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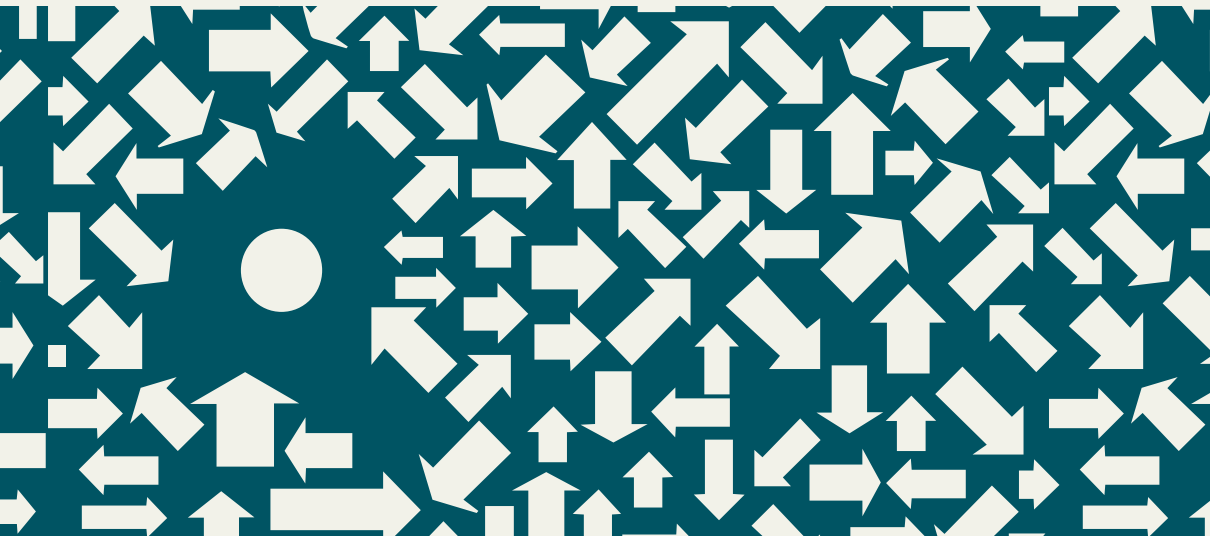
My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari
Recount their Learning
Experiences Abroad

edited by
David Newbold



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari



My Mobility

Studi e ricerche

17



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My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A Volume to Celebrate 150 Years of Ca' Foscari:
a University Open to the World

edited by David Newbold

Venezia

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My Mobility. Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad
David Newbold (edited by)

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My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Foreword

Tiziana Lippiello

(Vice Rector for International Relations)

Among the many international initiatives that have inaugurated the 150th anniversary of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, *My Mobility* is one of the most important, first of all, because Ca' Foscari University's students are the protagonists. 'Students think afresh', the Nobel Mohammed Yunus said during the lecture he delivered at our University on October 2, 2018.¹ We should value our students as the most important human resources of our institution.

The adventure, headed and coordinated by prof. David Newbold with the assistance of Elisa Gamba, head of our Welcome Office, saw more than a hundred students sending in accounts of their mobility experience in countries all over the world. In this publication you will find the thirty nine accounts which were identified as possible winners.

The personal stories were supposed to be an exercise in writing, in which all participants had to write an account in English and would be judged for their communicative efficiency in English lingua franca (ELF). Prof. Newbold writes 'In fact, the ability of entrants to express themselves fluently and convincingly in English, turned out to exceed our expectations.' And the students applied from all departments of Ca' Foscari University; it was a university-wide competition.

What is amazing and at the same time rewarding is to notice that it was not simply an exercise in writing in English, but much more: the personal anecdotes experienced during 'their mobility' narrated by the students testified to the value and deep significance of their study experience abroad, which turned out to be not only a learning experience abroad but primarily a life experience with a strong emotional impact on their personal life. The students, during their 'mobility', experienced a new cultural and social environment, a new lifestyle, new friends and professors, in what can be described as voyages of self-discovery through experiencing other environments, other people. This is what happens when they depart from what they call the 'comfort zone' of daily life. What they discover and acquire is cultural understanding, sharing and experiencing other cultures and in doing so they learn to be open to the world.

¹ Muhammed Yunus, 'A World of Three Zeros: The New Economics of Zero Poverty, Zero Unemployment, and Zero Net Carbon Emission', October 2, 2018

'Open to the world' is the motto of Ca' Foscari's 150th anniversary and we try to make it real and concrete by offering to our students a learning experience abroad. They can choose their destination, from Europe to UK, USA, Middle East, the Caucasus, China, Japan, Korea, Australia etc., in some of the best universities in the world, provided that they have a study project, with a strong motivation, a learning agreement, and the requirements needed. Every year we fund around 1,500 mobility placements for our students, for a wonderful study abroad experience, in which they encounter new cultures and social environments, and consequently learn to be citizens of the world, to value other cultures and at the same time to appreciate their own.

Like all modern universities and research institutions, Ca' Foscari is committed to the process of internationalization, for it is only by becoming more connected to the world that we will be able to completely fulfil our academic mission in research and education and maximize our contribution to the betterment of our society.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Preface

From the Office for International Relations

Elisa Gamba

(Office for International Relations)

Educational exchange can turn nations into people, contributing as no other form of communication can to the humanizing of international relations

Senator J. William Fulbright, 1983

I have been working in Ca' Foscari University of Venice International Office, where I am currently responsible for the Welcome Unit, since 2010. I deeply love my job, for a number of different reasons, which I shall attempt to briefly outline here.

One of the most satisfying moments in the daily activities in the office is seeing the growth and change in students. Before leaving for an international experience, they have different approaches: you can see them electrified, or scared, or hesitant. But whether their experience has been a wonderful time or not, in any case you will clearly see the difference upon their return.

A period abroad, alone, far from home, teaches you that you can go out from your comfort zone and thus discover new aspects about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses.

The human experience of mobility transcends the academic one: and the *My Mobility* writing competition perfectly reflects this reality. The International Office is proud to have contributed to the funding and organisation of the initiative, and to the prize giving ceremony which was held in June 2018.

The staff of the International Office support hundreds of incoming and outgoing students, who every semester live an international experience. The numbers keep growing: in the last five academic years, incoming students (i.e., exchange students, enrolled in a partner university, who spend a semester or academic year in Venice thanks to international agreements or networks) went from 407 in the A.Y. 2013/14 to 675 in the A.Y. 2017/18; while outgoing students went from 578 in the A.Y. 2013/14 to 1204 in the A.Y. 2017/18. Degree seeking students (i.e., students enrolled in a BA or MA with an international diploma, to be evaluated and accepted by the International Office before the enrolment) showed a significant increase as well: from 194 in the A.Y. 2013/14 to 329 in the A.Y. 2017/18.

The increase in numbers followed changes to the International Office, which in the last five years has become bigger and better organised. The office is now divided in three units, each responsible for a different aspect of the internationalisation of higher education: the Welcome Unit works with the international users of the university (either students, professors or staff); the Mobility Unit works with the creation of international agreements and it manages outgoing mobilities (either of students, professors or staff); the Projects Unit works for the creation and management of international projects aimed at getting international fundings. Moreover, in 2018 another office has been created, the Global Engagement Office, with the main aim of international branding, marketing and recruiting.

Most procedures have been automated, specific softwares for higher education procedures have been introduced, such as the website apply.unive.it, which made it possible to digitalise and speed up the whole process for degree seeking students, and, thanks to the cooperation with other offices inside and outside the university, many procedures have been simplified, for example automatised Transcript of Records, management of *prospective degree seekers* with CRM, file sharing in Drive, digital signatures on most documents.

Welcome services have been improved, among them: a dedicated desk at the airport of Venice during the Welcome weeks, support to obtain the stay permit and for other immigration issues, a Chinese front office, the creation of tutorials in English language for the main administrative procedures, and a personalised Welcome Kit for all international guests (students and staff).

These are the facts: behind them, the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff, who work every day ‘to the humanizing of international relations’, supporting the international (human) experience of the university community.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Introduction

David Newbold

(Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies)

The Competition: Celebrating International Mobility

In January 2018, as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of Ca' Foscari, and to reflect the growing international vocation of a higher educational institution which from the beginning has always been 'open to the world', the university launched a competition in which students were invited to write about their international mobility experiences. The rules were simple. The competition was open to all students enrolled at Ca' Foscari who had, or would have, completed a mobility experience abroad as part of their studies, by the end of the spring semester. They had to write between 500 and 1000 words, in English, focusing on a learning experience, not necessarily a formal experience, which characterized the mobility for them on a personal level.

Why English? For the simple reason that English is, for most students, the *lingua franca* which makes the mobility possible. Naturally students of foreign languages (and Ca' Foscari offers forty two!) who go to a country where they can practice the languages they are learning are an exception. But for most students, especially those who are not majoring in a foreign language, the B1 English level entrance requirement for undergraduate study at Ca' Foscari, and B2 for postgraduate courses, should be a guarantee for survival in an academic context abroad, and should make interaction on campus and in daily life possible. This is more than borne out by the high quality of the writing in the competition, which at times is astonishingly good. We shall return to this later.

More than a hundred students sent in an account of their mobility, ninety three of which fulfilled the entrance requirements. They came from every department of the university, making it a truly university-wide competition. Perhaps unsurprisingly there were large numbers of participants from courses delivered entirely in English (such as Economics and Management, and Philosophy, International Studies and Economics). There were also lots of entries from students of Oriental Languages, reminding us that in Asia, too, English may be needed by students, alongside their fledging competences in Chinese, Japanese or Hindi, to reinforce their communicative potential.

From the beginning it was clear that the level of writing was high, and that deciding which were the best would not be easy. The three members of the jury (Gregory Dowling and David Newbold from the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, and Elisa Gamba from the Office of International Relations) began with a subjective rating of each text, which led to a long list of 39 which were considered by each component of the jury to be at least 'very good'. A further reading established a short list of 22, which we all concurred were 'excellent.'

This is where things got difficult. It is not easy to decide on outright winners when all the entries being considered are excellent. We opted for an objective, analytic grid which evaluated texts for content, communicative efficiency, and use of English. By 'content', we meant that accounts should focus on an appropriate learning experience, and be, in some way, original or creative; by 'communicative efficiency' that the writer should relate to the reader, using appropriate discourse features and structuring; and with 'use of English' we were referring to formal features such as syntax and morphology, but also lexical range. Inevitably there is some overlap across these categories but the one to which we gave the most weight was 'communicative efficiency', the means by which the writer was able to touch, and maybe move, the reader.

The three students with the highest evaluations won cash prizes put up by the Office of International Relations, while seven runners-up were presented with copies of the *Oxford Dictionary of Academic English* generously donated by Oxford University Press. But all twenty two short listed entries would have been worthy winners, and readers can make up their own minds about which ones they think best capture the mobility experience. In this volume we present all thirty-nine long-listed entries, which together reveal a great well of creative resources within the university. As for the more than fifty entries which did not make the long list, there was not a single contribution which did not in some way add its own insights towards a collective understanding of the mobility experience, and which was not worth recounting. Every student who entered the competition is thus to be thanked for participating and sharing their own experience with the wider community.

The Content: the Meaning of Mobility

The dominant theme which emerges in students' accounts of their mobility, and which was solicited by the invitation to focus on 'a learning experience', is one of personal growth. This may take different forms, such as an increase in self confidence or cultural awareness, or cross-cultural insights into human nature. The accounts may be triggered by a single incident and take the form of an anecdote, such as a chance meeting in a train in Morocco (Caterina Battilana, *A circle and a cross*) or the unintentional gate-crashing

of a wedding party in India (Rocco Tonilio, *My big fat Indian wedding experience*). Or they may be a reflection on the whole mobility experience, as in the account which won the first prize, ... *to the sky*, and which is a distillation of nine months spent in Madrid, 'the same length as a pregnancy', the author, Chiara Bergonzini, notes, during which 'a new me was born'.

A few students, only a few, write about what happens in the classrooms and the lecture halls, but the focus is more on survival study techniques than the lessons being delivered by lecturers. Thus Silvia del Soglia hones her writing skills in the university library in Seoul (*At the end of hardship comes happiness*) because, faced with the choice of sink or swim, she realizes that 'sinking was not an option'; while Cecilia Spassini, (*Another side of China*) decides that the only way to survive her mobility in the remote north east China, with its draconian regulations, is 'by talking a lot in class, and by asking questions.' There is also an interesting account of a night spent in Hull University Library by Fabio Grattoni (*A night at the library*), in which the author observes and classifies his fellow readers as *night owls*, *lost students*, and *desperate students*. He identifies himself with the first category, with just a hint of the desperate. Fabio doesn't however make any reference to his illustrious predecessor: Philip Larkin, possibly the greatest post war English poet, was Hull University librarian from 1955 until his death in 1985, and may have reached similar conclusions about the night-time inmates.

A few students reflect on language issues, such as the use of English as the world's *lingua franca*, or the curiosities of the local language, whether Chinese or Dutch. Giorgia Frigerio (*The unexpected virtue of imperfection*) overcomes her fear of making mistakes in English, since 'The point isn't that I stopped making mistakes, but that my approach to them changed.' Beatrice Sarto (*Where are you from?*) extols the virtues of having a non-native speaker accent because 'accents tell stories, they tell people where you have come from, where you have been, and where you are going... and there is no shame in that.' In the Netherlands, Elisabetta Gobbo tries to work out the meaning of *The most beautiful word of the worst language* - the Dutch word 'gezellig'.

Mostly, though, students write about the people they meet, the friends they make, and the value of tolerance and solidarity across cultural divides. They recount voyages of self discovery as students leave the 'comfort zone' (an expression which features in numerous accounts) of home, family, and the security of the daily routine, for the unknown. Only rarely is the theme of tolerance and international relations approached from a different angle, from a critical, impersonal viewpoint - one outstanding exception being Silvia Pin's image of revolving doors in a hotel in Hebron, occupied territories, and the two men on either side of them, one of whom, we suppose, is Palestinian, the other an Israeli Jew (*Two men*).

Lasting friendships are formed, such as the one which inspires Chiara Bergonzini's tattoo (...*in the sky*), or the intense relationship which Irene Melinu forms with a Japanese girl, Minako (*A matter of beauty*) and which revolves

around a discussion of the contrast between western and oriental canons of beauty. Sometimes the friendships are unlikely: Asia Mariuzzo (*Do not ever judge an Aussie by his accent*) meets an Australian boy from along the corridor in her student residence in Reading who tells her almost as soon as he sees her that ‘tattooed, cranky and sassy girls are not my type.’ And yet...

But sentimental adventures, and close encounters of a sexual kind, keep a low profile in these accounts; which is not to say they do not happen. A recent article in *Sette*, the weekly supplement of *Il Corriere della Sera*, published a series of statistics about the Erasmus generation, and the two million or so European students which have been on mobility over the last thirty years.¹ Of these, 33 per cent are likely to end up with an international partner (compared with just 13 per cent of non Erasmus ex students), accounting for more than a million ‘Erasmus babies’, at least if we are to believe a claim made by European Commissioner Jean Claude Juncker.²

This may provide a reason for rejoicing in Erasmus, as Junker suggests, but so too do the many accounts of volunteering which Ca’ Foscari students have been involved in as part of their mobility. In Southampton, Marta Lucente (*Limitless music*) discovers the power of music to help the physically disabled in a dance therapy group, and in a children’s hospice, while on the other side of the world, in China, Chiara Spassini (*Another side of China*) gives up some of her time to help the disabled in a similar project. One Ca’ Foscari mobility programme, *Ca’ Foscari for the World* offers students the chance to participate in an NGO programme in northern India, and this is enthusiastically taken up by Filippo Spaliviero (*Do not bring medals with you*). On the last day he reports back about the recycling project he has been involved in, only to receive a sobering comment from the local supervisor: if you think you’ve done a good job, she says, don’t let it go to your head, and don’t take any medals away with you.

Disillusionment is part of the bigger picture which emerges; mobility does not offer instant gratification, but it has to be earned, and swallowing pride, as well as making mistakes, may be part of that process. A graphic account of this is provided by Maria Chiara Truttero (*Like a piece of cake*). Challenged to make a cake by a friend of her hostess in Tbilisi, she decides to make a *tiramisu* (for which she has to make a phone call to her mother to be sure of the recipe). The next day just before dinner, on the table where she had placed the finished product, she finds a ‘big brown cake’, definitely not her tiramisù, and an embarrassed hostess. The problem, it seems, is that the hostess cannot offer her guests a cake which has not

1 *Sette*, weekly supplement to *Corriere della Sera*, 3rd May 2018.

2 Reported by Reuters news agency, 13 June 2017: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-students-babies/a-million-euro-babies-eu-fetes-30-years-of-student-exchanges-idUSKBN1941PX> (2018-11-27)

been baked. The shock is great, but there is only one way out: Maria Chiara has to set aside her wounded pride, and her account concludes: 'I would never prepare tiramisu abroad again and I would always eat my cake with tolerance and understanding'.

Ultimately, tolerance and understanding are the key to a successful mobility, and the students who wrote these accounts are well aware of it. For many of them, this awareness triggers a reflection on pride and prejudice: to be proud of one's own cultural heritage is one thing, but to break down the barriers of stereotypes and ignorance is essential if international understanding is to take place. Time and again this has been a liberating experience for our students, and the real lesson learned from the mobility placement. In the words of Chiara Bergonzini: 'I literally felt like the world had finally opened its door to me, and I had never felt so Italian, and so much of a world citizen at the same time.'

The Communicative Factor: English *Lingua Franca*

All participants in the competition had to write their accounts in English. We did however specify in the rules that entries would be judged for their communicative efficiency in English lingua franca, and that we were not looking for 'standard' British or American English, although we expected a level of communicative competence at least B2 on the Common European Framework. In this way we hoped to encourage students who were not necessarily students of English to participate; the competition was open to *users* as well as *learners*. In other words, we were not going to penalize participants who used non-standard forms which did not compromise the communicative thrust of their writing.

In fact, the ability of entrants to express themselves fluently and convincingly in English, turned out to exceed our expectations. Of course, there are plenty of non standard forms, and some low level 'errors' (such as incorrect verb forms, or lack of agreement) creep into a few texts, but these are in the minority, and they do not compromise understanding. What was more noticeable to the judges is the sophisticated use of the language (for example in the creation of images and metaphors) and the sense of structure and organization which are a feature of all the entries presented here.

Often those non standard forms which might, in another context, be considered as errors of grammar or lexis, such as

«I felt like a lost luggage patiently waiting on the carousel» (*Lost and Found: The journey of a caterpillar*)

or

«I read, dreamt, travelled, believed, lived adventures» (*Dear Me, Breathe and love*)

can be seen as useful, rather than problematic. *Luggage* is a count noun

in standard British English, and so cannot be used with the indefinite article, but *a piece of lost luggage* would have been awkward and *a suitcase* too specific for the writer's purposes; while *living an adventure* (presumably transferred from Italian) gives the idea rather more successfully than the more usual *have an adventure*.

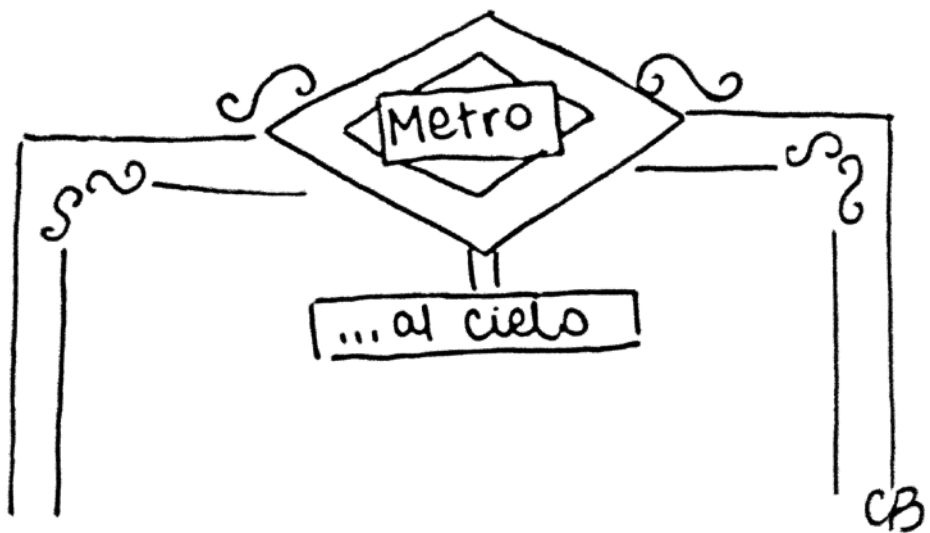
Such departures from a norm are a recurring feature of *lingua franca* English (ELF), of which much has been written over the last decade or so; the authors of these accounts are non native speakers of English, they are using the language to communicate with other non native speakers, and their mobility experience, like that of most of their companions, was made possible by the availability of English as a *lingua franca*. As such, these two small examples can be seen as creative uses of the language, rather than errors, and they would probably pass unnoticed to many non native eyes.

