it is the little costumes it gets every once in a while. There are actually two other peeing statues in Brussels: a little girl, called the Jeanneke Pis, is squatting over a fountain right across the Delirium Café, the biggest and most famous bar in Brussels - and the Zinneke Pis, a dog lifting its leg over a random pole in the streets of Brussels.

Another important landmark to be seen in the capital is called the Mont des Arts. It is located on a hill and thus offers a beautiful view over the city, with a little park in the foreground. Up on the hill, there's a few museums, the royal palace, and the parc of Brussels, and it was always part of the route where I took my friends visiting me.

Brussels has several big universities and it shows: around the Ixelles Cemetery or Flagey, in the south/south east of the center, you can find a good number of always full bars and restaurants and lit up streets full of singing drunken students. There's actually a strong sense of tradition in their student rituals, so you can regularly find young people in the train with strange hats, shouting loud bawdy songs and you might even come across some of them wearing bloody

clothes and asking you to help them in some challenges they're going through - I for instance bought a bag of tea for one euro off one of those. Those challenges and rituals are completely voluntary though, so there's nothing to worry about if fighting with animal organs isn't your thing.

The public transportation in Brussels is not bad, but it is clearly not at the level of Munich's organisation yet. There are metros (underground trains), busses and trams, but they don't connect everything so well, which means you'll sometimes need forty-five minutes to get somewhere that would only take fifteen with a car. The last metro is at approximately one in the morning, and the first one in the morning is at five thirty - there are a few night busses until two thirty, but after that, you'll need to either get a taxi or a "Collecto", a public service taxi that costs five euro per person and takes several people at once. The good part about the public transport though is that as a student, it'll cost you fifty euros for the whole year.

The University

The partner university of the Hochschule München isn't the most famous one in Brussels. The biggest one is called ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles) and is a bit like the LMU here in Munich: big, important, famous. The ICHEC Management School is a bit more humble, and also a bit further away from the center.

There's two campuses: one is in Montgomery, reachable by metro, and is for the students in the first semester and for the evening courses, and the other one is in Woluwe-Saint-Pierre, a municipality on the outskirts of Brussels, where all the other courses take place, and where I spent my days.

The building itself is quite fancy, a small castle in the country, separated in different parts. It's a rather impressive view from the outside. But as soon as you get inside, you get a typical school feeling, with strong smells, students sitting on the ground, confusing signs and paper ads on the walls. There is no library in this campus, and no room where you could sit down to study either. The cafeteria was often closed, and when it was open it offered some overpriced sandwiches and tasteless pasta. There are a few restaurants and bakeries near the school though, so when I

didn't bring something I had prepared in advance, I would go get myself a much cheaper sandwich next door. The classrooms were not always quite warm enough in the winter, but there never was any problem with the technology and the screens as we often see in Munich, and all of the teachers actually used them with well-constructed powerpoints to support their course.

The courses itself were not the best ones I've ever had. The teachers were very nice, open and comprehensive, but their english was partly very bad and sometimes they had some trouble assessing how much information should be in their course, which ended up in a very frustrating learning phase where I had to push way too many definitions into my head. But they were always responsive any time one of us had a question about the course, and since I had only four courses, it wasn't too bad.

One thing that also made a difference was that most of the courses that are in english are actually courses from a Master's degree, which naturally cranks up the difficulty of it. They were mostly group project works, which allowed the possibility to team up with some belgian students and get a bit more immersed in the "real" belgian life. I chose the course "Entrepreneurship", in french, and it was a really dynamic, interactive, intense work, which was really not simple, but ultimately I did learn a lot out of it and got to meet some very interesting people.

However must I say, the university really wasn't one of the reasons why I loved my semester in Brussels.

The Nightlife

I had the chance to met a lot of very different people during my stay in Brussels, who were interested in very different events.

The Erasmus people were focussed on partying a lot for cheap and all night long, which was encouraged by the parties organised by the ESN (Erasmus Student Network). There were some parties organised in specific bars and clubs, some private parties at people's places and some even took place inside the university. These parties were great to meet a lot of the hundred of

people making an Erasmus in Brussels, and making friends for the whole semester. You could always be sure that there would be a lot of alcohol flowing, some spanish music going and some sexy dancing happening. It also helped me to discover some bars in the center of Brussels which I went back to a few times afterwards, like the irish pub O'Reilly's, or the dancing bars Mezzo and Madame Moustache. These are all quite touristy and always full places though, where the local don't really go out just to have a few beers.

That side I discovered through my amazing roommates. Each one of the four had a different taste when it came to going out, and so I got to enjoy fully the great diversity of Brussels' nightlife.

One very important thing to know about Brussels or Belgium in general is its people's great love for beer. Unlike the Germans, who drink beer as a refreshing drink, the Belgians enjoy their beer like wine, tasting the subtle undertones of it and knowing every nuance between the different kinds. That doesn't stop them from drinking a lot of it, but at least they do it in fancy glasses and can have a type of beer for each part of the night. One beer that I as well as pretty much every other sweet tooth enjoy the most is the very famous "kriek", the cherry beer, that tastes and looks like juice but is still considered beer with its 3% alcohol. But there's so many other types of beer, blonde, IPA, sour, brune, banana, pilsner, white, etc and I took up the challenge to try as most of them as I could and be a beer-oenologist myself for the semester.

The one place to do that is the bar I mentioned before, the Delirium Café, that serves over two thousand different beers, so that its drinks list looks more like an annuary than an actual menu. Even though it's full with curious tourists, there is still a lot of locals that go there since it's such a big, comfortable and cool place, so I definitely recommend checking it out at least once. But most bars offer a good palette of drinks so you will definitely find what you need and like anywhere.

At the place St-Géry, there's a few very fancy cafés with a terrace and a relaxed, paris-ish atmosphere, for those who'd like to enjoy a drink in the setting sun - it's a very nice environment but definitely a bit more on the expensive side. The Ixelles Cemetery is usually full of students, so you will always find the bars there lively and buzzing. I've learned to really enjoy going there,

playing foosball, moving from one bar to another and dancing to the live music in the summer. Along the canal, there's the more alternative places: raves happening in huge hangars or in skateparks, with very cheap beer and chill people, like "L'Uzinne" or the "Magasin 4". There's of course also a lot of different night clubs with different types of music, you'll find as well electro or hardcore techno music as latino or nineties hits. And for people who are less into parties, there's a few museums opening at night for free, there's a lot of little theaters and movie theaters, there's even a board game evening organised every month at Flagey, called "Dé Joueur", where you can show up with friends and borrow and play a game which a game helper will explain to you.

I have spent some of the best nights of my life in Brussels, I have discovered so many parts of me that I didn't know existed, and I am so grateful to this city and to the people I met there for getting me there.

Conclusion

Even though a lot of people couldn't seem to understand why as a french and german person I would want to spend my Erasmus semester in such an "easy" and close place as Belgium, I do not regret my decision a single bit. Brussels was exactly the place I needed to grow as an artist, as a person and as a frenchie, and I feel more complete thanks to everything I've experienced there, even the bad parts. With its sometimes absurd ways, unstable public transports and cultural heterogeneity, this city breathes love , curiosity and excitement, and each day walking down its streets felt like I was growing into a part of its beautiful mess. I left a part of me there when I left and I know one day I will get back to fit right back in.