

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Diving into the unknown

The toughest moments of an exchange programme

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Y Nam Phan Ngoc offers her advice to anyone contemplating a mobility period abroad, and tries to distill the essence of the experience.

Be fearless.

There is no doubt that, one of the hardest parts of an exchange programme is the pre-departure period. Deciding to leave everything behind – your comfort zone, your daily life and your loved ones – and hunting down information and documents you need to go on a period abroad, may drain the little energy you have left after weeks or months, spent on books and exams. You most likely have already travelled around the world, or visited different countries for a few days or weeks as I had done before. However, leaving for a semester abroad is a completely different experience that needs much more careful preparation: dealing with difficult university websites, application deadlines, visa procedures (if you go outside European countries) you are not used to and the accommodation search may discourage you from starting a new adventure in a foreign country. Once you read your name on an exchange program winner list and after a few days in which you will be only daydreaming about your upcoming semester and screaming to the whole world that you have been chosen, you will suddenly cope with stress day and night, documents and offices will fill your daily routine and deadlines will be your worst enemy.

Trust me, hold on a little longer! It will be (almost) all downhill from the moment of your departure. Everyone has to endure this process in order to experience something that will possibly be the best experience of your university career, or even of your life! I am not overstating a single word. My Overseas experience in Hanoi (Vietnam) was definitely the best thing that has ever happened to me since I received my first video game console at the age of 8... I'm joking, it was really the best experience of my life.

I will never forget the overwhelming emotions I felt two seconds after I turned my back on my relatives at the airport departure hall: small bits of sadness, of course, but mainly a sense of excitement I had never felt

before. With a smile on my face – which I tried to hide, since my relatives were crying on the other side –, I realised I was growing up, becoming an adult and finally leaving the nest in which all my memories had been kept until then. I could finally see the unknown as something not to be afraid of, but instead, as something that would doubtlessly allow me to write a new chapter of my life.

If you go back to the beginning of this text, I said that after the departure ‘it will be (almost) all downhill’. I added that ‘almost certainly because of the first days in the new country, which were for me the second toughest part of this experience. Once you get to the university campus, – especially if you don’t have any fellow Ca’ Foscari student with you, as in my case – confusion will fill your mind, not knowing what to do first or where to go. You start feeling alone, realizing that you are a stranger trying to dive into a new world, where everyone already has their own group of friends, knows where their classes are located, easily finds good and cheap meals, or simply has settled into their stable weekly routine. You may feel scared, because the idea of being in a completely different world, in which you may never find your proper fit, might come to your mind, and would probably want to leave and go back home.

Luckily, many people will come into your life who are willing to help and will welcome you with open arms to their group of friends – sooner than you would expect. Locals will be eager to hear the tales of your too-far-away homeland, while showing you the best sides of theirs. Other exchange students will want to include you in their once-in-a-lifetime adventure like yours. Long-term friendships are just around the corner, and who knows, maybe also the love of your life!

And this is just the beginning: incredible tales await you, unforgettable memories are ready to fill your mind, and new sides of yourself cannot wait to be discovered. You just need to live this period to the fullest, and try to enjoy moment of it, from the numerous group projects that will pack your academic life abroad, to the weekend trips out of the city. Thanks to my Overseas programme in Vietnam I got to become a more mature person, with a broader mind and wider knowledge. You will learn things that books cannot teach you, but only living in a different reality can. Living away from your family and hometown friends will make you learn your weaknesses and strengths, and improve your foreign languages as well as many other skills that will be useful for your future career and life. Trust me, this is what happened to me!

Finally, you will face the hardest part of this journey, one that you will look back upon with bittersweet nostalgia as the end to your adventures abroad: returning home.