More noteworthy is the range of writing strategies employed, and the linguistic means by which they are achieved. This includes the descriptive bravura of accounts such as *Two Men* and *Beijing Nights*, the shifting narrative viewpoints of *A Letter from my Future Self* and *A Matter of Beauty*, the experimental approach of *Wet Hair* and *Dear Me, breathe and love*, the exquisite sense of focus and unity of which the outright winner... *to the sky* is perhaps the best example. Contestants had to provide a title to their accounts, and these, too, are often pungent and illuminating, as in *Do not bring medals with you* or the pun in *Like a piece of cake*. And who could resist reading an account of a mobility experience entitled, simply, *Wet Hair*?

Behind it all, holding everything together, is a competence in English which, as we said, exceeded our expectations. Some of the accounts (*A circle and a cross*, for example) come close, very close, to a level of expression which a highly competent native writer would display, and clearly require no editing. But even for those which offer a number of non-standard forms (not to mention the occasional typo) we have decided not to intervene, but to publish the finished accounts as they were submitted by contestants. After all, it is becoming increasingly common for publishers of academic articles NOT to require texts submitted by international authors to be mediated by a native speaker (which in any case poses a problem of definition: what is a native speaker?), since comprehensibility, and interpretability, not native speaker norms, are required for an international audience. And it is not by chance that a number of entries focus on precisely this topic.

So, if you spot any 'errors' in these texts, please be indulgent, and consider that they shed more light on the writers, and ultimately the mobility experience that they are writing about, than an edited text would have done. They provide proof that today's students, perhaps most of them, are highly competent users of the world's *lingua franca*. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did!

1st Prize



My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

...to the sky

Chiara Bergonzini

LM Lingue, Economie e Istituzioni dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Spain

When she found out she was going to be sent to her third choice destination, Madrid, instead of London, Chiara Bergonzini's first reaction was one of disappointment. But with the wealth of new experiences life in Madrid offers, she ends up feeling 'like the world had finally opened its door to me'. The jury chose this story as the outright winner not just because of the aesthetically satisfying image of the tattoo with which the story starts and concludes (and where we can learn why half the title is missing, see above), but because of the sincerity with which it illuminates the experience of cultural and personal growth which student mobility programmes such as Erasmus have done so much to promote.

I have a tattoo just above my left elbow. It says '...al cielo', which means 'to the sky'. Most people assume it's Italian – I am Italian, after all – but it's actually Spanish. I guess it doesn't really make a difference, because the meaning doesn't change, but I like pointing it out every time someone asks me about it. I had it done in June last year, only a couple of days before leaving Madrid for good. I had spent nine incredible months there, together with the person who had managed to transform from a complete stranger into one of my most treasured friends in a matter of weeks, and surely, we could have come up with more original ideas to represent the impact this experience had on us, but a tattoo seemed like the most permanent trace we could leave on ourselves, and have it dedicated to the city where we met, we laughed, we cried, we learnt, we grew up together just felt right. So, one day we left our apartment in *Cuatro Caminos*, got on the *Metro* to *Lavapiés* and entered a tattoo studio, and 20 minutes later my friend's elbow recited 'De Madrid...' and mine '...al cielo' ('from Madrid to the sky'.)

I personally hate commitment, and tattoos are indeed a commitment. I'm a very insecure person so I never trust myself when I think about possible tattoo ideas, as I always fear that I will regret it sooner or later. This time, though, I didn't have the slightest doubt. But this story isn't only the story of my tattoo; rather, it's the story of how strong of an impact living abroad can have on people.

I lived and studied in Spain for nine months and I can easily say that it was the most overwhelmingly beautiful experience of my life. Sometimes I think back to that spring day when I got the results for my Erasmus+

application and I can't help but laugh at the thought that I was actually disappointed that I hadn't got accepted into the universities in the United Kingdom that I had selected as my first and second choice. I had been to Madrid before, twice, and I had never really fallen in love with that city, contrarily to what usually happens to me when I travel. What I didn't know yet is that Madrid is a city which needs to be lived, experienced, felt. It's not only about visiting the Retiro park or the Royal Palace. Its beauty is hidden in the streets of Malasaña, in the canteens where people of all ages and nationalities sit from dusk to dawn, eating *croquetas* and drinking *sangría*, in the colours the sky takes around 7pm... I have never seen such beautiful sunsets anywhere else in the world.

I arrived on a late summer day, at the beginning of September. The weather was unbearably hot, my apartment was much smaller than I thought and my flat mates all seemed very different from me. I panicked: I was sure I wouldn't make any friends and I wouldn't get to enjoy Spain as much as I wanted to. I couldn't be more wrong.

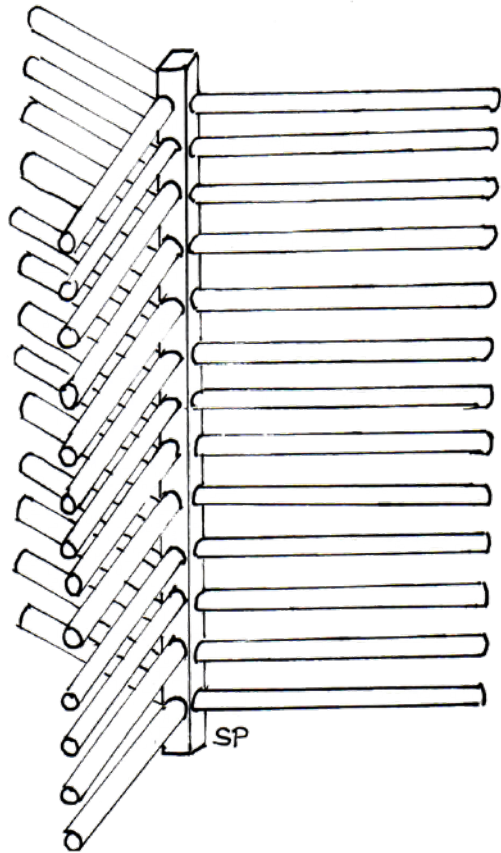
I soon found out that being an 'Erasmus student' feels like a special condition: when you meet other Erasmus students, you immediately bond, even if they're the kind of people who you'd never bond with in your home country. In the first week alone, I met people from Greece, France, Israel, Brazil... all of them had just arrived and all of them had my same wish: to learn Spanish, to experience the Spanish culture and to explore the city, and the country. The months passed, we all got used to our new lives there, but we kept feeling special. We weren't citizens, but we weren't tourists, either.

During the first months, I transformed. I used to avoid everything that I wasn't sure I would enjoy, but when you find yourself alone in a new place, you either accept to go out and do what other people suggest, or you isolate yourself. I chose the first alternative, and all of a sudden, I found myself enjoying walking around the city centre at 4am after leaving a pub, eating a pizza slice while waiting for our taxi home. At the same time, though, my new friends learnt to enjoy chilling at a café while reading a book or getting homework done. It's incredible how the 'Erasmus status' forces you to open up: to new experiences, but also to new ideas, because meeting people from all corners of the planet makes you curious about everything they have to say, and you can't help but ask endless questions about their lifestyles or opinions. I had never felt so rich in my life, so connected to the world. I had always tried to keep as updated as possible regarding what goes on in all countries, not only the closest ones, but finally my source of knowledge wasn't a newspaper article, rather the voice of other people, who also wanted to hear *my* voice, regarding Italian issues.

In only nine months - ironically, the same length of a pregnancy - a new me was born: I still had my introverted personality and enthusiastic curiosity, but I was much stronger and sure I could face all my insecurities. This wasn't only an experience that let me improve my language skills and learn

about the university system in Spain, it was much more than that. It was proof that I can aspire to great things because I had been able to overcome all the fears that tortured me on the first day. I literally felt like the world had finally opened its door to me, and I had never felt so Italian, and so much of a world citizen at the same time. Madrid represented this door, to me, and that's why my elbow will forever read '[De Madrid] ...al cielo'.

2nd Prize



My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Two men

Silvia Pin

LT Lingue, Culture e Società dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Tel Aviv University, Israel

This is a vision of conflict, of shifting perspectives, involving two men, one an Israeli and one a Palestinian (we suppose, but are never told) whom the protagonist meets on her visit to Hebron in the occupied territories. It is skillfully told, using noun phrases and snatches of dialogue, and only minimal authorial intervention. After this scene of 'strangers in a wounded city' the account broadens out to a reflection on learning and how things are always more complicated than they might at first appear, leading the protagonist to conclude that 'settling for complexity' is a more realistic goal than 'gaining comprehension of the world'. It is a satisfying conclusion to a sophisticated piece of writing.

Hebron, February 2018

A group of strangers in a wounded city. We stroll around crowded markets and abandoned streets, we hear the quiet rage of exhausted voices, we see the enthusiasm in hopeful eyes, their fearless resolution. We pass through revolving metal doors, carousel they call them, like the merry-go-around of night time fairs, a toy for kids, turned into a grown up monster. A five-years old boy follows us, he wants to play, pushes the rods, but they stop him and he goes back, disappointed. He is not allowed to come with us. Two men are our guides. The old one explains: – Here's the sanctuary, our side, I am not allowed access beyond that line.

The young one, a few meters away: – We are standing on the holy site, our part of it. I am not allowed to the other side.

The first one, his heavy American accent: – You are Christians, you can visit both of them.

The second, with a clear British intonation: – We like Christians here, so I don't care, today you all are Christians.

Our first guide continues: – Here there were all the time attacks, so we closed it up.

The second: – The soldier shot him, he was lying on the ground.

– He saw a bomb vest, he feared for everybody's life.

– They kill my cousin in front of me, we were nine. He wanted his ball back, and for that he lost his life.

– They entered and killed her father at night, she was reimbursed with a new house.

– They throw us stones, waste, even acid at times.

– It happens from time to time, we condemn those actions, they are just a few violent boys.

– My uncle had a heart attack, we had to carry him on our shoulders, the ambulance could not get through.

– We impose the curfew just once a year, thousands of people come here for the annual celebration, we cannot protect them otherwise.

Muhammad says: – My childhood was not easy, but you get used to everything, it's my life.

Eliyahu: – I wasn't born here, but my people are. We just want to live in peace.

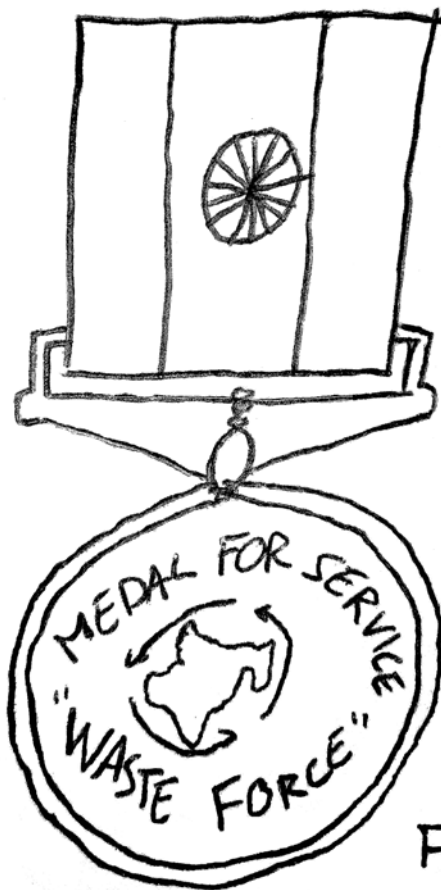
On the open space, no man's land, between H1 and H2, between two worlds, maybe two states, certainly separated families, also foreign families, two - more - languages, the same language, the same blood, the enemy blood - between everything and everyone, all the same and all the opposite, they come close, see each other, smile and ask: – Is everything ok today?

My learning from this experience went beyond university lessons, welcoming parties, English written papers, Hebrew grammar, Arabic conversations, history and religion, persecutions and wars, atrocities and humanity. It went even beyond new friendships and the strengthening of old ones, surprising habits I made mine, of which I did not have a clue before, tasty foods and incredible landscapes. It went undoubtedly beyond delusion and disillusion, mistakes, deceits, cheaters who swindled me, but made me stronger. I saw with my own eyes things about which everyone talk, and I learnt how much they are easy there, everyday life, but at the same time, how much they are complicated.

I have a vivid memory, from primary school: my teacher is standing up, in front of the blackboard, and with a white chalk traces a circle. Within that circle, she draws a slice, saying: – When I was your age, do you see this pie? My knowledge was limited to this little slice, and I hoped that, growing up, with patience and dedication, I would get to know the entire pie. – then she enlarges the circle, now it fills the whole blackboard, and continues – But one day I realised: the more I learn, the more material I discover worth learning. I suddenly understood that the pie will continue increasing, and that I will know only my slice.

Those two men reminded me of my teacher. They are two enemies working together not to bring knowledge, but awareness. If I had convictions, I lost them. However, I acquired something far more important, though destabilizing. There is no one truth, no right and wrong. The goal which will boost my efforts from now on, will not be about gaining the comprehension of the world, but settling for its complexity. Thanks to those two friends-enemies in that tormented-holy land.

3rd Prize



F.S.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Do not bring medals with you

Filippo Spaliviero

LT Economics and Management

Destination: Ruchi NGO, Himachal Pradesh, India

The title says it all. On this journey of discovery from San Giobbe to Himachal Pradesh, Filippo Spaliviero has set his heart on working for an international non-profit organization, and the Ca Foscari for the World project has offered him just such an opportunity. He throws himself enthusiastically into a recycling venture in a village in the mountains of northern India. But when the time comes to leave, he gets a shock. Instead of thanking him for his selfless generosity and humanitarian ideals, the local NGO moderator tells him that, even if he's done a great job, he shouldn't think of it as simply due to his merit. 'And when you go on – she adds, – do not take any medals with you'. This sobering remark hits hard, but the protagonist takes it as an eye-opener, because 'incredible India, you will always shine in memories more than the brightest medal I could sling around my neck'.

2015, 14th September, San Giobbe Campus, my first Principles of Management lecture.

The professor is watching us firmly from behind his glasses, as he briefly says: – Gentlemen, as we start this course, keep in mind that here your goal is only one: to learn how to make a profit in the market environment –.

I was a young man who had pondered to study philosophy, but had turned to economics as I sought a sense of concreteness. That statement made me feel a bit out of place. I raised my hand: – What if our business burns the Amazon rainforest: shouldn't we take such ethical implications into consideration? – I'll never forget his sharp reply: – You should better leave your ethics outside of this room, I am sorry.

So I did, I banished my ethics from the classroom. Thing is, I also followed them...

2017, 17th December, Barotiwala College, a small university in Himachal Pradesh, northern India. I'm with Diletta, the other intern working at RUCHI NGO (Rural Center for Human Interests). We're introducing the principal, Mrs Madhu-ji, to our Waste Force project, about rural recycling. She carefully listens to us explaining everything about the monthly collection and segregation we planned. Her head nods in that peculiar way that Indians have mastered to tell you they are following what you are saying. This charming Sikh lady sprinkles positivity and looking straight into our eyes, she says: – I've been waiting a long time for someone like you to provide a recycling structure. Doing it alone was unfeasible! – and then she outlined some ideas on how to further improve our plan.

You see, I realized that my ideal job is to work for an international non-profit organization and that a management major is exactly what will lead me there. So I kept studying, and when I heard about the Ca' Foscari for the World project, I applied immediately and flew to India to test my dreams on the field.

When I arrived in September 2017, in the middle of nowhere, I was overwhelmed. Green mountains and scattered villages of just a few hundred farmers willing to drink a tea with me, sharing their joyful peacefulness. It didn't take long to start feeling at home.

However, our second reaction was grief. The amount of garbage in the streets was immense, when you didn't feel its burning smoke scorching your lungs. The government hadn't yet provided any system for recycling.

A thought struck me: 'Why don't we rent a truck and collect the trash in these villages? There's an industrial area close-by, where we can recycle...'

So I asked Mr Dharamvir, our NGO site director, for his opinion, and he gave us the go ahead.

Diletta and I were in complete charge of this new project. Professionally, we grew into the role quickly. She mastered her spoken Hindi and after a couple of weeks we could go to villages alone. When the question arose about motivating the local children to recycle, we had to be creative. So we developed a game whereby the kids had to look at pictures of bananas, bottles, cigarettes and guess how long it took them to decompose and what they could do to get rid of this garbage. Candies were a most effective method, but our public speaking skills were improving too, becoming more effective with older children.

The adults were more difficult to convince. They were resistant to change - it was only by going there day in and day out, showing the benefits of our work, that slowly drew their support. The children though - their enthusiastic smiles showed us they sincerely believed in the project. Some of them even volunteered for a clean-up event in front of the local market. Shopkeepers nodded approvingly.

Schools' headmasters usually supported us from the beginning, but it was often the case that people did not understand why to participate.

I remember a young woman saying: - Hey, you claim that burning plastic is bad for our health, but we have done it for years and nobody died so far... you must be lying -. Sitting in the middle of this ladies' group, Diletta and I looked at one another with surprise and helplessness. We looked for the eyes of Mrs Pushplata-ji, our NGO group moderator, but she didn't know what to say. Probably she had the same doubts. Clearly, follow-up projects were needed.

Four days before returning to Italy, Diletta and I were having a chai and biscuits in Madhu-ji's office. It was an interesting conversation: she shared the principles of the Sikh religion, and various life experiences. At a certain point, she said: - Well Filippo, you have done a great job, but

please do not think that this is to your merit. You have just made yourself available, but in the end, you should feel lucky you could start the project.–

These words truly hit me. I didn't see it in this way at all. I mean, I was the one who initiated everything, wasn't I? She explained: – Don't get me wrong, your decision was important, but do you really believe you could do it if the Universe did not prepare this path, this opportunity for you? – I felt she was very right. It was an eye-opener.

– And when you go on, do not bring medals with you, – she continued, – leave past successes behind you, and look forward to letting yourself achieve something new, wherever you will be.

I wish I had more time to talk to her, but our driver was hitting impatiently the horn: we said goodbye, we had to leave.

A few days later I said my final farewell. Actually, her words helped me realize it will be the people, the friendships, the ones I would miss the most.

Dhanyavad, incredible India, you will always shine in memories more than the brightest medal I could sling around my neck.

Runners-up

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A Circle and a Cross

Caterina Battilana

LT Lingue, Culture e Società dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Ecole de Gouvernance et d'Economie, Rabat, Marocco

This is a very accomplished, well written account of an episode on a train in Morocco. The protagonist finds herself in a compartment with a family of six. She tries to make conversation with one of the children, who is clearly rather interested in this young woman with the strange habit of writing from left to right in her notebook, but the language divide, between Moroccan Arabic and the standard version she has been learning, is just too great. So she hits on the idea of showing him how to play noughts and crosses; and the language barrier is overcome...

I recently spent a few months in Morocco as part of a mobility programme, and as most students do I devoted a fair amount of my free time to travelling and visiting different parts of the country. Having always been very curious, I just couldn't resist the temptation.

Morocco is a rather long-haul country, and one can spend up to five hours – sometimes even more – travelling from one city to another. It was the end of October, and a couple of friends and I decided to go to Tangier before our mid-term break was over. Living in Rabat we knew that it would not be a short journey, but nonetheless we wanted to make the most of those last few days.

We spent four hours on the train, and for the first half hour I updated the journal that I'd been keeping for the last couple of months. Due to studies or other various hurdles I didn't always have the time to fill it in; therefore I resorted to using the time I spent travelling on trains and coaches to make up for the reports I'd missed.

On our railway carriage we came across a somewhat unusual family: the two parents were talking to their four children, none of whom were screaming or trying to talk over them. This is why we perceived them as 'unusual' – Moroccan children are generally rather 'active', to say the least. One of them was a very curious boy. He kept running up and down the aisle, playing with his toy car and sliding it on every seat, probably pretending to be a famous racer. He seemed completely absorbed in his game, and yet he kept me within his sight.

Being used to the Arabic alphabet I could see that he was intrigued by my left-to-right writing, and it wasn't long until he finally decided to perch on the armrest of the empty seat beside me. As his father was keeping an

eye on him – because I was, after all, a perfect stranger – I barely smiled at this curious child, and I went on with my activity as if nothing was happening. He wanted to play with somebody, I could see that. And maybe discover something about this weird young woman with her weird-looking handwriting, who knows.

We tried to talk, but it was no use: he could only speak Moroccan Arabic, a language that I was just barely becoming familiar with. I attempted Standard Arabic: nothing. As a last resort I gave French a shot: still useless. Soon enough he got fed up and went back to speeding with his toy car. He was not satisfied though, and I could tell he wanted to find out more about me. Any communication with him seemed to be beyond reach – but I've always liked a good challenge.

He came back and he sat down next to me with his big brown eyes wide open, clearly waiting for something to happen. I figured he was expecting me to make the first move, and do anything that could entertain him. I looked over to my friend, who was also catching up on her journal, and I asked her whether in her opinion this child knew how to play 'Noughts and Crosses'. I don't know why I thought of that specific game, it was the first thing that came to mind. She dismissed my question with a flick of her hand and a quick shake of the head, as if to state that she had no idea. I decided to give it a shot, and on the last page of my notebook I drew a nine-square grid. I passed the notebook and the pen to the curious boy, who immediately shook his head – I was still a stranger, and a woman too. Nevertheless it was a matter of seconds before he changed his mind, and we started playing. His father was smiling and nodding from a distance, both trusting me and still keeping an eye on his now laughing son. I was enjoying this little game more than I normally would: there I was, bonding with a child I had never seen before over something as simple as that, despite other forms of communication failing. I was having fun, and so was he – as the whole carriage was soon able to tell by all his bursting into laughter.

I do cherish this particular memory, because it goes to show just how resourceful we can be when tackling a problem. There is a sort of pride that arises from the ability to form a connection with a total stranger, more so when there is a substantial cultural difference or when spoken interaction proves to be nearly impossible. In that instance, any bond is considered a success; therefore we were cherishing that small treasure, well aware of its ephemeral nature. He didn't seem to care about his toy car anymore, nor about his family. All his worries seemed to have vanished: apparently I didn't pose too much of a threat, so we kept playing and making the most out of that time together.

It wasn't long until that family had to get off the train, but the father did come up to me and thanked me before leaving. I saw the children waving at me through the window; as the train departed I waved at them,

and so did my friend – who apparently had come to feel involved in this pleasant encounter. I went back to writing my journal, glancing at the landscape every now and then. On the last page, a few nine-square grids that can, to this day, spark my smile.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A night at the library

Fabio Grattoni

LT Economics and Management

Destination: Hull University, UK

This account focuses on a night spent in the library of the university of Hull (where Philip Larkin, possibly the greatest post-war English poet, was librarian from 1955 until his death in 1985). The interest for the reader lies partly in the context, the description of the walk through the lonely streets at night, and the discovery that the library is open at midnight, but especially in the categorization of the students the protagonist finds at work inside: the owl student, the lost student, and the desperate student. Students who read the account may well recognize themselves as belonging to one or another of these categories; the protagonist sees himself as a mixture of the first (owl) and the third (desperate). But helped by a cup of strong coffee he is able to keep working until first light, and complete an essay for which, 'against all the odds', he gets a good mark; a fitting metaphor, he concludes, for his entire Erasmus experience.

I would like to tell you the story of when I spent the night at the university's library. I was in Hull, not far from the deep English countryside but at the same time in a very multicultural port city. I found these two clashing features an intriguing peculiarity. It is a small city, incredibly similar to my city in Italy: Udine. Both rather unknown to the public, a part for their football team that makes you understand football lovers as soon as you mention it. They are the only ones that are aware of the existence of these cities. Both the cities with very kind and proud people, and with an ambitious soul. Hull, in fact, was UK's city of culture that year.

It was the second or third month of my Erasmus experience when I found out that the library was open the whole night. I immediately found it very fascinating. Who stays at the library the entire night? What happens among hundreds of shelves full of thousands of books when everyone else is sleeping? My mind wondered while I was slowly convincing myself that I wanted to try. I needed to know! The fight between my two sides began. The quiet one, that thought that it would have been a decision full of regrets the next day, when I would have been extremely tired. Against the curious and adventurous one, who thought it was an unmissable occasion that I would have regret the next year if I wouldn't have taken it. Needless to say, the latter won.

The occasion arrived when I had to finish an essay for a course I was taking there. Even if it wasn't necessary to spend the night working on it, I thought it was the perfect opportunity. When the moment to leave approached I started to doubt the validity of the idea. The result was the procrastination of the departure until also the last bus had left. The accommodation I was staying at was a little more than one hour walk far from the library. I decided to go anyway even if I could have stayed working there in my room. It was the right decision because the walk was extremely relaxing. When you walk in the middle of the night, alone, it may be scary at times but, if you overcome that fear, you discover a whole new city. The very same streets and buildings change. The street you thought you knew have a completely new intriguing look. It is something I often do also in Venice. I would go, wondering around the smallest streets I could find, trying to discover the few ones where there is no one, and then letting my mind speculate about what those streets, those houses, those canals, would say if they could unravel their mysteries.

After an hour walking I arrived at the library. Against all the odds there were a lot of people studying and writing papers just like me. The first thing I did was to walk around. This gave me the chance to observe the inhabitants of the library at night. There was the one that I named the owl-student. He is only productive at night. For him the morning doesn't exist. He stays up until late at night and wakes up ready for lunch. Then there is the lost student. Probably he goes to the library with the best intentions but ends up surfing the Internet the entire night, finding himself after two hours in a Russian bonsai forum discussing about the best ways to protect the trees from freezing. Only at that moment he understands that is probably time to give up the idea of studying and go to sleep. Finally, there is the desperate student. You can immediately identify him, because he is the one that is constantly scratching his head, sunk below a dozen of books and with one or two energy drinks upon which he desperately stores his hope to remain awake to finish his homework. I was one of the first category, with a little tint of the desperate one. With this brief analysis of the people around me my night began.

The study session started greatly, with most of the work being done in the first few hours. But then something happened. The energies started to finish and with them my attention span. I found myself distracted plenty of times and just realizing it after a while. You really understand that you are tired when you can't concentrate at the point that you don't even realize you are distracted. I started to think that it has been a bad idea. I shouldn't have gone there, because if I wouldn't have finished the essay that night I probably wouldn't have been able to finish it in time with the care I wanted to. I therefore decided that I needed a help. I needed a long, long coffee to wake me up. This gave me the necessary energy to continue my work until the first light arrived to wake up Hull. After a couple of weeks, I received the mark, which really satisfied me. One more time, against all the odds.

It is only now, thinking about that night, that I realize how this can be a fitting metaphor for my whole Erasmus. It started with great curiosity and desire to explore a culture, a city, and a country. Nonetheless I had some difficulties at the beginning, trying to figure out how to do all the exams before leaving. Then these doubts turned into excitement. There were so many new things to explore, to learn. Unfortunately, this is often difficult and tiring. Soon complications and hard moments started. Luckily the spring break and, above all, the visit of my girlfriend, put me back on track, just like a strong, good coffee. At the end, I feel lucky to have had the chance to have this opportunity in which I learnt a lot and from which I got a lot of satisfaction and fulfilment.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A Matter of Beauty

Irene Melinu

LM Lingue, Economie e Istituzioni dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Showa Joshi University, Tokyo, Japan

This is a stylistically engaging account of a friendship, between the protagonist and a young Japanese woman studying English at a university in Tokyo, who thinks that she (the Italian protagonist), and all other Western women, are 'amazingly beautiful'. The conversation develops into a five month mobility-long dialogue on the canons of beauty, and how they shift across cultures. The brief extracts which are taken in isolation from the ongoing dialogue are penetrating and effective, inviting reflection on the size of noses and the colour of eyes. Beauty, the protagonist says, 'was a fil-rouge during my entire stay in Japan'. But the mysteries of changing aesthetics are transcended by the lasting friendship which has formed by the end of the mobility, when Minako accompanies the protagonist to the airport not because of her eyes, 'but because I want to remember forever our friendship'.

– When I'm talking to you, why don't look at me in the eyes? –, I said laughing.

– Oh, it's nothing. I'm just shy. And I think you're very beautiful –, she replied to me.

After few seconds of pause, – I'm so jealous... I mean, you, and all the other Western women are amazingly beautiful –. Silence.

I was freezed. This was one of our very first conversation. She was little, thin, introvert, with long black hair, so straight and bright that I could reflect myself there. She was studying English at Showa University in Tōkyō but more than anything Minako was my first friend in Japan.

Even if my Japanese back then was not perfect at all, we had many discussions about our lives, our futures, our attitudes about lots of issues, and when my Japanese was not sufficient, our hands and faces talked for us.

In particular, that evening of March, after that brief dialogue, we talked about beauty and what was in our opinion the inherent meaning of this word that nowadays we see and overhear almost everywhere.

– Models are usually Western women, they have gigantic brown or blue eyes, small faces, big noses. They are perfect and cute, aren't they?

While she was speaking, I was sitting there, thinking about how in the entire world my gigantic nose would be considered perfect by someone else and how my small face with my pronounced cheekbones would be treated as cute.

– Japanese girls are clumsy and they don't feel pretty at all. That's why I am afraid of looking at you, because I feel inferior, you know –.

Looking at her now was different. How can someone think of being inferior just because there is a global standard of beauty which is very western influenced?

This first conversation perfectly represents my trip to Japan, riddled with strangers asking me a picture just because I have big brown eyes.

Minako was just expressing a discomfort that probably lots of Japanese girls feel; seeing Western girls in reality or in television programs that advertise a standard without any rational basis or any attention not to hurt the feelings of the young public, is stressful. Obviously, it is not surprising to see various fashion products or make-up ones to make Japanese girls similar to Westerns, such as lens to make the pupils bigger or to make the eye-colour change. Before coming to Japan, I read several articles about the so called 'economy of sameness', yoking all cultures to the same idea of beauty which is linked to assimilating all countries into the same economic model.

– Minako, what are you saying? Come on, it's ridiculous. You are beautiful because you are unique. There is nobody in the world like you, right?

I tried to convince her that everyone is beautiful just being original and natural, not trying to be similar to everyone else.

But her face was not persuaded at all.

– Listen, then why just skinny-perfect models have success in life? Isn't it already an answer?

I sincerely didn't know what to say. She was looking at me with her hopeful eyes, waiting for a word or an expression that could make her feel better.

But I was just hesitating, something not that typical of me.

The days after and generally during my five months in Tōkyō, I often thought about this; while I was at the shopping mall with my Japanese friends searching for eye-lenses, while I was at the University with all the girls staring at me during lunch time, while I was at Starbuck's with some 40-year-old man asking me for a picture with him just because 'I was looking just like a model'.

Beauty was a *fil-rouge* during my entire staying in Japan, an issue that I didn't really considered seriously since my arrival and the encounter with my first friend. I thought how strange it is not to consider himself beautiful just because you have not the typical features of a Western woman, how strange it is to think you are inferior just because you are not similar to everybody else, instead of thinking that your value is by being different and not standardized.

At the end of August, I had to go home. Minako came with me to the airport and when we had to say goodbye, she thanked me for being so kind and polite with her, even if she was clumsy, and she apologized to me if sometimes she was too shy and not too friendly.

I hugged her – something that is not so common between Japanese people – and I wished her the best for her life and her studies.

Just a minute before the control gate, she stopped me and asked me a picture with her. Laughing, she said – I am not asking you because of your eyes, I am asking you because I want to remember forever our friendship –.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Wet Hair

Martina Nati

LT Lingue, Civiltà e Scienze del Linguaggio

Destination: University of Nottingham, UK

This is a touching journey of self discovery. Martina Nati's destination is Nottingham, England, a country 'as beautiful as it is cold and windy', where she cannot make up her mind if her real home is there, or back in Italy; until she realizes that there is 'absolutely no need to'. It is a stylistically bold account, in which the writer has hit the return key after every sentence, and in which every other sentence, or almost, begins with the personal pronoun I. But it works. And the wet hair? This provides the central metaphor for the account: you don't realize your hair is wet when you're under water, but 'once you get out, you find yourself carrying undeniable proof of your marine life to unknown shores.' Which is another way of saying, the experience abroad marks you, and you take it back home with you. Because yes, Martina left for England to find her way home; and she did, and it was 'exactly where I had left it.'

I left for England because I thought that, by leaving, I would somehow find my way home. A new home, a new culture to dwell into, new air to fill my lungs, new experiences to drunken my youth.

New, new. Everything had to be new. Everything away was as desirable as a shimmering diamond behind the glass of a window.

– You look so English – they said every time they looked at me, at the way I behaved and sat quietly among the guffaws at the restaurant. – You don't look Italian at all.

I heard that so many times I convinced myself it was true, and this new truth of mine grew stronger and stronger and it made its way upstream in my veins and in my mind.

I don't look Italian.

At all.

Then, what did I look like? Which one among the many places on this Earth was my real home? All I knew, was that Italy was not.

Then maybe it was England.

Now that I think about it, it was not the hope to find a new home that pushed me to leave. Maybe it was the need – the irresistible urge – to find myself.

Or maybe it was both.

I do not know at which point my homeland and my identity intertwined to the point of becoming one. I have never paid much attention to myself.

The problem is that after years and years of distractions, the only way to get to know something – even the most trivial information – about myself

was to borrow my reflection from the eyes that lay upon me.

I think that this is what made it so hard for me to understand where my place was. I borrowed other people's eyes so many times that I forgot how to use mine.

This was indeed a dangerous mechanism that spread in my being like an illness, aggravating itself until it beguiled my very vision of the world outside of me. I saw everything as if through an altering mirror.

I forgot how to look at my country, Italy, through my eyes and I could only see it through foreign stereotypes.

You don't look Italian.

At all.

Well, maybe I did not want to look like it. I did not want to be loud, to always be joking or to gesticulate every time I said something. I did not want to be recognized as the food fanatic or the fashion addicted.

I left my country behind, I hid my accent at every occasion, I blended in. Italy was now nothing but the chaotic land where my family lived: far, far away from me.

So I left.

And I understood.

After a few weeks abroad in a country as beautiful as it is windy and cold, I started to miss home. Now, do not misunderstand me, I have loved every second I spent in England. Nevertheless, I was nostalgic.

I missed the sun, the hills that surround my hometown and the sight of the mountains.

I found myself talking of Italy more and more, of its culture, of its language. I longed for someone to speak Italian with me, even if just for a minute. I remember my flatmates making fun of my enthusiasm every time I met an Italian when we went out.

I remember the moment I realised the truth that would help me start anew.

I was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Thinking.

I was thinking about England, about my life there, and I was thinking about Italy. I could not bring myself to choose and I realised that there was absolutely no need to.

When I left I did not know what my place in the world was, I thought I was untouchable by all that was 'Italian'. What I have learnt is that you never realised that your hair is wet while being underwater and, once you get out, you find yourself carrying undeniable proof of your marine life to unknown shores.

Fitting in might be possible, but what is the price to pay? To get dry?

I have discovered a lot about myself and I have redefined myself on many - many - occasions.

I understood that denying part of who I am will never make me happy.

Once I realised that, I felt relieved. I felt good. I could finally enjoy what was around me without having to look for a new home in every place I saw, because I knew exactly where my heart lied.

I left for England because I thought that, by leaving, I would somehow find my way home.

And I did.

It was exactly where I had left it.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Who said that taxis are boring?

Manuel Recchia

LM Lingue e Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

In this account the mobility experience begins with a nightmare taxi ride to the centre of Beijing. Manuel Recchia tries to explain to the driver where he wants to go – a hostel where he will stay for the first week, before the university dorm is available. Encouragingly, the driver seems to understand him. But then things start to go wrong. The taxi is hit by a car behind, both drivers get out and start shouting at each other, Manuel is left inside looking at the clock and the taximeter ticking over while Beijing traffic whizzes past on all sides and in all directions. The altercation stops as suddenly as it has begun, but then the taxi driver can't find the hostel, and after a few unproductive calls on an ancient mobile phone he simply throws the phone out of the window 'smashing it into a thousand pieces.' At this point Manuel decides for reasons of personal safety, to pay the driver and continue the search for the hostel on foot. And that is when things start to get better...

Finally. After four years of studying, the moment has finally arrived. When you get the confirmation e-mail of the flight, you really understand what you are about to do. Where you will be for the next five months. You really understand that this time it is not a distant hope. It is there, all paid for and confirmed.

The dream is about to come true.

China has always been a difficult destination for me to define, to imagine. When I first started studying Chinese at university, maybe by chance or maybe not, then that country so far away was not as distant as before. But there was always that feeling... the one that, despite this, it was still an unattainable step.

But instead...

29th August 2017. The beginning of a great adventure. After endless hours of flight, I finally land in the city that will give me a warm welcome to China, Beijing – or the Capital of the North, if you prefer the translation from 北京. Do you know what was the first thing I saw when I left the airport?

Grey. It is polluted, something that I have never seen in Sicily. But I am so excited to win this challenge vs China that, almost involuntarily, while sitting in the taxi headed to the hostel, I take the phone and take a picture of 'the sky.' 'I have to show it to my parents', I think. Here, in the taxi... right here is born the first true story I can tell since I arrived in China.

I am alone. My friends took a taxi together because they will all study at the same university. I stay a week in the hostel because I still can not

get into the university dorm. I arrived too early in China, I wanted to visit the city first. I stop a taxi. I show off my best Chinese and I tell the driver where I have to go. He immediately understands me and I already feel satisfied by this experience. 'I learned something in these four years', I think. Still euphoric from my first real Chinese conversation, I continue to ask questions of the driver, to test my skills 'in the field.' I do not understand everything yet, but we manage to talk in some way.

But I do notice a very small detail. Two minutes ago, we were on the highway heading to the city center from the airport... now we are still on the highway, but in the middle of the city. Or at least I think it's a highway. What do you call a two-way road with four lanes in each direction? The only thing that does not convince me is that it passes through the city. And there are traffic lights. I had never seen this before. Despite this, we are stuck in the traffic on this 'highway,' right in the city center. Suddenly, a car hits us from behind. Not strongly, but enough to make my body detach from the back of the seat. Then I think, 'here we are... not even an hour in Beijing and they're already hitting my car. Who knows what can happen in the next five months?'

Still stuck in the traffic, the driver gets out of the car and goes to face the guy who has hit us. They each begin to tell their own side of the story (...I think, I cannot understand anything). The tones slowly begin to rise. With the same speed with which the two raised the volume of the discussion, the cars around us begin to move, but the two drivers do not seem to want to get back in their cars and resume the journey as fellow drivers. I sit in the cab, looking at the taximeter and at the clock. They're still out there talking while the cars speed around us. I think, 'I cannot believe it... are they serious? Among thousands of taxies, I had to take this one?'. Suddenly, they go back to their cars with the same initial calm and proceed as if nothing had happened. I do not ask questions and hope to arrive soon, safe and sound.

We are almost there - I know it, thanks to the hundreds of pictures I saw weeks before, sitting on the sofa. Yet another problem. The driver does not find the hostel, even if he keeps on yelling the address to his cell phone. So I take the matter in my own hands and give him the number of the hostel. I tell him to call it, they can definitely direct him better than the phone that has decided to go against me and my wallet. The driver agrees and dials the number on an old mobile phone. I do not understand anything at all because they speak dialect, but I think that there is something wrong. After several trips around the neighborhood, with the phone in one hand and the steering wheel in the other, the driver decides to pull over and throw the phone away with all his strength, smashing it into a thousand pieces, and then go - as fast as the best *Fast & Furious*. Speechless, I do not want to believe it. One hour in Beijing and everything has happened. I already have a thousand things to tell everyone. After the movie scene, the driver pulls over again and tries to reassemble the cell phone. Naturally, he fails

miserably. So I decide, for my own safety, to get out of the car, wherever I am. I would have continued on foot, asking all the people if they knew that hostel. Someone has to know it. I get out, I pay, I take my bags and I greet my first Chinese friend, aware that I would never forget him. Thank you, you gave me the very first Chinese story. His name is Wang, like it is something new in China.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

My Big Fat Indian Wedding Experience

Rocco Toniolo

LM Economia e Gestione delle Aziende

Destination: Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, India

The protagonist in this account, on mobility in Lucknow in India, gatecrashes a wedding party with some other international students just two days after arriving in the country. The prose is reminiscent of (quite accomplished) travel writing, but this account scored highly because of the sensitivity with which it takes the reader into the ceremony and describes the hospitality of the bride's sister, and other people present at the event, offered to perfect strangers. An international discussion on weddings is interspersed by dancing, eating, and reflections on the nature of hospitality, leading to the realization that 'the most amazing thing is that the entire time I had the impression that my presence was really cherished by everyone who met me, and the family was not only pleased but honoured to have me as guest.'

I've always been fascinated by India, what I thought to be, and discovered that actually is, a vibrant, colourful, incredible, chaotic, potpourri of people and cultures. During my Master I had the opportunity to spend a semester in Lucknow, a city next to the border with Nepal, and it truly was a life-changing experience. Throughout this time, I got to know and embraced a culture completely different from the familiar European one and at the end I was enriched by different ways of thinking and new perspectives on life.

Not even two days had passed since I landed on Indian ground, and me and some international friends, not caring about the jetlag, were already eager to experience how Lucknow was like during the night. The city is very chaotic, as I've always imagined India to be: cars don't follow any rules, cows and people cross the street whenever they want, tuk-tuks run at incredible speed zigzagging in between busses and elephants. It is very rare to find not-crowded places but somehow, strolling around, we found ourselves in a quite calm neighbourhood. Here, there wasn't so much traffic, lights and sounds weren't as intense as usual, so, bright lights and loud Indian music coming from a huge marquee at the end of a street caught our attention: it seemed like some sort of party was going on. Moved by our increasing curiosity, we got closer to the tent in order to understand what was happening there and in doing so, we basically crushed a typical Indian wedding. As soon as we timidly walked through the big entrance, we were welcomed by the sister of the bride, Pooja, who didn't think about it twice and immediately said that we were welcomed to stay and started showing us around.

Of course I was a little bit shy at first because I felt out of place and so many questions run through my mind: will the other guests look down on me because they think that I am ruining their special day? Will they be offended that I don't have any gift? Am I allowed to take pictures? Not knowing any of their traditions, I really didn't want to do anything that might have offended someone. But the warm and welcoming nature of the Indian culture overtook my initial emotions. I was impressed that we were welcomed with no questions asked, because it would never have happened in a European wedding. The bride's sister was so happy for our presence: having European guests (even though we essentially gatecrashed) was something that made her really proud and she couldn't wait to guide us around. She showed us her *saree*, the traditional Indian dress, and her *mehndi*, an intricate henna tattoo on her hands and feet.

The bride, on a stage in front of the crowd, was dressed with an orange *saree* and she looked exhausted. Her sister told us that it was normal because of all the jewels she was wearing: they were really heavy and she had to stand for hours with all that weight on!

When we arrived, the *pujas* (prayers) and the official ceremony (that go on for hours) were almost over and it was time for the buffet and the after party. Pooja told us that we could serve ourselves and try all sort of delicacies that were displayed on the huge dinner table. Only a small part of the buffet offered meat based foods, since the majority of the guests was vegetarian. She explained that they don't use cutlery, but they eat almost everything with the right hand and she went on teaching us how to make a ball of rice with it. Useless to say that the food was amazing, maybe a little bit too spicy for our European tastes, but after some coughing and tearing up we got used to it and we really appreciated it. A strange thing from our perspective is that there was no alcohol whatsoever, but there was a tent dedicated to smoking *hukka* (hookah), reserved only for men.

Inside the main big marquee there were some internal divisions, with lights hanging from the ceiling and on the walls, and some of these colourful 'rooms' were dancefloors. Of course, we didn't know any of the traditional choreographies but no one laughed at us; a lot of people stepped in to teach us the right moves, and not even the language barrier could stop them: the ones who couldn't speak English showed us how to catch up with the rhythms and then made us understand with gestures that we were supposed to copy them.

A lot of guests asked us about our lives, how weddings were handled in our countries, what we were doing in Lucknow and how long were we planning to stay. They showed a lot of interest in our answers, and in general everyone was friendly, ready to help if we had any doubts and enthusiastic to teach us about their culture.

If now I think about this wedding, I notice how all my early concerns and anxieties had no reason to exist. During the whole night I was chaperoned

through every stage and even if I didn't always know what was going on, I continuously felt included and welcomed, I was comfortable and I could enjoy the party. The most amazing thing is that the entire time I had the impression that my presence was really cherished by everyone who met me, and the family was not only pleased but honoured to have me as guests. This aspect reminded me of the concept of *filoxenia*, a Greek word that indicates the love for the guest. In ancient Greece, hospitality was considered as a really virtuous value and the host respected, and was honoured by, his guests. It's interesting how the oriental world incorporated in its culture an ancient western tradition, with the host offering 'welcoming gifts', such as food, to his *xenos* (stranger that is welcomed).

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Like a piece of cake

Maria Chiara Truttero

LM Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

Destination: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

This is the story of a dinner and a challenge. The protagonist is in Tbilisi, Georgia, and she has been invited to dinner. But she can't keep up with the insistent invitations of a fellow diner to drink the wine he has brought to grace the meal. He pretends to be offended, but says there is a way out: if she makes him a tiramisu for dinner the next day all will be forgiven. She agrees, prepares the Italian ('famous-the-world-over') cake meticulously, but when dinner time arrives she is horrified to find that her cake has been substituted by her landlady with a 'big brown cake in the centre of the table'. If you want to know why, you must read the story. For the protagonist, it is a learning experience: she would never prepare tiramisu abroad again, but at the same time 'I would always eat any cake with tolerance and understanding.

My appearance in the kitchen was accompanied by Ada's shouts of delight. I handed her the pack of cigarettes and the change and let myself drop on a chair in front of her. I watched her light a cigarette and burst out laughing with satisfaction. She was going to be my host for the next three months, but I already understood she was going to be to me something more similar to a second mother, as, the moment I entered her country and her house, I had lost most of my 20 years of age. I was not an independent grown-up student from a foreigner university who came in order to gain academic knowledge. I was a child, still learning the language, sometimes not even able to behave, a funny kid - in a 20-years-old body. I had already been sent on errands. I understood I had to do the growing-up thing all over again.

We were going to have two guests that night, so, while cooking dinner, Ada asked me to lay the table. After having set dishes, knives and forks, I asked her where the pitcher for water was. She burst out laughing and told me nobody drinks cold water, people drink wine at dinner or they simply wait for having tea or spirits when the dinner ends. I wondered what they do when a piece of something sticks into their throat and I immediately inferred they drink a lot of wine. The guests arrived, a local theatre director, an old friend of Ada, and the wife. I had mentally reviewed a hundred times how to say, 'Nice to meet you' and 'Enjoy your meal' and 'This is very interesting', with which I hoped to manage just fine.

The dinner was proceeding smoothly, I thought. The conversation was cheerful and sparkling, bouncing from one topic to another with apparently some very fitting correlation. A lot of wine had come through, and this

helped me to smile and nod whenever I didn't understand what someone was saying. I hadn't embarrassed myself too much so far, yet I could feel something was going not as it was supposed to be, and bit by bit a slight sensation of anguish got its claws into me. Finally, after the umpteenth toast he had given, the theatre director cast a sympathetic glance at me, put his hand on my hand and asked me if I didn't like the wine he brought over.

I opened my eyes wide with terror and assured him I just loved the wine. – So why are you so timid with it? –, he asked me, – Whenever I fill your glass and give a toast in my country, you are supposed to finish it all at once, otherwise I will feel offended and could challenge you to a duel –. At first, I took it seriously, then I doubted there could be some irony in there. And finally, I burst out laughing. Everybody laughed, and I thanked God my destiny wasn't to die alone and mistaken on foreign soil, for not having drunk a glass of wine. My grandmother, who used to correct her coffee with liquor, would have been very disappointed. Saying goodbyes, the theatre director said it had been a real entertainment to meet me and that he would have even forgiven my terrible offence if only I prepared him the notorious and famous-the-world-over Italian tiramisu. I told him nothing could be easier for me: just a piece of cake.

Next morning, I telephoned my mom to review the recipe. I remembered to have eaten the cake quite a lot of times, but I didn't remember me preparing it once. Mom said tiramisu is all about ingredients and precision. I was in a country where Savoyards were the great unknown and, of all the people I know, I do know I am the one who lacks in meticulousness the most. I kept a whole morning free for the operation. I went to the shop and spent a good two hours pondering ingredients. Then, to make sure I followed mom's exact instructions point by point, I commented everything I did out loud and asked myself questions, as if in a Tv show: 'Do you really want to break this egg?', 'Is that your final answer?'. At midday, I was bushed but confident: I was quite positive I just did an astounding tiramisu. Ada came home and asked me if I had problems with the oven, which was a pre-war dreadful specimen of oven. I smiled indulgently, and explained her tiramisu is not a cooked cake. Ada looked at me horrified, but I assured her everything was just fine and that I had done tiramisu millions of times.

Just before dinner time, I noticed something was wrong. Ada didn't look me in the eyes and was very laconic. I noticed a big brown cake in the centre of the table. I could not believe it: Ada had made another cake. She said she was sorry, but she couldn't let an uncooked cake be served to her guests. She then smiled indulgently and told me she had eaten tiramisu quite a lot of times and she knew what a tiramisu was like. In fact, she just prepared one. I looked again at the cake in the centre of the table, which appeared to be some kind of chocolate plum cake.

I decided to set aside my wounded pride. I learned something from this whole story, and it is I would always try to transcend any prejudice. Some

people may seem confident, but they might not know what a tiramisu is, but also, some cake may not be tiramisu, but it might be as good. I would never prepare tiramisu abroad again and I would always eat my cake with tolerance and understanding.

Short-listed entries

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

In India

Diletta Cola

LT Lingue, Culture e Società dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Ruchi NGO, Himachal Pradesh, India

Diletta Cola discovers that 'accepting' is the only key to open wide her Indian adventure.

How long are three months? They say time is relative, so probably it depends on what you do, on where you are, on the people you are with.

It was September 2017 when I left for my internship abroad, and I was supposed to spend three months in Himachal Pradesh, India, as an intern in a local NGO, with Ca' Foscari per il Mondo project. My main purpose was improving the language I had been studying for two years: Hindi, but I was also keen in learning more about Indian culture and traditions, which are so different from European ones. I did not know that my experience would have become much more than that.

The initial impact with India was not easy. I was confused because of the several changes I had to face: spicy food, a completely new environment, unknown people, with whom I was supposed to socialize and cooperate, and an unspecified job in an Indian organization. I knew I had to spend three months there, and in those first days they seemed an insuperable obstacle to me.

Then Mrs. Pushplata, or better Pushplata-ji, one of the health-motivators working in the NGO, invited me to celebrate *Karwa Chauth* with her family, and that occasion proved to be a turning point for my experience. Considering that I did not know what this festival was, neither other remarkable details, such as accommodation, bus timetable to reach her village or what I would have done and said for two days at her home, I was skeptical. For a moment I really took into consideration refusing her proposal, because, it was clear, nothing was under my control. But then I realized that accepting was probably the key, the only key I had to open wide my Indian adventure. And so I chose to put it in the lock. 'I'll come' I replied, and five minutes later I was in my room, sticking some clothes, sleeping bag and mosquito repellent in my rucksack. Celebrating *Karwa Chauth* festival was one of the most powerful experiences I lived in India.

At the time it was still the beginning of my internship, and my Hindi was not that fluent. However the smiles that welcomed me at Pushplata's village turned out to be more meaningful than words. Some women

immediately offered me typical food, mainly spicy Indian sweets. When I realized I was the only one to eat, they explained me that during *Karwa Chauth* festival married women have to fast until the full moon rises in the sky, in order to ensure a long and prosperous life to the respective husband. Before nightfall though, they need to perform a special rite in front of the *murti*, the gods' images. The ladies invited me to join, thus I found myself offering some incense to *Durga Mata* and other deities, and singing extremely melodic devotional hymns with them. Maybe it was the incense perfume, or maybe their voices, but suddenly I realized that I was exactly where I wished to be. It was such a powerful feeling that made me thank life for the extraordinary opportunity I had.

Later Pushplata's daughter, Alka, made a henna tattoo on my left hand, and she painted the traditional red *tilak* on my forehead. I was ready to take part in *Karwa Chauth* ritual. The sky was dark and all the villagers were gathered close to a big ancient tree. There were children, different-aged couples, everyone talking with the closer neighbour. When the white, round moon appeared, each wife walked in front of her husband and all the couples performed *Karwa Chauth* ritual. The wife had to look towards the full moon and then to turn repeatedly around her husband, pouring some water on a small tree, previously placed in front of him. In the meantime, we took many pictures. The women were especially excited because a European girl had visited them, and I could not help but smile for the deep joy was sharing with those people... my neighbours.

In that moment I felt so grateful for the opportunity of being there, being a part of their community, not as a stranger, but as a friend. It was a great lesson. It had been difficult to trust those strangers, and now they were telling me I was not a stranger to their eyes. They had just accepted the differences among us, not as a boundary, but as a starting point for showing me their world. Something amazing about India is the attention and respect given to diversity. Everyone there seems aware of his own specific features, which are not hidden, but people show them, they are proud of it. For example, it is possible to recognize a Hindu believer, a Muslim or a member of a Sikh community because they wear different clothes, according to their religion. Indian people taught me that diversity is a richness, not a stigma, and that is exactly what they made me experience during *Karwa Chauth* festival by accepting and welcoming me as I was.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Beijing Nights

Clarice Cominelli

LM Interpretariato e traduzione editoriale, settoriale

Destination: Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

In this impressionistic portrait of the city, Clarice Cominelli describes Chinese women in the park moving like 'a shoal of old, exhausted fish'.

Illuminated by the light of the autumn sunset, the park is empty, the central square filled only by the stretched shadows of the benches. No sound can be heard, apart from the creak of the oldest trees and the rustle of leaves on the pavement. Sitting upon the branch of a plane tree, a silent magpie looks at the first stars that appear in the sky, longing for summer.

The cold weather is coming back to Beijing, and the days are getting shorter.

The last slice of sun peeps over pines and junipers and it shines upon small figures standing at the entrance to the park. It is the Chinese old women living in the neighbourhood, just in time for their everyday rendezvous. They are covered with thick coats and wear colourful cloth shoes. With the hair permeated with the fragrant smell of fried pancakes, they gently open the gate and sneak into the quiet park. Like a shoal of old, exhausted fish, they slowly limp towards the central square.

The small crowd becomes more and more definite as the people arrange themselves in ordered lines, waiting. Before the lesson starts, you can hear a little routine chitchat, you can see a few warm-up exercises.

The feeble buzz that fills the air suddenly dies out when a new figure ceremoniously walks through the lines and places herself at the head of the group. Like an orchestra conductor during a rehearsal, the lady stretches her legs, clears her voice and pushes the PLAY button on the recorder.

The brief moment of silence is interrupted again, this time by a song that reminds everyone of springtime. It invites the old ladies to reach the edge of the world, leaving behind the everyday struggle to survive and embracing the joy of living.

After some uncertainties, the old women begin to dance with each other, in synchrony. Everybody knows the steps by heart, the clumsiest just have to follow the movements of the other dancers.

The ordinary square welcomes, as every evening, a wonderful show: as if they were guided by the melody, the spirits of the old women get rid of

theirs wizened bodies and soar into the air like dandelion seeds. Finally freed by the weight of the years, the slow school of fish transforms into a swift flock of birds that fly following the rhythm of the music.

The same scene takes place in every park of the capital, from the public garden surrounded by the skyscrapers in the westernised district of Chaoyang to the playground nestled in narrow *hutong* near Xisi Street; every night the whole city of Beijing turns into a stage and gives everybody a possibility to spend time together and enjoy an apparent but yet priceless moment of freedom.

A few hours after the sunset, the lesson comes to an end. The pale moon shines on the dancers who linger a few moments after the music stops, still inebriated by the magical atmosphere. After a while, the souls unwillingly get back into their wrinkled bodies and bring them home. Recalling memories of the past youth, the old women walk along grey streets plastered with red slogans that praise progress.

The park gets quiet again, waiting for another evening to come.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

At the end of hardship comes happiness

Silvia Dal Soglio

LT Philosophy, International and Economic Studies

Destination: Yonsei University, South Korea

Silvia Dal Soglio hones her study skills in a university library in Korea

There is a Korean proverb that goes 'At the end of hardship comes happiness' and it can easily sum up my exchange experience.

When I applied for the overseas program I knew it would have been challenging. What I didn't know was how hard it would have been. I applied more than a year ago now, and little did I know of how people studied on the other side of the world: sure, I had heard of how many hours students put per day in China, but it seemed a bit unrealistic and it was happening so far away that it did not scare me.

I still remember my first-nighter at Yonsei: it was the Monday of my second week. I had two essays due for Wednesday and the daily 50-70 pages to read before classes. I hadn't been procrastinating; the issue was that I was being graded on a curve, meaning I had to be better than my classmates - well, better than some of them at least. However, something happened at around 2 am: I started to feel motivated, partially because the study room at the library was quite full, making me feel not alone in my struggle, but also because I started to see results coming. Since I had to write the best essays of my entire academic career at the quickest pace I had never experienced, my writing skills started to sharpen and I became more analytical, critical and more meticulous in developing my own position on different issues.

University life in Korea is more intense than in Ca' Foscari - not because it is more difficult, but because it is structured in four months and therefore you have to study for the exams (which are exactly when your classes end) and finish home assignments, which can be up to three or four a week. While exchange students find that the amount of books and articles we have to study for exams here at Ca' Foscari is sometimes enormous, I found that the amount of work Koreans have to do in the span of a four-month period was gigantic. But here lays one of the most important lessons Yonsei has taught me: work hard, give your best all the time and learn from your failures. You can't be on top all the time, but what you can

do is to learn where, why and how you've fallen and next time avoid it. One classmate that I had, who I respect immensely, taught me this: failure is good, it is *not* failing that means that something is wrong.

Embrace your imperfections, do not get mad at yourself and grow as a person and scholar. By failing you become aware of different ideas, opinions and beliefs; you reevaluate your standpoint and make some adjustments – meaning that you become a more complete student.

You see, Koreans give their best on a daily basis. This is part of their culture, well-grounded by Confucianism, which sees group mentality as prevailing over the individual. What surprised me the most is how every student I met felt that they were working today so as to contribute to make their nation even greater in the future: individual aspirations were always framed in a bigger picture. It follows that personal betterment is an essential trait of the Korean mindset and you will see it as a characteristic of every person, even the laziest – which, if compared to us, cannot be considered as such at all.

Deciding to go to Korea put me in a position of sink or swim – but sinking was not an option, the opportunity I had was way too big to sink and so I learnt to swim, at first weakly, but with time my pace became faster, stronger and more relaxed. I pushed my limits and learnt how far I can go. To make a long story short, I grew. And the most incredible thing is that I was growing along my classmates and new friends: when I burnt out, I had friends ready to take a break with me, to have a laugh, or go to a cafe and have one of those mugs of brownish water that they call coffee. I talked about my problems with them, about the work covered in class, of books and conferences, or of just a silly cat being cute on YouTube.

This is the most important lesson this program has taught me: no matter how different you are, no matter how different your cultures are, no matter how much of a language barrier there is, wherever you go in the world you become part of this huge family which will not only challenge the values you had given for granted for your all life, but will also make you see the world with different eyes and will wake up the curious little child that we all have inside of us who still see the world with wonder.

To never stop learning, never stop exploring and never stop living to the fullest – this is what Korea has taught me.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

An experience of self-discovery

Fabiana Fianco

LM Lingue Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

Destination: Université de Lausanne, Switzerland

Fabiana Fianco takes us straight into a gastronomic experience with chocolate and Gruyère cheese, on a campus where professors remember students' names.

I'm sitting on a chair waiting for the Welcome day to start. With my right hand, I'm holding the best hot chocolate of my life; with the left one, I'm swallowing a massive croissant filled with Gruyere, as if I didn't already eat in one week all the cheese Switzerland produces in about one year. In the meantime, I try to focus on what is going on around me. Surrounded by dozens of international students speaking languages I didn't even know existed, a group of professors is showing a video introducing us to our new life in Lausanne. All I can see is that the sun is shining, the campus is amazing, sport is free, interviewed students are strangely happy and satisfied, professors remember student's names and the overall academic atmosphere is rather peaceful and relaxed. Wait, I might be missing something, because it can't be possible and I'm seriously beginning to think we are definitely watching one of those videos imitating tourist advertisements. And the craziest thing is that one week later, I realize the video is surprisingly telling the truth.

These are actually the first memories I am able to collect when going back to the beginning of my journey in Lausanne. I'm pretty sure they correspond to the moment I started to feel excited about my mobility, realizing I managed to be in a wonderful place. But let's rewind a little bit, just to give you an idea of my attitude before leaving. When I first heard about international mobility, saying that I was sceptical is an understatement. I've always thought that going abroad during your academic studies was a sort of compulsory experience, something necessary for your career, whether you really wanted to do it or not. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to move to Switzerland for six months, I wanted to use this time to focus on exams and improve my speaking skills. Actually, I was just considering a small portion of the whole experience, something that only matters to a certain extent. I guess at the beginning I just needed some time to understand that I was missing the point and that I had to enjoy what I was about to undertake.

Studying abroad deeply changes who you are, pushing you beyond your limits and turning your entire vision of the world upside down. It simply challenges your beliefs and your values by questioning the way you have always behaved. I learned to feel more comfortable with new people and that I was more open than I thought. This is why more than anything else, I took time to discover some parts of me I wasn't even aware of and had the chance to express myself in another language, which I found quite tough at the beginning. Even though I study languages and literatures, it is only while being in Lausanne that I realized for the very first time that speaking a foreign language also implies changing the way you express yourself about who you are. When I spoke French, I felt very polite and elegant, which is far from how I sound while speaking Italian! But I'm pretty sure this feeling faded once I was able to master all the rude expressions some Swiss friends diligently taught me.

Anyway, I feel I'm not the same anymore. It is, as if my mind completely reinvigorated, enabling me to change for the better. During the past six months, I've met incredible people, passionate about what they were doing and deeply inspiring. Going to Switzerland gave me the opportunity to see how many chances one may have in the future, only by stepping out of their comfort zone for a little while. I think Mark Twain was right when he said that 'broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all of one's lifetime' (*The Innocents Abroad*). Of course, saying it is easy would be lying to all those students planning to spend some time abroad. At the beginning you feel pretty lost and confused, and no matter how motivated you are, you will always ask yourself why the hell you did it, why you couldn't just stay at home without messing up your life, even if for six months. But the most amazing thing is that when the end of the mobility approaches, you will also ask yourself why you didn't do that earlier.

After these extraordinary six months abroad, I learned more about myself and other people than ever before. What would I say to my old self before leaving? Be brave, make mistakes, do crazy things you've never thought you would do, meet new cultures, fight for what you really want, be passionate and ambitious. There is much more outside your comfort zone than you imagine. And most of all, coming back home can be the starting point of a new amazing departure. It's only while leaving that I realized how much I felt like already being at home. And this is the best of all rewards.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Discovering the beauty of Korea

Federica Fortuna

LM Scienze del Linguaggio

Destination: Ewha Women's University, Seoul, South Korea

Federica Fortuna finds herself the centre of attention in Korea, and doesn't understand what's happening when an old lady on the subway takes away her bag full of food and chocolates.

Korea is less studied and visited compared to its neighbors China and Japan. However, it is a unique Country with a beautiful landscape, where modern and traditional buildings stand side by side in a very powerful harmony, a rich and unfortunately troubled history, strong traditions, delicious (and spicy!) food, and much more. I was personally very fascinated by such a Country, so I chose to learn about it more at University, and then I applied for the Overseas Program. When I got accepted for it I was on cloud nine and when I arrived in Korea all my expectations, and a lot more, were met.

With this short text, my aim is to describe my unforgettable experience in Korea and give an insight into it. I would like to give a representation of such Country, filtered through my eyes and symbolized by two particular events that happened to me and that I consider emblematic.

The first episode that I will never forget happened when I was in a small city outside of Seoul. While in Korea, I took part in the English language club at University, one of the extracurricular activities organized and managed by the students. During one of our field trips, we went ice-skating together in a place where there were not as many foreigners as in the metropolis of Seoul, so I had all the eyes on me, full of curiosity and surprise since I was the only foreigner with a group of Koreans. After skating for a while, when my friends took a break and went to sit on the side of the rink, some young boys addressed me and joyfully said: – Hello! Hello! – while giving me high-fives when gliding next to me. I was surprised but I found it quite funny, so I smiled and greeted them back. Then, as I was leaving the rink to reach my friends, those boys together with so many others – a whole middle-school class – approached me, or better surrounded me, and a lot of voices started to talk, asking me a variety of things: my name, my home country, if I knew this or that Korean pop singer or actor, and so on. When some girls came to me and asked to take pictures together I felt like a real star. Only the autographs were missing. Then, all the hugs and hand-

shakes started, with my friends looking at the scene and laughing loudly.

It was a very bizarre and unimaginable experience for me, which I will always remember and recount with great delight.

Aside from Korean people's curiosity towards foreigners, what struck me was their kindness and generosity, sometimes unexpected.

Back to Seoul, on November 11, when in Korea what is called Pepero Day is celebrated, as the recent tradition wants I was carrying many bags of chocolate sticks (pepero) and pralines to hand out to my English club friends as a sign of friendship and affection. In fact, in Korea on that day, couples and friends exchange chocolate and spend time together. My university club organized a small party, so I went to buy some sweets for the occasion. I hopped on the subway to go to the appointed place and I immediately looked for a seat, but since it was rush hour I could not find any, so I just stood with all my bags in the corridor, facing the people who were sitting comfortably in their seats. My attention was caught by the middleaged lady sitting in front of me, who was insistently staring at my bags full of chocolate and delicious goods. My mind was wandering when suddenly the woman pulled my bags and said: – Give it to me –. I looked at her startled, not understanding what was going on and utterly puzzled, but still fiercely holding on my bags. She then explained kindly: – Your bags look very heavy, give them to me and I will keep them for you here on my lap until you arrive at your destination –. I thanked her and hesitantly handed my bags, standing right in front of her, ready to grab my chocolates in case she tried to escape with my precious goodies. However, when I arrived at my stop, the lady gave me the bags back and just smiled.

These two episodes, which at first sight could seem insignificant and not so relevant in the description of a whole and complex Country, are actually a symbol of what I perceived Korea to be. The young students, so curious, enthusiastic, and enterprising, represent the younger generations of the Peninsula, who are getting more and more open towards the external world, and ready to welcome different and new cultures. The second event narrated, instead, illustrates the traditional Korean culture of helping the others, expressed in Korean by the term *jeong* (정). This word is extremely hard to define, even in the Korean language itself, and is a very broad concept meaning love, but also affection, compassion, sympathy, community, and attachment. It incorporates a sense of caring for other people, relatives, friends, neighbors, or even just members of the community or whoever in need. The woman who kindly 'stole' my bags, therefore, was expressing a form of *jeong*, she saw that I was in need and helped me, even if I did not ask for it.

These, and of course a number of other amazing experiences I had the chance to have thanks to my exchange period in Seoul, reinforced my passion for this unique Country and paved the way for my future visits to Korea. Lastly, these experiences made me aware of the great importance

of challenging ourselves without any fear of the new, going to another Country, seeing and trying various things, exploring different places, and meeting new people. Traveling really opens up a whole new and exciting world and makes us live extraordinary adventures that we would never have the chance to experience if we stood still in the same place.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

The unexpected virtue of imperfection

Giorgia Frigerio

LT Lingue, Civiltà e Scienze del Linguaggio

Destination: Cardiff University, Wales, UK

Giorgia Frigerio learns how to embrace her mistakes (especially the language errors) and laugh at them.

My Erasmus exchange in Cardiff was certainly the most defining experience in my life. It may sound like an overstatement, since it only lasted four months, but the truth is that even after a few weeks I started to realise the impact it was having on me. I definitely think that Erasmus represents a key experience not only from an academic point of view, but also on a more personal level. This is why I would like to talk about something that combines these two aspects, since it affects both my language learning habits and my daily life: confidence.

Being extremely insecure, I always worry about doing my best and I often fear other people's judgement. I still remember that during the first week in Cardiff one of my housemates told me that he thought my way of saying the word 'about' was weird. He didn't mean it in a negative way, but I started to wonder what was wrong with it, worrying about all the mistakes I was probably making without even realising. Scared of making mistakes, I sometimes prefer not to say anything and I think this is something a lot of language students can relate to.

My excessive self-awareness could have ruined the entire experience, making me feel awkward every time I mispronounced a word or made a small grammar mistake. Luckily, it was the exchange itself that helped me handling this problem. Indeed, speaking English every day and constantly being exposed to it made me feel more comfortable expressing myself in the language, so that I progressively started to worry less about my mistakes. One may say that this happened because my English improved, but it's more than that. The point isn't that I stopped making mistakes, but that my approach to them changed.

The perfect example is something that happened during the last week of my exchange. I was having dinner with my housemates and when one of them told me that I was quite short, I replied: – Actually, I'm very *high*!

Needless to say that I meant to say 'tall' and that everybody immediately started to laugh – including me –, especially because of the actual meaning

of my sentence. I'm absolutely sure that if this had happened at the beginning of my Erasmus, I would have been utterly embarrassed, since this is the kind of mistake you would expect from a beginner. Instead, I laughed.

This is what Erasmus taught me: to embrace my mistakes and laugh at them. Not only are they a natural part of the learning process, they're also necessary to improve. I'm not saying that mistakes don't matter or that we shouldn't care about them at all, but sometimes accepting that we're allowed not to be perfect can be extremely beneficial. If there's one thing I learnt, it's that when you're not making any mistake it simply means that you're not speaking the language, and if you're not speaking the language you're not making any progress. I will always be grateful to this experience because - both in language learning and my personal life - imperfection doesn't scare me the way it used to.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

The most beautiful word of the worst language

Elisabetta Gobbo

LT Philosophy, International and Economic Studies

Destination: Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Elisabetta Gobbo tries to explain the true meaning of the Dutch word 'gezellig'.

When I applied for the Erasmus+ program I had no idea that my life would have changed substantially within a few months. Many people told me that I was going to fall in love with Rotterdam, such a mesmerizing city. I only realized it when the doors of the central station opened in front of me as soon as I arrived. Freezing wind and hail on my face, a huge piece of luggage in front of me, homeless. But still, it was love at first sight.

Everyone that has been on exchange can tell you how amazing it is to live such a thrilling experience. During those seven months in the Netherlands I had the chance to meet some of the best people I will ever have the honour to meet in my life. I had the craziest nights, got lost biking in the city multiple times, went to have coffee in pyjama at the supermarket just because it was free... To sum it up, I could tell you so many amazing things about my experience that I had to re-write this paper more than twice to stop crying. It is heart-warming to think about all the good memories that I keep as a golden treasure in my heart.

Nonetheless, this emotional peak is not melancholic. I am who I am now, only thanks to all the people that I met and to the adventures that I went through. I am proud of all that I achieved during my exchange. Particularly, the ability to overcome difficulties on my own, but especially with others. As a matter of fact, it was thanks to the atmosphere that my friends and I were able to create together that we could sustain each-other during rough times. And therefore, I want to talk about the most beautiful word of one of the worst languages in the world (Dutch): 'gezellig'.

Moving alone to another country was not easy, mainly because I had no place to move in. The day before I left, the housing agency from Rotterdam called me to tell me that there were major damages to the hydraulic system in the apartment that I booked. The consequence was that I had to spend the first week in a hostel. I repeated to myself that all the hustle was part of the experience, I had no intention to give up, but misfortunes seemed to be haunting me. Life at the hostel was miserable, I was hugging

my bags while sleeping since I feared robberies, and there always was a drunk man on my bunkbed.

When I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown I finally found hospitality at a friend's place, she was the first one who made me discover the true meaning of 'gezellig'. I moved all my things to her place, in the extreme south of Rotterdam. We were sharing a very small bedroom and both her and her housemates made me feel comfortable and tried to help me in all the ways they could. From that moment on, I profoundly appreciated the altruistic and helpful heart of the Dutch. I am always amazed by how much effort people in Rotterdam put in helping the others. I sincerely hope that I will be able to continue to follow this positive model and to make it spread even more.

My exchange continued, I found another apartment to move in, where I finally felt that I had my own 'gezellige' surrounding in the big city I was slowly discovering. As time went on, I started realizing that I had no need for a safety-net at my place, because I could find a cozy, convivial atmosphere wherever I was thanks to the people that I had around me. I found myself in 'gezellige' situations at house parties having life-changing discussions in front of a beer. Surprisingly, even at university we were able to turn the worst pre-exam intense study-sessions in pleasant moments. I could always feel at ease and full of positive energy thanks to the bonds created with the people I met. The Erasmus programme is a fantastic opportunity to meet life-long friends, who will go through the same indescribable experience as you. Letting yourselves be who you are, you will create a unique connection with those friends, a bond that cannot be easily broken.

'Gezellig' has no definite translation, and if you ask to a Dutch what it means he/she will probably just smile at you and giggle trying to explain it. The closest meaning that I can give to this special word, is a warm feeling of relaxation, something that makes you feel at home and in the mood for socialization. The reason why I decided to talk about this term is that thanks to it I learnt something that I will cherish as a long-lasting life-lesson. There will always be tough moments in our lives, or obstacles to overcome, and the best way to cope with them is to surround ourselves with people who are willing to put an effort in making our day a better one, included ourselves. A straightforward way to do it, is to create a 'gezellige' atmosphere!

In the end, I was lucky. Not only the worst beginning brought the best throughout all the experience, but also, I learnt how to take the best out of the worst. In addition, I have the chance to continue to live the city that I fell in love with, with the person who I fell in love with during my exchange. We have been beating the statistics about long-distance relationships for more than one year now!

In conclusion, to all of you who are about to leave for a similar experience, I wish you to find a 'gezellige' environment, and to meet the adventure-squad that will sustain you throughout all the ups and downs.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Lost and found

The journey of a caterpillar from crisis through resilience to fulfilment

Giuseppe Grispino

LM Lingue e Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

Giuseppe Grispino arriving in Beijing feels like a piece of lost luggage 'patiently waiting on the carousel to be picked up by his owner'.

I woke up to the voice of the captain announcing that we were about to land in Beijing. I still remember the nerves and the excitement that kept me buzzing for the duration of the entire flight.

The days before I left for China were filled with hope, curiosity and a bit of genuine fear. I knew I was about to live a great experience, but I could have never imagined it would twist my life around the way it has done. I had spent days wondering what this experience could teach me, planning and carefully scheduling the coming months. But the truth is, I could have never guessed what was about to happen in my life.

By the moment I stepped out the airport, I was surrounded by a world so different than the one I was expecting.

The first few days in China were the toughest ones in my life. I could not sleep, I could not eat and I could not even breathe. I wondered for the first time whether I should just give up, whether this *Eat, Pray and Love* stage of my life was seriously taking me somewhere, or it was just showing me the darkest side of me.

I wanted to give up. I wanted to take the next flight back home, wherever that place was.

When I started my classes, neither my classmates nor my professors thought I could make it through to the end of the program. They said I was not good enough, my Chinese language skills were too weak.

Just in the first month of my stay in China I lost six kilos; I spent nights awake and I felt so down, as I have never felt in the seven years I lived away from home.

I did not give up. One night, as I was reading a book trying to fall asleep, I came across one word that would resonate with me for the time of my whole stay in China: resilience. I printed that word, typed a definition and stuck it on the wall of my upper bunk-bed. I knew I had found my word.

From that day, I faced the reality I was surrounded by in a completely different way. I would take everything negative that came across my life and turn it into something positive. I had decided that everything I was going through, no matter how good or bad, would be a significant experience, something I could learn from.

I took the bad feedbacks from my classes and I sat in a library every day. I have spent countless hours in the library, reading, writing and learning. Eventually, my grades improved and I passed all my exams.

I stopped wishing away all the time I had left. I made every single second of each day count.

I lost myself a thousand times in the streets of Beijing.

I found myself in the faces and smiles of strangers in a stranger land.

I learnt from the country-boy working as a guard in my dormitory, to the most inspiring professor at university.

I made friends, I ate great food and, for the first time in my life, I experienced the greatness of falling in love with someone. I also managed to put together all the pieces of your heart, once this person was gone.

I understood that all the things that shocked me, all the thoughts that invaded my brain and would not let me sleep at night, they were all signals of the great change that I was going through.

I felt like a caterpillar inside his cocoon, unaware of the greatest change that it is going to have on his life. And once that change of attitude was completed, I was the happiest and most fulfilled version of myself that I have ever been.

To all the people that might take into consideration the opportunity to join this program, please do it. Don't let fear stop you, don't let imagination and expectations drift you away from the reality you are surrounded by.

Be aware, you might get lost in the process, but you will ultimately find your true-self.

The day I arrived in Beijing, I felt like a lost luggage patiently waiting on the carousel to be picked up by his owner. No one came to reclaim me and so I had to learn to step out from my comfort zone and start experiencing a whole new me, a whole new life.

One year after I arrived, I went back to the airport with an extra luggage. I filled it with all the things that this experience had taught me. I had to pay for overweight, but I was ultimately lost and found.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

In the bottom of the bag

Virginia Lo Vullo

LM Lingue e Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

Virginia Lo Vullo finds that wearing a Japanese yukata is 'easier said done'.

When someone ask me if I found what I expected in my year in Japan I usually say no, I did not. What I found there and I brought back with me is completely different from what it was supposed to be. This is because when you began to study something that everyone describes as completely different and far from your reality as night and day are, you can only try to image what you will find. But if you think very closely about it, you will understand that the reason is simple: you do not know what you really want from this kind of experience until it appears before your eyes. And sometimes you have to wait until it seems that nothing can change, that one year abroad did not do anything for you. But, eventually, I found 'it' during a humid day in the end of the summer, in the very moment I felt like that year has just passed without giving me any useful answer.

A music band I usually listen to organized an event in Tōkyō, in which fans have to wear a *yukata*, a light cotton garment, similar in shape to a *kimono*, but thinner, meant to be worn in summer. But wearing this sort of garment is easier said than done.

It is the same when you try to fit in a society that you are not used to, and, moreover, a society that is not used to you, at all. In these times we fear 'diversity'; in the midst of a delicate international situation sometimes we cannot see the humanity that lies behind numbers without names, children, women and men who strive desperately not for the last smartphone model, but to survive far away from home. Sometimes we forget how it feels like to be the stranger, the other one, and for this reason becoming that one is a useful reminder. And so, you have to go abroad, to study and to learn everything about it, and in the end, with the all you have prepared, you try to go out from your comfort zone and find a balance, a compromise with the new reality you have to confront. It is a challenge.

Moreover, as if this situation would not have been hard enough, I lived quite far from the capital and for arriving there on time I should take the bus with *yukata* already on. It seemed to be difficult, but I decided that I

should at least give it a try. And so, I spent four hours wearing my *yukata*, doing the make-up and so forth, without any help.

It was the same with everything that has happened there: you have a vague idea of what is like, of what you must and must not do, of what the others told you to do, to say, but you are alone when you finally do it. You can spend all your life studying something, but, in the end, there is no better book than the life itself. You have to find your way alone. And so I tried my best to fit in something that I was not familiar with, but still, I tried because I wanted to be not one of them but one that can understand them and be richer out of it, who can be appreciated even if I appear different, because my diversity is a richness, and not something to fear.

That day the air was thick, a little rain fell scattered from the iron sky. I tried my best with the *yukata* and I felt like somehow ridiculous, with everyone glaring at me with strange eyes. But it was not only *yukata*'s fault. I was the 'other one' and I was wearing a symbol of their tradition. And so, with nothing but a paper bag and a tiny umbrella I reached the bus terminal. In only one hour the main string that should block my *yukata* from the inside untied.

It was just like when you start something and time by time the enthusiastic will of doing it fades away. There no dream-like place in the world, nor in Japan, nor in Italy, and so what was I looking for there? I felt like my dream was like that string untied.

This unsatisfactory emotion that accompany us is rooted inside us, it does not depend from the place we are.

And then, in that very moment an old lady came to me and begun to fix all the strings, chattering with a clear voice, saying that nowadays even Japanese young girls do not know how to wear a *yukata* and beside that string I had done a good job. And then my mind just flew at home, where my grandmother used to speak in that way. I felt at home. We talk about the past, or present and the very near future. 'I will finish my studies, I will take care of my family, I will come back here, in Japan.' I told her. It was so astonishingly simple that I never realized what I was searching for, until I just said it. And I just realized that I was not searching a place, but my place in the world. In the end, she looked at my paper bag, destroyed from the rain and laugh merrily; she took everything out of it and put my things in a finely embroidered white bag. She told me that it was a present for not forgetting my year there.

That present reminds me, even now, what I should not forget, what that difficult year taught me.

The aim of going one year abroad is not to forget your identity, not to become another one, but to find inside you what you really are and what you want to become.

And I can say that I found 'it' in the bottom of a white bag, in that rainy day of August.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Do not ever judge an Aussie by his accent

Asia Mariuzzo

LT Philosophy, International and Economic Studies

Destination: University of Reading, UK

Asia Mariuzzo writes about a friendship with an Australian boy in Reading, in what appears to be an attraction of opposites.

If someone ever asked me what was the best thing that happened to me during my Erasmus in Reading, I would definitely answer that I have been blessed with genuine and sincere friendship. During those five months in the UK, I got to know many people from all over the world and each one of them taught me something, sometimes by confirming or denying stereotypes, but most of the times they surprised me with unexpected peculiarities that I now cherish as a secret treasure.

This story is about my Australian friend Michael, my best friend in Reading and one of the dearest life-mates I have ever had. Fun fact: my friendship with Michael is not actually the main reason why I decided to dedicate to him this account. In fact, I am telling about him because with his mocking voice, his funny stereotypes about other nationalities and his essential moral values, he showed me how wrong it is to judge a book from its cover. In a mutual and unavoidable way, with my loud voice, my typically Italian attitude and my crystal-clear opinions, I taught him that thinking outside the box – and rules – can be really fun.

Michael and I got to know each other during the first day of classes. We were both waiting outside the professor's office to have our learning agreement confirmed and he came to me asking about the timetable. He thought I was Turkish, because of my naturally black hair and my olive skin – I figured out that 'white' people do not consider me 'white', another fun fact. Actually, before studying abroad, I did not even know what Englishspeakers mean with the adjective 'white'. Of course, the use of the label has some racist root, but when Michael made me aware of our skins' different colour, he really made me laugh. It is crazy and curious how stereotypes about the others and ourselves influence the way we stare at the world.

I think Michael and I felt a special feeling and complicity since the very beginning of our relationship. We used to take any chance to spend some time together because we both realized how much we could learn from each other.

Not mentioning the fact that we were attending the same module on European political integration: I was not very fluent in English yet and he knew nothing about the European Union. I can totally say we are a fun duo. Many Italian friends of mine have spent some time in Australia, but I had never met a native-Aussie before. Michael as well has met many Italian immigrants in his home country, but he never got as close to any of them as he did with me.

After we discovered that we were living in the same student hall, on the same floor – my room was number one, his room number four – we shared each other’s number and set for going to class together. I warned him – I’m Italian, I’ll be late –. Ever since, every morning I used to knock on his door, singing out loud ‘good morning pretty princess’ – this because he turned out to be the laggard one, no matter what. As a response, he started to call me ‘grandma Asia’ every time I was walking along the common corridor, because of the slippers I used to wear.

We fast turned out to be more siblings than friends. We are so different, sometimes I thought we came from parallel worlds – and we probably do. But discovering our souls day by day, it let both of us grow up together. I would have never thought to be so close to an ‘upperclass’, religious and apparently innocent Aussie guy – he did not even have the Aussie accent! Definitely, our friendship has been an unusual and exceptional one also for him: one of the first things he told me was that ‘tattooed, cranky and sassy girls are not my type’. Then here I am! And this is how we ended up being besties during the most amazing adventure of our life.

Michael and I share so many special memories. So many breakfasts, brunches and lunches; so many parties – and afterparties – and even a couple of sunrises, that we managed to watch after a night out. Last summer, I also hosted him at my place for a weekend. It was during the celebration of Redentore in Venice, so I was really glad and proud to show him around my city during the most colourful period of the year. Still, the dearest memory I cherish is about one night in Reading: I do not actually remember when it was or what we were doing, probably just hanging out in someone’s room, watching *Modern Family* as usual. What got me emotional and made that night unforgettable is what we said to each other: we realized together that every single choice we made before led us to that exact moment. Without choosing to go to university, to go study abroad and to do it in Reading, we would have never met and never had the chance to find such a great friend in each other.

This is what any study abroad experience is all about: freaking out because of leaving home and all the things we know so well, but also and above all, letting life surprise us, strangers bumping into it and becoming dear lifetime friends. It does not matter where you are, but whom you are sharing your experience with. And that is why everyone should live abroad for a while, because the world is full of stunning different-from-us people; we just need to be open-minded enough to see the good friends in them.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Dear me, breathe and love

Rachele Parodi

LM Relazioni Internazionali Comparate

Destination: Yokohama City University, Japan

Rachele Parodi concludes her sophisticated impressionistic account of her Japanese experience by thanking herself for having the courage to embark upon it in the first place.

I never thought I'd be a sneaker-type of girl.

I never thought I'd be a globetrotter-type of girl.

I never thought I'd be an unflagging adventurer-type of girl.

I never thought I'd be many things, in my life. I dreamt about it, reading books in my bed at home. Loads of stories about heroines who embark upon journeys in faraway lands, looking for some kind of treasures, something that should give their life meaning, eventually discovering that looking themselves in a mirror was just enough to find what they were longing for.

I read, dreamt, travelled, believed, lived adventures with them, but I never thought I'd be successful in such a challenge.

And instead.

As I left for Japan, I fulfilled my biggest dream as a little child, a teenager, a young woman, making me proud of myself as I ever was.

The moment in which I realized I was growing, was probably when I had the chance to travel around Japan for almost two weeks, during the famous Golden Week. I went to Shikoku, southern Japan, with some friends, and we went on a journey on the road, hitch-hiking and trying to discover the island.

I'll never forget those days, those people, those mountains. I'm never going to forget those skies, one blue and one grey. I'll never forget my rusty orange bike, neither my former white sneakers - now blackish. I'll never forget the adrenaline rush that surprises you while you go biking on a hill, without really knowing where you will get at the end. And the joy you feel, understanding it was all worth it.

Beers, rice, *onigiri*, *bento*. Smiling faces, anxieties, thoughts, the joyful moments, the stars.

How they can shine so bright... it's breathtaking.

The temples of which you catch glimpses beneath the trees, the graveyards. The dazzling green of the trees, of the forest, of everything that sur-

rounds you, remembering you that even though there are many problems in the world, there is still a deep-rooted hope in nature and in mankind.

When I was there, I was living a changing moment in my life, as I was trying to imagine my future self: my studies, my job, my home, my family. I got confused and I was somehow panicking, because I realized that my future was coming towards me at light speed but I didn't know what to do. So, I tried to focus on how I was able to go to Japan, and on the beautiful places I was visiting.

I started breathing again. And I realized: If everything is fast, too fast for you, take some time for yourself. Go away, get some distance, go home. Take a break. And then, breathe. Breathe at the top of your lungs, with your arms wide open so that the world could wrap you up.

Shikoku became one of the places where my heart will always be. Wherever my life will lead me in the future, I know this place will never leave me.

I don't know anything about my future: with all its uncertainties, I don't know what I will do, or where I will live. But I will always go back there, to Shikoku.

At the end of it, of my experience, I can just say one thing: I fell in love. Deeply, completely in love. Not just for the beautiful things, but also for the worst, and this is the best part: I've seen the good and the bad. I've seen the racism, the trains delayed because of suicides, the absurd plastic waste, the total unawareness of the youngsters towards politics, their culture, the problems with and related to the infertility rate, and so on. But still... I fell in love.

I couldn't help it, but everything drove me to this feeling, and the ambiguity, represented by Tokyo at its finest, was one of them. You could be wandering in the city, surrounded by skyscrapers, and yet you suddenly find yourself in a very well hidden oasis, with trees, maybe a temple, and you only hear the noises of the city as if they are coming from outside a glass dome. There are cities like Tokyo, where everything is modern, fast, punctual, perfectly working; and then there are places where you are simply surrounded by rice fields and mountains, no trains and almost no cars, no supermarkets and just a *conbini* on the main street.

So, thank you, young Rachele, because you discovered you had the courage to start this journey, the best thing that could happen to you. You don't know it yet, but during these four months and a half you're going to travel a lot, study, laugh, learn, you're going to grow up. But above all, you're going to find a purpose in your life.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Getting lost

Bianca Valente

LT Philosophy, International and Economic Studies

Destination: King's College London, UK

Bianca Valente describes a nightmare bike ride in London, a city which makes her feel 'so dead and alive at the same time'.

October 2016. My Erasmus year has just started and I feel like a child discovering the world for the first time. I had already been far from home for a long time, I was sixteen at that time and an ocean was separating me from my lovely Sicily. So, for this reason, I felt pretty confident and I knew what to expect, the moody days, the up and downs, that childish curiosity mixed with the worst homesickness. Well, I was wrong. Every time you leave home is different. This time was different. It was me, alone more than ever.

8.788 million people.

When I read that number I hardly manage to imagine them in reality. This city crushes you like you were a little, infinitesimal, ant. It is a paradoxical place, it makes me feel so dead and alive at the same time. London is like this, there is a thin, almost imperceptible line between loving it and hating it. It easily shows the cruellest of the truths: that we are all little and vulnerable. At the same time, however, it bumps into you with its insatiable energy. It makes you realize that you can be anyone, no matter what weird, unusual or utopian idea you might have, the world has a place for you. This is a feeling so strange and peculiar that I have never felt before. It is as exciting as devastating. After all, we have only one existence and every door we open is at the same time thousands that remain closed.

Day by day I meet so many people, so many amazing stories, so much variety that sometimes I feel lost. I am lost, actually, I have to admit it. I am lost in the beauty that travelling brings. In the curiosity of trying new roads. With regard to 'trying new roads', there is one anecdote that I want to share. It was (surprisingly) a warm Sunday a couple of weeks ago and I decided to join a friend to a street market not too far from the student accommodation where I am living so I took my brand new shining red bike and I hit the road, looking at google maps sometimes. After almost fifteen minutes of my ride, my phone decides to suddenly die so I started to ask

for directions at every crossing. The worst part was not asking for directions, my English was not that horrible, even if I didn't fully understand native speakers, and I still don't. No, it was actually discovering after ten minutes that I was frantically riding on an underground motorway that crosses the river. Exactly the opposite way to where I was supposed to go. Maybe it was the left-hand traffic, the confusion of the first weeks in London, or just my very inexistent sense of direction. Now, some weeks after, I cannot stop laughing when I think about it, but back then I was totally shaking. The whole cue of cars started obsessively to honk the horn at me and to furiously shout something indistinguishable and I knew that I couldn't just stop in the middle of the way so at first I tried to ride as fast as I could. I felt I was the obstacle to the whole frenetic flow of the city so after a while I just stopped and went on the sidewalk, dragging the bike all the way. The tunnel seriously seemed without an end but almost two hours later I manage to come back home, totally tired but happy to be still alive.

When I think about that episode I realize that the whole experience of travelling can be exemplified by that crazy afternoon. Living in a foreign country it is always a way to get completely lost, to reach some underground tunnels of yourself that you would have never thought of having. At the same time, it makes you experience something so challenging that it is inevitable to learn from it and to grow up, finding yourself again or maybe for the first time.

Long-listed entries

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A strange family in an even stranger adventure

Sofia del Monaco

LT Commercio Estero

Destination: Warwick University, UK

Sofia del Monaco travels 976 miles with just a toothbrush, a tent, and three changes of underwear – together with 8 international travelling companions.

It is impossible to explain what the Erasmus project is to me. I have genuinely never thought that that experience would have changed me that much, especially one incredible adventure I had during my last week there in England.

I lived in an on-campus accommodation called 'Rootes' and I shared my flat with eight other people. I have created a genuinely bond with those people coming all around the planet: there were two British people, a Norwegian, an Australian, a Thai, a Mexican, a Québécois and a Rumanian.

It was the 15th March and we have all already finished our module classes. Therefore, we decided to participate a university race by which you had 72 hours to go as far as possible from the university. The rules were simple: you must not use money and any electronic devices, cell phone included. The prize for the first place was £2000. Since we were students and, by definition, penniless, we had to give it a try. We started our race completely unprepared: three changes of underwear per person, toothbrushes, a tent and tons of food. During the competition, we had to walk a lot but, even if we were a large group to move, we managed to hitchhike many times: we took many lorries, vans and even a ferry. Indeed, we took a ferry from Folkestone to Helsingborg, in Sweden. We have been really lucky, to the point of absurd: we've met a 60-year-old Swedish man in a pub who happened to have a fishing boat. He agreed to help us since he had to go back to his hometown the morning after. We arrived to Helsingborg the morning after and, after paying the fisherman with some tacos and pasta alla carbonara, we started to walk the eastern way possible. We have slept into our tiny tent for every night and, considering that it rained almost every time and we were 8, it hasn't been very comfortable at all. When the countdown hit zero, we were in the city of Alvesta, in Sweden. We were dirty, tired for the few hours slept and starved for the rationing of food we had to do on our last day.

I would like to say that we won the majestic prize but, unfortunately, another group arrived in a town close to Guadalupe, in Spain. We have come second, though. Trust me, I am quite aware it is not the same as the first trophy, but we had a £100 prize.

Once we came back from the beautiful city of Alvesta, we went to collect our prize. We decided to spend those pounds in having a great dinner into our kitchen and, since that was my last week in United Kingdom, it was also a farewell party. We went to Waitrose supermarket because we wanted to treat ourselves as kings one last night. We bought chickens, sausages, beef, chips, pizzas, gallons of gravy sauce and some cakes. It seemed like we were the Knights of the Round Table.

As I said, it is impossible to describe what those months have been for me. Those eight people become my family, in spite different languages, cultures and religions. We managed to go for 976 miles into another country without anything but ourselves. Our knowledge to tell stories in English as proven the most important factor that made us have a wonderful dinner and an incredible experience.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Beyond the villain movie star

Alessandra Drigo

LM Sviluppo economico e dell'impresa

Destination: St Petersburg State University, Russia

Alessandra Drigo analyses the Russian character and finds it more open than most Europeans she knows.

I left Russia in late January, but still it is everywhere in my everyday life and I could not be more grateful for the chance I had to learn what to live in Russia today means.

In the period where Russia is in the wave of breaking news, I find myself surrounded by comments and prejudices that often go beyond the pure news, so when I am asked to tell something about what I experienced in Russia, I am more than glad to answer. The fact is the following: when I arrived in Saint Petersburg, I didn't know exactly what to expect, the only image I had of that huge country was the one pictured in the movies, or in books, about rulers, lovers and spies acting surrounded by snow. I can say I had a more precise picture of the economic situation of Russia and CIS in general, since I am studying Economics, and it helped me in the understanding of the society in which I was trying to settle in. In order to satisfy my curiosity, being in class with Russian professors and classmates was not enough, so I decided to share an apartment with other three - very lovely - Russian girls. Saint Petersburg is such a young dynamic city that is almost impossible to get bored, young Russians do love culture and art very much, it was easy to discover and enjoy what the city has to offer. I was very surprised actually to find so many young people, in Nevsky you can breath the city spirit which is totally young, innovative, and energetic. This has been the very first surprising detail, then when I started to get in touch with this net of young people - becoming part of it - I discovered that our mindset was completely on the same line for almost all the topics, but sometimes, due to cultural backgrounds, my perception of facts was different from theirs. Not necessarily better or worse, but just different. This was another surprising detail: Russians in general are very talkative and curious about impressions and opinions, very interested in understanding things beneath the surface. For me, it was unbelievably interesting to notice these aspects, since before arriving there I thought things were just

the opposite. In class, different points of view were seen as precious, as a source of debate and consideration. Debating was a transversal and ordinary activity, professors always asked the audience some comments about lectures and I noticed Russian students are quite accustomed to argument and stand for their opinion, even more than I was. It has been very useful to take part to those debates and to measure my ideas with my Russian, German, Chinese, French, Dutch, Finnish, Spanish and Swiss colleagues. It deserves to be mentioned that most of the times we did not share the same conclusions at all, not even among Europeans, despite the approach to the topic was more or less the same. Nor in nor out of the classroom it has never happened that Russians wanted to shut down a conversation just because someone was presenting a different way of thinking, I have never ever felt closure towards any speech or topic. On the contrary, sometimes I perceived more closure from my European colleagues, sinning of know-it-all. Among the things I learned by living there, there is that the concept of State and politics are perceived very differently from what I was accustomed to. In everyday life there is a very thick line between people and politics, it is something especially elder Russians are not very interesting into, but they are all united in the deep love for their country. There is a brand new pride to be Russian across Saint Petersburg's wide boulevards.

The Russian culture generated some of the most extraordinary literature in the world, showing one of the deepest and finest ability of thinking and expression. Several scientific fields saw pioneers from Russian Federation, with its amazing scientists, mathematics and cosmonauts. The most famous ballets we can see performed on the stage in theatres worldwide have been written by the great musical sensitivity of Russian composers. But sometimes - maybe too many times - in recent years the aggressive Russian temperament, the ex-Kgb leader, the 'controlled democracy' narratives have become the lents of suspicion used to look at every discussion related to Russia, especially by media and social media. But the country is so much more than just those narratives. It seems to me that this way of approaching Russia has become part of a mental habit spread in western world, that precedes analysis on facts, numbers, circumstances, without the benefit of the doubt. This condition of prejudice, of which I used to suffer too, makes people forget that Russia is made of people, cultures, abilities that gave the world a lot of accomplishments that we still benefit from and we will benefit from in the future. Moreover, Russia has to face a condition that Europe and its countries have never faced: hugeness. Europeans sometimes sin in considering our notion of society as the example towards the different societies in the world needs to align sooner or later, despite the western one presents many criticality and hypocrisies. Russia owns some historical peculiarities that get lost in the centuries, starting from its dimension, which is a unique characteristic that needs to be taken into account in every discussion about culture and mindset. It is not easy

for us to imagine what does it mean to live in a country with eleven different time zones.

So, when I am asked to describe my experience in Russia, I invite the audience to forget about all the filters and Russian villains in movies, to take off the glasses of suspicion, and to move a step back from quick judgments. Only in that moment I start to tell the stories, to make people reflect on the points I wrote down here for you.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Mirrors

Emilia Esin

LM Crossing the Mediterranean: towards Investment and Integration (MIM)

Destination: Université Paul Valéry 3, Montpellier, France

Emilia Esin reflects on national identity, nationalism and racism – and how taking part in an Erasmus programme can help overcome apathy.

The desire to see this land had long since reached maturity.
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, talking about his travel to Italy

Before applying to the Erasmus Mundus programme, I always thought that at some point I would leave my country to work and live abroad. Not because I did not love Italy, but because I never felt a strong sense of belonging to our national identity and I always defined myself as a citizen of the world. Taking part in an Erasmus programme means meeting a lot of people from different countries – this is especially true when it comes to Erasmus Mundus programmes, in which participants come from all over the world. It was in this context that I realised that no one can build their own identity without comparing themselves with people who are different from them. In other words, you cannot understand who you truly are, without getting to know the others.

As for me, I never understood how much I felt Italian, until I had to talk about my country. It is hard for me to find one specific situation in which I had this sensation, especially because my Erasmus lasted two years and I travelled more than one country – Spain, Tunisia and France. But I know for sure that it happened when I found myself explaining how my family celebrates our successes with a fine meal, or how we welcome home someone who was away for a long time with a feast, or how we celebrate literally any important event with food – it was then that I understood that our perception of food as a ritual was not shared by many of my colleagues, and that it was rather something that I had in common with other Italians and with North Africans. It was when I was talking about German guilt with my friend from Berlin and she told me – No one is proud of being German –, that I looked at myself and discovered that I was proud of being Italian, despite all the horrors of the Second World War. It also happened when I found myself smiling as I discovered how many words are shared

by the Italian and the Tunisian languages. It was while speaking to my Brazilian colleagues about colonisation and the history of their country, that I realised I knew almost nothing about South America, while I found myself passionate about Italy when I was asked to talk about the history of my country. I never expected that.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing a spreading of hatred and racism all over Europe - not a country is spared. We tend to be less empathic and more suspicious, to feel unsafe and therefore to be more introvert and withdrawn. Taking part in an Erasmus Mundus programme can break this *apathy*. Going and living abroad for a certain period of time means becoming a foreigner yourself, even if temporarily, and the feeling of being 'the other' is likely to make you more indulgent towards foreigners in your own country - I will never forget the first time I was told that my French was not good and, even if I tried hard, it was clear that I had difficulties in communicating. Moreover, knowing precisely and serenely who you are prevents you from perceiving as a threat the ones who come from the outside.

Taking part in an Erasmus programme means travelling, moving to a new country and facing a different reality. Going home after an Erasmus programme means having a better knowledge of yourself and, at the same time, being hungry for travelling, for learning more about other people's way of living and for understanding life.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A letter from my future self

Anamaria Girdescu

LM Lingue e letterature europee, americane e postcoloniali

Destination: Karl Franzens Universitat, Graz, Austria

Anamaria Girdescu shifts the perspective in this account of her mobility, so that the 'future self' looks back and gives advice to the girl about to leave on what she should expect from the experience.

Dear Ana,

I know you have many worries before leaving for Austria. You have packed your things, are ready to take off and actually do what you had been saying you would do. Going and living abroad, while studying what you're mostly interested into - it sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

You say you want to know how it was, and if it was worth it. First of all, let me tell you one thing. No matter how many stories you have heard about it, it is useless if you yourself have never done it. There are of course some elements which all students going abroad can relate to, but the fact is, each and every experience is unique and beautifully challenging. And that is a good thing, because could you imagine how boring it would be if everyone came back with the same story?

Where should I begin with my story... I could tell you a lot about how my courses went, what they were about, if I liked my town of destination, if I improved my linguistic knowledge and could do it all over again. I guess you are especially eager to know the answer to the last two questions. I can assure you that if you could hear my voice, you would notice it is thrilled with excitement and also a bit of nostalgia, as during the semester abroad I thoroughly enjoyed the sense of opportunities of self-improvement. I think you would be excited to know that you are going to have lots of fun making some new friends and discovering new places, new landscapes, new dishes and so on. You will have some trouble remembering your German, but that won't stop you from taking chances and bonding with some incredible locals. Most importantly, you will discover things about yourself you didn't know were there.

You will discover that brushing up on your German and writing papers in academic English is not impossible, that you enjoy waking up early in the morning, that you could eat steak with marmelade on it, and even ride a bike on the roads covered with snow in winter.

Well, that last one might not be such a good example, because once my bike slipped and I fell, but don't worry about it. Fortunately I wasn't hurt and managed to get up. I rode my bike a lot, which was not bad, since my town was not that big. In the evenings it was a bit more risky, but then I could always use the public transportation.

Generally, I liked the people. They were friendly, open to talk with you, most of them salute you on the street even if they don't know you personally. That was such a fun part- getting to know new people and see things from different perspectives. You will meet a girl who is very fun to be around, with a strong Styrian accent, shoulder-length brown hair, and a passion for feminist novels and exotic travels. You will make friends with her and other two girls who are into arts and preparing for the final exam of their degrees. Oh yes, they have a huge final exam at the end of their studies, for which they have to read and study a lot.

Overall, I enjoyed my courses. I chose seminars, because I wanted to experience new ways of teaching and learning. I read lots of novels in English and discovered some new authors. Well, they might not be that 'new', but to me they were. The best part about seminars is that you don't learn in the traditional way, with a teacher explaining the theories to the class, but you actually get to the bottom of some interesting dilemma in a personal paper that you have to hand in at the end. It is not easy, but it can be so enjoyable once you've found an interesting topic. It is important not to get down on yourself if you find it difficult. And you will. I had some trouble with some assignments, but remember that you can ask for help; your fellow students or teachers will be more than glad to help you. You just have to get involved and show interest in the subject.

I know you are curious about your linguistic knowledge. Has it improved? I hope so; one thing is for sure. My self-confidence in using languages has improved. As I made a fool of myself in many situations when I chose to speak in German, I lost the fear of making mistakes. It is so liberating when that happens! However, there is so much more that helps you connect than the language per se. I could make friends in Austria not because I could use my linguistic knowledge, but because I was willing to get to know other people and not afraid of making stupid mistakes or finding myself in awkward situations.

I won't tell you more, because I don't want to spoil the experience for you. Would you like to know, if it was worth it? Then, do not be afraid to leave for your semester abroad, and find the answer yourself.

Love,
Your future Self

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Limitless music

Marta Lucente

LT Conservazione e Gestione dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali

Destination: University of Southampton, UK

Marta Lucente discovers the power of music to help people with disabilities.

The Erasmus experience was one of the biggest challenges of my life. Arriving to my destination and settling in was very difficult, but in the end, the effort I put into much of what I did makes me feel proud of myself, and I am pleased to recall experiences which influenced my Erasmus and the perception I have of myself.

When I first arrived in Southampton I was very excited and at the same time scared because of the new experience. I had never lived away from home, my level of English was basic, meaning I could understand what people were saying if I paid attention, but it was very difficult for me to speak. Moreover my music knowledge was extremely basic, because in Italy my bachelor is focused on History of Performing Arts, while at University of Southampton I was in the Music department and most of the exams and coursework we had to prepare were practical, which I was not used to at all. For a number of days I felt like I was overwhelmed. Everything seemed to be unknown to me, everyone knew English and music at a higher level and I kept asking myself – Why am I here?

When classes started, it only got worse. In fact, the main reason why I chose Southampton was because of the modules Music Therapy, Music and Disability and Community Music. As soon as I got there, I was informed that two of them were not running that academic year so I quickly had to choose alternative modules to replace them.

The Music Technology class, that I chose instead of one of the others courses, was extremely specific and technical. We studied the technologies used in music and we also had to apply the concepts we learned by composing a song, playing it on the piano to then record and modify it using the program Logic Pro X. My basic knowledge of music theory, not being able to read music well nor to play the piano, which on the other hand was slightly compensated by my singing skill, did no help. I would say... challenging! To be honest, at the beginning of the project I was in despair. Going into the music lab was frightening and I had no inspiration at all. Moreover the music

editing programme was quite difficult to use without any kind of experience. Thankfully, during this difficult moment, my friends in Southampton helped me with support, giving advices, inspiration and helping me to understand and use the program... even until 1 am! And guess what? In no time the song was finished and quite pleasing to hear. Of course not a masterpiece, but I felt incredibly satisfied because I had gone over my limit: music and technologies did not scare me anymore! I had done it and succeeded!

Although we all have moments in which it feels like everything goes wrong, we should remember that with effort and perseverance difficult situations can be solved. Feeling satisfied and proud of myself put me in a great mood, and it is then that my great Erasmus time started.

I decided to go to a dance school which offered classes focused on 'dance and disabilities', the exact topic of my thesis. I present myself asking to watch and observe a class to help me gather information for my thesis, just for a few times. Surprisingly, they asked me to join them every week until the end of my Erasmus, giving me the possibility to add a lot of information to my thesis. I met a lot of people and I was stunned by how outgoing they were, even the dancers with disabilities. They kept asking me about my work and telling me their feelings, such as the reasons why they felt better while dancing. It was incredible!

I also met Claire, the manager of a Community centre close to the dance school, in which some performing arts classes for disabled people were taught (folk dance, music technology, singing, music). In only one day my month was planned: I was going to go to both place three times a week.

Day by day I explored the world of disabilities and performing arts with different tutors, approaches and points of view! Every time I was amazed by the power of music; to give an example, seeing a woman using the walker, but then completely forgetting about it while dancing. And that is not all: thanks to my professor I had the opportunity to join a music therapy group session in a children hospice. All of these experiences made me more aware of the differences between Italy and the UK in the approach towards disability.

I think Erasmus is a lot more than going to university and doing a great job by having great marks. Certainly good academic results are important and necessary, but during your Erasmus you should also dedicate time to becoming aware of your own possibilities, trusting yourself, understanding what you are interested in and trying to achieve your goals. You will also meet a lot of new people and you should test your limits, such as language and being in a different context while away from home. Challenge yourself by discovering parts and characteristics of yourself you did not know about, or a strength you could not even imagine. And remember: everything cannot and will not be perfect during your experience, but do not be worried. Try to change what you think is wrong and observe the outcomes. Do not give up! Be brave, trust your sensations. You just need to make the most of the moment!

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

21 kilometres of experience

Giulia Marasca

LM Relazioni Internazionali Comparate

Destination: Universitat de Valencia, Spain

Giulia Marasca compares her Erasmus experience with running a half marathon.

If I had to describe what it did mean for me to study at the Universitat de València, I would compare it to my first half marathon, a competition in which you have to run for 21 kilometres.

It is a course that comprises a long previous training which generally begins one month and a half earlier, the same time, before the departure to Valencia, in which you start thinking: 'I can do it', 'I am afraid of not finding friends', 'where can I live?'. But the time is running, your legs and your breath are getting stronger and you convince yourself that this new adventure is not so scary because both your mind and your body are ready.

When THE day of the departure arrives, as during the day of the course, you wake up early during the morning, your shoes are tied, you have to stick your bib number to the t-shirt, the same number which represents your outbound ticket towards the experience that is going to change your perspective when looking at the environment around you.

With a determined look, you are prepared to pass under the first Column of Hercules, your hand makes the watch start and in few seconds the first metres have passed and, without completely realizing it, the airplane is taking off. The first step has been made, there is no time to come back; you start to run and you soon understand that the first kilometres are not compelling as the mind is caught in a state of excitement. All the days that you have spent training are becoming true and this state of euphoria is precisely incited by all those persons who have come to see the sportive event to provide you with the strength you would need when alone.

All these anonymous people, with whom you get in contact through a simple glance, can be compared to all those students that you meet during the first days and who has the fundamental role to form your foreign family. What is more, the excitement experienced after the start is exactly the same feeling which invades you as soon as you enter in your new university ready to assimilate all the knowledge that you know will enrich both your academic skills and your character.

But then everything changes; when you arrive at the seventh kilometre you remain alone, just you and your legs, and the first difficulties begin. You have enrolled in several courses and you get to know that one of them is the worst and the nightmare for all the students in that university. You start to realize that your situation at the home university was not that difficult, but it is exactly in this situation of powerlessness that you start to be aware of the functionality of your physical and mental training and that you just have to trust your legs and your academic skills. An exam has to be faced, a Spanish test where you are supposed to recognize all the Spanish dialects finding for each word its Latin origin.

Looking at the exercises the thinking came alone: 'I have never studied Latin', 'Spanish is not my mother tongue, I cannot do it.'

However, you look at your watch and you see that you are already at the tenth kilometre and behind the corner the volunteers appear in order to provide you with both bottles of water and energisers in order to give you the right motivation and strength to go on. In that moment you become conscious that you can find a solution to your problems because one secret of the Erasmus has been disclosed: being abroad for an Erasmus not only did it help you to be more responsible, but also to be able to ask for aid to everyone who could be able to let you see the light.

You are almost at the half of the course, stopping is not contemplated, a high level of concentration is required so as not to feel the pain in your legs and it is already time for you to face your first exam abroad. The 18th kilometre has passed, you have run a lot and a further sprint is the only thing that you are supposed to do to finish the course. 'Is everything going to be ok?', 'what if I ruin the average of the marks that I have reached studying at my home University?', 'I should have chosen an easier exam as all my colleagues': these are the common thoughts that invade your mind as you present to the professor your university card.

However, while concentrating in order to find possible solutions to all these negative outcomes, you pass under the first Column of Hercules which means that there is only one kilometre missing. The professor gives you the exam, you start writing and the awareness of the effectiveness of the preparation becomes patent. The last column becomes visible and looking hardly you can see the time which is marked and, knowing that your principal goal is to finish under two hours, you increase your speed without even knowing where exactly you are finding all this strength. It is done, you have finished, two hours and zero seconds and, suddenly, the professor appears in front of you telling that you have been the best of the class.

This is my International Mobility.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Diving into the unknown

The toughest moments of an exchange programme

Y Nam Phan Ngoc

LM Sviluppo Interculturale dei Sistemi Turistici

Destination: Hanoi University, Vietnam

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.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Tennis balls and chopsticks

Marco Piscitelli

LM Relazioni Internazionali Comparete

Destination: Hanoi University, Vietnam

Marco Piscitelli tries to pick up chopsticks and catch a tennis ball at the same time.

At the third month of my exchange period in Vietnam, I was almost getting used to most of the different things that I was experiencing over there. Going from a place to another by motorbike, maybe while having my sugarcane drink inside a plastic bag instead of a tin can, zigzagging between chickens and exotic fruits with bright colors that I had never seen in my life, making my way to one of the many bars next to the West Lake of Hanoi became my weekly routine. The curiosity about trying new food shaded, as drinking egg coffee or eating noodle soup in the morning was not as strange as it used to be before. I did even stop taking pictures of all the fancy or absurd things Vietnamese people managed to carry on their tiny vehicles, and driving alongside them turned out to be my reality. Thanks to my host brother Son, I was able to make some local friends, with who I ended up playing Chinese chess or Neapolitan card games, always present in my backpack. Life was pretty nice, people still stopped me in the middle of the streets to ask me to teach English to their children, or just to have a picture with me, but neither one of these things bothered me anymore. Nevertheless, there is one main episode that really made me fell in love with Vietnam and its citizens. It was Saturday when me and Thuy, a classmate of mine, ended up in Hoan Kiem, walking alongside the lake, observing the pagoda that was towering in the middle of the water. During the weekend, the roads around that area were closed to traffic, so that the great flow of motorbikes could leave a spot for the Hanoians, who could spend a nice time with their beloved ones over there. Because of that, Thuy showed me some games that we could play just by sitting on the asphalt, by using a tennis ball and some chopsticks. Seeing an Italian guy playing some local games with a local girl, as we were communicating to each other in Japanese, was something uncommon in that place, so other people started to become curious about our match. Other two Vietnamese boys decided to join us, and so did a kid that was staring at me, or at my beard should I say, so curious. I wasn't able to communicate with any of

them, but body language, and maybe Italian gestures as well, helped us to have fun together. However, it was when an old lady, dressed in a pink suit and wearing the traditional Vietnamese hat, sat next to us and threw the tennis ball in the air, while catching all the chopsticks on the ground in one turn (that was the point of the game), beating all of us, that I realized how unique that thing was to me. Six people, or I should say six complete strangers, were playing such a childish game all together in the streets of the second biggest city of Vietnam, regardless of age, gender or nationality. And they were even unable to speak properly to each other. After that, we all left to go back to our lives, as what did just happen minutes before was just something so normal and common to do.

During my stay in Hanoi I experienced many times the kindness and friendliness of Vietnamese people, but that episode ended up being one particular sweet memory among the others. Vietnam was a totally unknown country to me, and discovering its scenery, food and traditions made me more curious and interested in it, but not as much as its people did. I think every student that has been on an exchange program has cried at least once when coming back home or when some random memories of their experience came into their mind, and I have to admit that I am not an exception to this. I came back realizing that I changed so much in such a small amount of time, and that my so-called 'bag of experience' was now full of stories that I wanted to share with the others, trying to give them at least some sprouts of how amazing that journey has been for me. I do not know if my stories may be effective, but I know that I enjoyed one of the best, if not the best, experiences in my life. Oh, and I also taught my siblings how to play that chopsticks game together. It is a silly but really funny game after all.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

The Fall of Stereotypes

Yasmin Rech

LT Lingue, Civiltà e Scienze del Linguaggio

Destination: Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Yasmin Rech sets out to convince the reader that the more you travel the lighter your bag of stereotypes becomes.

I believe that as we leave for a foreign country, we carry with us a bag of stereotypes, ready-made knowledge and beliefs, which often prove to be wrong. Truth is, the less you travel, the heavier this bag gets. I spent four months living and attending university in the Netherlands thanks to the Erasmus+ program. My life there as an exchange student was mainly spent in two different environments: my host family and the university, both of which were melting pots of cultures. In the former four different nationalities coexisted: the host dad was Dutch, his wife was French, there was me from Italy, and another exchange student from Greece. Needless to say, differences emerged straightaway. Differences could be found for instance in habits, in behaviour and in eating as well. I was once cooking some rice at lunch and as the Dutch host dad and his son saw me, they asked me rather puzzled if I was really going to eat rice, a 'hot meal', for lunch. It's nice to see that what is normal for one person, is totally absurd for another. What they called lunch, namely slices of bread with peanut butter and a glass of milk, appeared to me more like breakfast; what I called lunch was for them more like dinner. This is nothing but culture. It's fun to realize how we all draw from our bag of ready-made knowledge, as we start knowing new people from countries different than the ours. This is what I could acknowledge both in the host family and at university: when approaching people, we use the same mechanism. You start with a simple 'What's your name?', followed by 'Where are you from?', and as we hear the answer we start gathering all the information we have about that country, like a sort of brainstorming. I could see this mechanism at work in my own group of friends. It was a rather diverse group, where five different countries came all together. More specifically: Sweden, Canada, Scotland, Korea and Italy. I met my Swedish friend first. As my brainstorming began, I started saying everything that I could associate with Sweden, although it was not much. In fact, all I had was: cold weather, snow, the ABBA and

Ikea. So I asked if she enjoyed skiing and if she did that a lot. Here came my first disappointment: she had never skied in her whole life. On the other side, she started applying her knowledge - or so-called knowledge - of Italy. According to her and to my other friends as well, since I was Italian my sustenance mainly depended on pasta and pizza. A general disappointment was in the air as they understood that I'm not actually a pasta lover. Another stereotype destroyed. When I met my Canadian friend, one of the first things I asked her was if she could speak French. I could tell she was rather annoyed by this question, and I could later understand why. In fact, she told me that every single person she met sooner or later got to that question, inevitably. And the answer was again disappointing: no, she could not speak French, although being Canadian. Examples like the ones mentioned above are endless, and they all show the same thing. The more you travel, the more you learn to 'pack' lighter, since your personal bag of stereotypes becomes almost - if not completely - empty.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

An unexpected journey

Andrea Rizzo

LM Lingue, Economie e Istituzioni dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: Jilin Huaqiao University of Foreign Languages, Changchun, China

Andrea Rizzo survives minus thirty degrees of winter and stringent university rules in the old capital of Manchuria, and makes a lasting friendship.

It was February 17th 2017 when I received that email. The list of the students who had been accepted for the Overseas program. It was the first time I had applied for such a project, and I was feeling nervous. I really wanted to go to one of the first two choices that I had submitted: Beijing or Nanjing. Both very big, unique and fascinating cities. There was also a third choice, but I only chose it because of the 30 possibilities to be accepted, certainly not because of the city itself: Changchun. A small city (for Chinese standards) where snow season goes from October to May, with temperatures that reach -30°C. I thought how could they live there? With all these thoughts in my mind I opened the link in the email. 'Beijing' ... There's not my name. 'Nanjing' ... There's not my name. I was starting to lose hope as I reached 'Changchun' and... My name was there. I didn't know how to feel, because on one hand I was happy to have won such an amazing chance to study Chinese, on the other hand I could hear the -30°C whispering cold words to me. After a few hours the excitement and happiness took the upper hand, so I replied to that email saying that I was more than ready to go to Changchun the first semester. And I couldn't have made a better decision. But I didn't know it yet.

By the end of August, after a long three-stopover flight, we reached the old capital of the Manchurian State, in the north-eastern part of China. Winter was yet to come, and accompanied by with this warm welcome, I reached the University campus. I was impressed with how big it was and how many buildings were there, I could see myself losing my way to the dorms every day. After some days, when all the students had arrived and we all settled in, we had the entrance exams, and we had assigned to the classes. Teachers were very kind and available, and hearing academic Chinese 4 hours a day for 5 days a week it really helps you improve. But I believe that the real challenges were outside of the campus, where people only speak Chinese, with all the influences that the north-eastern dialect had on it. If you make sure that you find yourself speaking with those people, travelling as much as you

can, meeting as many people as you can, then you're studying a language. Of course you need a preparation to be able to make conversations with everybody, but teachers studied to have the most comprehensible pronunciation and when we'll start working or we'll go back to China we'll meet very few teachers. That's why we need to learn the language also through other ways. This is more challenging with the Chinese language because in China there are very few people who can speak English (or something else apart from Chinese), and even fewer who can speak an understandable English. That's how I have always tried to approach to this language, and many times this view allowed me to make friends. One night for example we wanted to find a new place to have dinner. On the internet looking for 'pubs' we found one that looked nice and was close to us. As soon as we entered, there was this young waiter that smiled at us and ran to welcome us and to show where we could sit. While we were choosing what to eat, he started asking us questions like where are you from, why are you in Changchun, and so on. At first he used an online translator, but when he saw that we could answer in Chinese, he started speaking Chinese as well. After everything we had ordered arrived, more beers and fruits arrived as well. We didn't ask for those, so we were looking for that waiter to tell him, and we saw him in the distance smiling and winking at us, as to say 'that's a gift'. From that day every weekend we went to that pub where food was good and cheap, but most of all because we were happy to chat with that waiter, and he was even more happy to have so many western people that he could call 'friends'. When there was live music, we asked for songs to dedicate to each other, when he wasn't busy working he sat with us. He even brought us gifts to celebrate that his girlfriend was pregnant! Unfortunately, our university had so many strict rules (some of them were absurd), so we had to be back pretty early. But we that didn't stop us. After months, it came the sad 'this is the last time we can come here' moment. He cried, he sincerely cried, and even more when we gave him the pictures we took together along with a small dedication as our thank you gift. We still keep in touch through WeChat, and we both hope that we could meet again soon, hopefully in Italy so that I can offer him food and drinks as he did with us.

It feels like yesterday when I opened that email, but it's already been more than a year. We visited so many cities and places, met so many people, done so many things, and I still can't understand how could we have done so much in just 5 months. What I can understand is that it was an amazing opportunity and I feel that I have made the most of it. I survived those -30°C, I survived the university rules, I survived the food. I spent so much for this adventure, time, money, energy, but in this kind of experiences the more you spend, the more you get rich. And this is something I would have never imagined when I said my 'yes', it was indeed 'An unexpected Journey'.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A girl on the move

Chiara Rutolo

LM Crossing the Mediterranean: towards Investment and Integration (MIM)

Destination: Universities of Barcelona (Spain), Montpellier (France)
and Meknès (Morocco)

In a letter to 'Joe' Chiara Rutolo writes about life in three towns: Barcelona, Montpellier and Meknès, all of which were mobility destinations on her Joint Master's Programme.

Dear Joe,

I don't know where to start.

It feels like for the past two years I've never stopped! I've been travelling all around the Mediterranean; living in Barcelona, Venice, and Montpellier. I've travelled to Tunisia and Morocco and lived in Meknes with a local family for three months. I've even visited Alcoy, Paris and Brussels! Sounds thrilling, doesn't it?

The truth is, it's been the most exciting, beautiful, and constructive experience of my life, so far. Particularly as day by day I get to know so many different cultures, and I could say I've also virtually travelled to Mexico, Lebanon, Egypt, and another 11 countries as well.

In the 2016-2018's edition of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree MIM, we were 31 students, with 14 different nationalities. I still remember when we first met in Barcelona, in September 2016, on the first day of the course. Our diverse faces scanning the room, curiously looking at each other and wondering 'what language will I have to use to communicate with her?', 'mmm... blonde... mustn't be Spanish'. It's been so exciting and I've learned something from every one of my peers during these two years that has enriched my cultural understanding and changed my life for the better, forever.

In August 2016, before leaving for Spain, I thought I already knew how to deal with different cultures, how to overcome the obstacles of living in a new city, in another country, sharing a flat with people I did not know and who probably spoke another language. I'd been in Erasmus in Paris for 1 year during my bachelor, after all! But I was wrong. Living in Barcelona has proved to be very different from my experience in France. As you can imagine, sharing a flat with a couple has nothing to do with sharing it with two friends. I also learned Catalan; ate the best *jamon Serrano* (the Spanish ham) I had ever tried, and enjoyed the Barcelona night life and its beautiful sea, often both in the same night!

Then I moved to Venice, where I had the chance to see its beautiful Carnival for the first time. And trust me, I ate as many *frittelle* as I could.

But even after all those *frittelle*, the experience that definitely made me grow the most was living in Morocco with a local family. I was not alone, a friend from the masters was with me, but we both felt courageous to take this decision as no one else wanted to. And you can guess why... it wasn't always easy. We slept on a Moroccan sofa for three months, which - believe me - is nothing like the sofa you're imagining. We lived in a house where everyone respected the Ramadan fasting period, with all its good and its bad. Growing up in Italy on generous portions of pasta three times a day, it was hard for me not to eat and drink while having to go to university under the 35 degrees' sunshine. But at the same time wonderful because at the end of the day we all broke the fast together with *ftor*, the 'night breakfast'. Thank *Allah* as the nights were often spent playing ninja with our two little Moroccan brothers - one of the funniest things ever! Not to mention going to the *hammam* on Fridays nights with our Moroccan mum, and preparing couscous with her... We couldn't experience a more authentic Morocco than this. When in September 2018 we moved to Montpellier for the last semester, me and Maria Elena were missing our Moroccan family so much that we kept on listening to '3andw ziin' (a local traditional song) all winter long.

During these two years of the master, I studied, I travelled, I learned. I have walked on the sand of Moroccan desert, cycled by the marvellous Camargue's canals watching flamingos flying over my head. I would need a thousand pages to tell you everything, and even then it wouldn't be enough. I would need to show you pictures, videos; I would like to walk with you in Venice, to show you its wonderful little corners where every sight becomes a work of art. Unfortunately, all I have is this letter. A letter I have willed to taste like Moroccan couscous and smell like the Mediterranean Sea. I am proud of all I have learned and accomplished throughout these experiences, and feel incredibly humbled by all the amazing people I have had the chance to meet. I will carry a piece of every one of them with me, as I hope they will do with me.

Now I've got to run; there are many more adventures to be had and memories to be made! All of which you'll no doubt hear about next time.

Lots of love,
Chiara

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Where are you from?

Beatrice Sarto

LM Lingue e Letterature Europee Americane e Postcoloniali

Destination: University of Girona (Spain), University of Guadalajara (Mexico)

Beatrice Sarto reflects on how having a strong foreign accent can actually be a plus point in international interaction.

The word 'Erasmus' means a lot to me: whenever I hear it, a brainstorm happens in my head. It evokes all kinds of bittersweet memories I have been collecting in the past years: a collage made of adventures, funny 'culture shock' anecdotes, linguistic misunderstandings, hours of study in the library, faces of strangers who eventually became lifetime friends, good and bad moments. In these days I have spent a long time recollecting memories from my past experiences abroad - first in Spain, then in Mexico - and the phrase resounding in my mind over and over again is: 'Once Erasmus, always Erasmus'. I learned this motto from the beginning of my very first exchange adventure, when I studied at the University of Girona during my bachelor. Now that a few years have passed I realize that those words mean something very specific to me: once you are ready to jump out of your comfort zone, and you actually find the courage to do it, you will never be the same person anymore and at the same time you cannot go back to who you used to be. I would describe this as the best and the worst thing that could happen to young students, like me, who are still looking for their own place in the world while they are building their future. At least, this was the way I felt when for the first time I said goodbye to my family at the airport and all alone I passed through the security checkpoint. A few months later, seated in an airplane and looking at Barcelona's city lights, I remember I thought: 'this is the most thrilling and scaring feeling I have ever had so far!'. It was in that very moment that I understood that everything I was doing was worth it. At the same time though, moving abroad means facing a lot of challenges, first of all the challenge of expressing yourself in another language. I have been studying foreign languages for many years of my life since high school and I believed I had numerous opportunities to learn how to overcome the fear of making mistakes or the embarrassment of mispronouncing a word... I can assure you that sometimes it is still hard not to feel weird, when eve-

rybody is staring at you while you are talking or reading out loud. This is something that always happens to me - and I mean literally every time I am talking to someone in another language (usually English or Spanish, which are the two languages I use the most). As soon as I finish my first sentence, comes the fateful question: 'where did you say you come from?'. The usually thing evolves with me rolling my eyes and answering 'Italy', then waiting for the mafia, pizza and hand gestures jokes to begin. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that all Italian people abroad sooner or later face these situations, probably because of our strong accent. Initially, I felt quite uncomfortable in such circumstances, but over time I realized that my easily recognizable accent could be a plus. As a friend of mine once said: accents tell stories, they tell people where you come from, where you have been and where you are going. Your accent is the reflection of who you are, of how hard you worked to be where you are and there is no shame in that, not at all. In the end, what I have learnt from my mobility experiences is that certainly each and every one of us is scared of losing the so-called 'Linus' blanket'. At the same time, it is essential to embrace this phase of transition, because change itself is the only constant element that allows our lives to develop and to move forward. Without novelty and diversity there is no growth and without growth there is no freedom. Thanks to the Erasmus project, thanks to all the people I met during my journey, thanks to the linguistic difficulties I had to overcome and thanks to the many super special moments I lived, I can proudly say I have grown a lot since my first university year. Not only I refined my linguistic skills as I always wanted to do, but I also developed various personal, professional and academic skills and I do not regret any hour I spent abroad.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

New eyes for a new journey

Elisa Savietto

LT Commercio Estero

Destination: MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Austria

Elisa Savietto describes the sense of freedom she feels on mobility in Innsbruck.

I didn't want to finish my university career without living an experience abroad. I wondered what it would be like to leave everything, immersed in another culture, relate to foreign people and learn a new style of life. After being accepted at MCI in Innsbruck, I spent 5 months, from March till the end of June, in the capital of the Tyrol. I wanted to test myself and figure out if I could do it alone.

When I arrived, the city was framed by a generous quantity of snow which covered the top of the mountain. It would have taken a long while to melt due to the climate.

I'd be lying if I said that everything was easy right away. I found myself experiencing feelings similar to excitement and fear at the same time. I remember what I felt when my buddy-student greeted me and then left me in my room. I was overcome by a sense of emptiness never felt before. My roommate had not arrived yet, I didn't know her but she was certainly someone with whom I would be living for four months and this thought gave me a kind tranquility.

The first weeks were not easy: a new culture, new people with a different mentality, new classmates, a new language, a new routine. Speaking in another language was not simple at first. In addition, I had to get used to new rhythms of study: no set study periods, no exam sessions. It was a bit like going back to Italian elementary school: lessons that lasted from 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon but only for two days a week - they used to concentrate more hours of lessons on the same day - and then, a few weeks after the end of the course, there was the exam. There was enough time to dedicate to studying, and study areas were in abundance: huge libraries open until late evening, large classrooms and lots of cafes for working on team projects. At the university the climate was 'relaxed', most of the lessons were with other international students. The most surprising thing from the first day at university was the courtesy of the teachers. No barriers, no formalities, but lots of respect for towards all students.

It was normal to meet professors on the street and stopping to have a chat with them.

It didn't take a lot to make new friends: Mexico had never been so close and New Zealand seemed like a curious place; all prejudices were overturned and I realized how similar we are to each other. After about a month and a half, we created a wonderful group of friends. In the evening we often met in a dormitory kitchen or in one of the pubs to have a drink or in some clubs to dance a bit. We cooked the typical dishes of each nationality, we talked about our countries and how we spent our holidays, which cities were the most beautiful and what we were used to do during the weekend.

I found myself surrounded by people from all over the world, I touched diversity and understood treasures hidden in everyone.

I found fantastic people, a family of friends and I knew that although I was far away from home I could count on them as I knew them: the way Erasmus opens your heart is something unique.

Erasmus is having nothing planned and doing whatever you want to do, it is going to sleep knowing that the next day will be different from the previous one, it's the snow of the mountains that little by little melts and with it all your fears and worries melt too giving you an extraordinary strength. You become aware of who you are and realize the beauty of living every single moment: every instant should be lived to the maximum because it will never return - the going-home date is the 'nightmare' of all Erasmus students.

An Italian singer, Fabrizio De Andre, wrote: 'Loneliness can lead to extraordinary forms of freedom'. Erasmus is proof of this. You understand you can get by yourself but at the same time you realize that it is much better to be surrounded by people.

Erasmus is courage and it changes the way you react to everything that happens. It's an inner journey to discover who you are and it shows you the world with new eyes. As a famous quote says: 'life begins when your comfort zone ends'. So, don't be afraid of change, of what seems strange or different but experience life, travel and be curious.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

An unexpected meeting

Eliana Spampinato

LM Scienze Filosofiche

Destination: University of Stuttgart, Germany

In a moment of crisis in Stuttgart Eliana Spampinato meets a friendly secretary and discovers that it really is a small world.

My name is Eliana Spampinato, I'm a student at Ca Foscari University in Venice, enrolled in the Magistral in Philosophical Sciences and I would like to tell you about an event that occurred during my recently completed Erasmus study in Germany, at the University of Stuttgart. Even though it was my second Erasmus, I was very excited and worried as I would have to learn a language as difficult as German, so when I had to go to the studio of one of my German teachers, I was terrified of having to express myself in German; I knew I could speak English, but it was as if my brain had decided I no longer knew any language other than Italian I was so afraid, that I had finally decided to go home and write a simple email to the professor, when his secretary came out of the office and gave me a warm smile as she invited me to come in with her hand. With a lump in my throat, I entered.

While I was trying to organize myself mentally to formulate a logical and grammatically correct speech in English, she told me, in Italian, 'Don't worry, I speak a little in Italian'. At the moment, I thought I misunderstood and stared at her, bewildered. From my look, she understood what I had thought and she burst into a thunderous laugh while I didn't know what to think or do. She returned to look at me and she explained that had done, a few years ago, an Erasmus in Bologna and that she had also visited the city of Venice and Treviso. At that point, I smiled and relaxed thinking about my city and Venice and I told her that in Italy I was living in Treviso and that I was a student at the university Ca' Foscari in Venice. She opened her eyes wide and she went to her desk to show me a power point she was doing right on the city of Treviso and on a historical fact that had really happened in 1214.

While we were talking, time passed, but we two weren't realizing that, because we were telling each other a bit about our lives, drinking tea and sipping coffee. Ania, this was her name, was from Austria and she loved

Italy, so much she had melancholy and wanted to help me solve all the things I had to do. As the saying goes: wanting is power. In half an hour she managed to do what I could do in two hours at least: she called to my German Erasmus coordinator and told her to be found in her office because I needed to talk to her and she also called one my professors to give me the exam certificate; she could not talk to him, but she told me to leave my contact information because she would have thought about it. I, astonished, looked at her and thanked her for all she had done for me; she smiled at me and told me that it was she who thanked me for keeping her company, for having listened to her and for having talked to her a little about her beloved Italy. I smiled at her and told her we could stay in contact, if she pleased her. And she immediately told me she would like it very much. After leaving my phone contact, we said goodbye and, once! had left the office, I realized that I had been afraid for nothing.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Another side of China

Cecilia Spassini

LT Lingue, culture e società dell'Asia e dell'Africa mediterranea

Destination: Jilin Huaqiao University, Changchun, China

Cecilia Spassini decides to take control of her life in China by signing up for extracurricular activities: a dance club, and a volunteering group working with the disabled.

I have thought so many times about putting my experience abroad down, because I really enjoy writing about important facts, and maybe read them in the future. But since I came back, I couldn't do this. I strongly think that the reason is the difficulty of describing in a few lines an experience lasted five months, and this blocked me before starting. At the same time, when someone asks me: 'So, how is China?', I always answer with short sentences, or also jokes, and maybe by stereotyping. I would probably need so many hours to explain all my feelings and what I have thought during that time abroad. So that's the perfect occasion to start.

It happened that I won a scholarship in an unusual city: Changchun. I've met so many people who told me that for their first experience they decided to go to Peking or Shanghai, which are the main cities, but I accepted this challenge, without thinking about it very much, and so I chose it.

Changchun is a city located in the north east part of China, six hours from Peking. It has six million people and it is the capital of the Jilin province. Winter comes very fast: days, at the beginning of November, are already shorter and temperatures start going down, arriving to the average temperature of -20°C. The city offers some beautiful parks in which you can have a walk, you can visit the palace of the last emperor and you can ski during winter. The rest is all under construction. I tried, during autumn, when it wasn't too cold yet, to find some glimpse, some alleys, some typical shops, and I can't say I didn't find them. But the sensation of finding myself in a city I didn't belong to, and even more, in a city which repulses and doesn't host, never left me. High buildings, all the same, listless colors, few vegetation, lot of pollution, grey sky, streets and unfinished places. Gradually, temperatures started to decrease, and so I was forced to stay in inner places and I used to go out just for a few hours. I noticed that, at the beginning, there were some beautiful lotus flowers in the little lake inside the campus, but they suddenly disappeared, and the view was very desolating.

Even if I was very enthusiastic about living in the other part of the world, far away from my routine and my monotony, after a while I was already counting the days of my return. I also have to add that there were very restrictive rules imposed by the university: the curfew was very soon (at a quarter past ten), we were obliged to a compulsory attendance for the lessons (even if you were ill, you couldn't skip the lesson, otherwise they could decrease your mark), and they also kept checking your room. I felt like in a jail, and this made me nervous and not so disposed to open to this new world and to its new culture.

At a certain point I decided that I couldn't keep on doing like this: I started to take control of the situation, and thanks to my will I managed to make my experience unforgettable. I enrolled in two school's clubs: the dance one and the volunteering one. The second one, in particular, really surprised me. I made some interesting activities, such as going with disabled people: there was a day dedicated to them, in which they were trying to find out they're perfect soul. I found it a very original idea, that I've never seen in Italy. At the same time, I tried to concentrate on Chinese lessons in an active way, I mean not only by making my homework done, but by talking a lot in class, and by asking questions. I talked with shoppers, with taxi-drivers, with pedestrians.

I gradually realized the presence of another China, made of very friendly people who I can speak with, built on diligent workers, always ready to help you every moment they could. I found people who offered me some tea on the road; I found foreigners spreading their vivacity and their passion in everything they did. So I can say that, despite what I expected, the experience gave me a lot and changed me for the better.

During a trip in Peking I met some girls who were doing my same experience in Shanghai, and they told me they had many facilities. What shocked me is that they kept on complaining anyway, and I still don't know why. So I thank the destiny, or the coincidences that brought me in Changchun: I learned to appreciate the smallest actions, to face bigger difficulties, to find out new things by myself and learning to know them better. When I left Italy I didn't know anything, if not just at an academic level, about China and Chinese people. I didn't know what I could have expected and, even if I think I understood this huge and mysterious culture, I just know a little part of it, and I have a lot more to learn. What I realized is that there are many aspects I can't stand and which would bring me not to integrate in a society like this; but at the same time there are other aspects which I admire. Thanks to this incredible adventure, I can finally say that the more I travel, the more I see many beautiful places. The more I know about new cultures and the more I can appreciate my mother country. Travelling makes you appreciate what you have, and it encourages you to experience with your own eyes different situations, with the curiosity of a traveller, not of a tourist.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Grandma, I'm going to Morocco!

Marta Veronese

LM Lingue, Economie e Istituzioni dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea

Destination: EGE Rabat University, Morocco

Marta Veronese grapples with the powerful emotions unleashed in Morocco by Eid al-Adha, the Muslim feast of sacrifice.

Everyone knows Morocco. Couscous, Tajine, Spices, Joint.. but can you imagine how it's real life there? I couldn't. Well, I thought I could but I ensure you that I was wrong; well that's what happens when you decide to reject destinations like Barcelona, Paris, Amsterdam and you prefer going overseas and truly immerse yourself in the culture you had been studying for years.

My first day in Morocco can perfectly resume my life there.

I arrived in Rabat at midnight and directly went to the apartment I had seen when I still was in Italy on the internet and whose owner I had negotiated with (yes, if you go to Morocco, never forget to negotiate! You can buy a Berber carpet for 50€ instead of 350€). The apartment was awful, it smelt so badly and it was so full of mold I couldn't breathe; moreover I was kicked out of the house because I refused to rent it. So I found myself in the middle of the night in the capital of Morocco with two suitcases and had no idea of what I was going to do. Fortunately Morocco has two sides, people who want to fool you and the other 90% who looks forward to help you; Luckily in this 90% there was my Moroccan friend Anas who picked me up and brought me in a pub to drink something (yes know.. first thing I did in Morocco? Drank a Belgian beer, so typical). Not only Anas helped me finding a house but also hosted me for 4 days in his beautiful villa and prepared me tea, which became my favorite: it's nothing else but green tea with mint and an enormous amount of sugar.

On the following weekend occurred the biggest festivity in the Muslim world, *'īd al-kabīr*, so I decided to take my first journey: Marrakesh and Essaouira. Marrakesh, called the red city of Morocco because of the predominance of this color in most of the buildings, is an amazing chaos where if you stop and stare into space just for one second, in an heartbeat you find yourself surrounded by Moroccans trying to sell you the best tajine pot in town or twenty 'handmade' Fatima's hands which

are identical to the ones of every other peddler in Morocco. If you turn on the other side you can also find other people willing to show you how to reach your hotel whose location they exactly know, even before you tell them its name. Eventually you end up following a random makeshift guide, while full of souvenirs bought for half price.

Then I moved to Essaouira, a wonderful little town by the ocean which I could never forget. On Friday I woke up and went out for breakfast with no idea of what I was going to go through. Streets were completely empty, shops were closed, houses were gated, there was no living soul outside, I could just hear the sound of the wind crashing the trees. There was blood everywhere, pieces of bones, horns... it seemed like the beginning of a horror movie. All of a sudden I heard children screaming and I saw them running towards me with a bucket, in which there were the entrails of an animal that they were collecting from the street.

Epiphany! During *ʿīd al-kabīr* Muslims are used to sacrifice a mutton to Allah. They slit it without causing it death, then let it walk while it's still alive so it can lose the excess blood and finally they kill it; afterwards they skin it and prepare it to be cooked while kids collect the entrails; every process takes place in the street, as it is a collective festivity. This is what I mean when I talk about going into a culture, discover every side of it, its customs and traditions, even the most horrifying from the western point of view. That night I was invited by a local family who shared with me their holy meal. That mutton was delicious, cooked with plumbs and almonds.

The last experience I want to talk about is the most powerful memory I have about Morocco. I was with a big group of people from my university in Rabat, with whom I rent a coach and left for the south. It was the longest journey ever: 17 hours driving, with the driver who was reckless, like every other Moroccan driver. We danced, we played cards, 'never have I ever', 'would you rather', we kissed, we cried and finally we arrived.

We arrived in the exact middle of nowhere. The coach stopped, we got off and in front of us, the desert. There was nothing around us, only tons of sand and just beyond, nestled deep in the rolling dunes, a tiny rickety tent which was our place to sleep. Actually that night we stayed outside, the sky was astonishing, full of sparkling stars; Try to imagine the situation: close your eyes, total silence, the wind is blowing and moving the sand that crashes your skin, the sky is bright and immense. A human being, surrounded by nature. I still remember the peaceful feeling I felt that night.

The following morning we woke up at 5, we climbed the highest dune nearby and contemplated the sunrise. The sun was extremely bright and big, reflecting its light on the sand. In North Africa in the early morning Bedouin shepherds bring their flock to the well, walking for hours and hours just to water them; we were so lucky to witness this beautiful moment, when we saw a group of wild dromedary camels. They were

twenty or thirty, of different colors and sizes running toward the well and behind them, the shepherd with a stick and a kefiyah in his head. I was breathless looking at wild nature.

Morocco changed me; sometimes it was really hard, but I believe that tough experiences challenge you and eventually make you grow.

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A journey to the centre of myself

Valentina Zago

LT Economics and Management

Destination: European Union Experts, Brussels, Belgium

Finding herself by chance at the scene of a terrorist attack which had taken place the previous year, Valentina Zago decides she has to engage more completely with her surroundings to make her mobility a success.

‘Practice without theory is blind, as blind is theory without practice.’

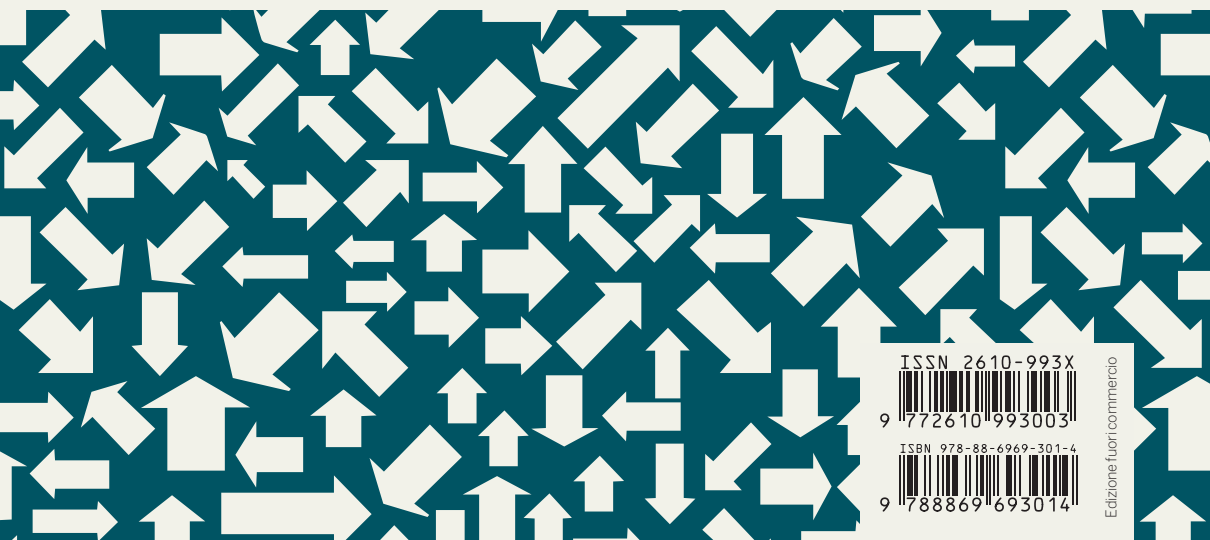
This has been claimed more than twenty centuries ago by the ancient Greek rhetorician and philosopher Protagoras, considered the father of sophistry. And what's more true than this? I have always been convinced that theory and practice are two complementary elements in any field. Especially in personal and professional training, I believe that the theory learned in books, notions, formulas, concepts cannot benefit 100% if not accompanied by practice, by the concrete application of these rules, concepts and notions. It was precisely for this reason that, at the dawn of the third academic year, I decided to start a traineeship with the Erasmus+ international mobility program, which I believed to be not be just an educational opportunity (both from an academic and personal point of view), but a necessary step in my life path. I had the opportunity to visit Brussels during the months preceding my internship and to deepen my knowledge about the European Union's history, and it was this interest that led me to seek a traineeship that was connected with the huge institutional world of international communication that is present in that city, which I believe will be the fulcrum and the starting point of the macro-economic events that will take place in the future. So I left on September 15th, alone and with a city of about a million and a half inhabitants ready to welcome me, ready to face new adventures and clash with a city that I knew as a tourist, to learn millions of new things and to start an internship that would have put me in contact with new people ready to teach me something new every day. But it was when I landed in Belgium that I realized how much I had underestimated the difficulties that I would have encountered during my trip: although I had been looking for accommodation for months, when I arrived in Brussels, I did not have a roof under which I could sleep and, above all, no known face that could have helped me. Unfortunately, this

last detail turned out to be the most difficult thought to live with. After two days spent looking for accommodation and sightseeing around the city, I managed to find a temporary accommodation: two weeks in co-housing with three Belgian girls. I thought things were settling down, but it was when I moved in the apartment that I realized how lonely you can feel even if you are sharing a house. The girls came home only late at night and stayed closed in their rooms without saying a word, while I was waiting them with dinner prepared by me (despite not being an amazing cook) to be shared, excited to have a conversation about who they were, what interesting things they had done during their life or even just about how they had spent their day. I found myself sharing the evenings and weekends with only myself, and that days seemed to last forever, marking every centimetre of the 852 km that separated me from my parents and all the people I love. This was also due to the fact that at work I had only one colleague, who lived on the opposite side of the city and that in the evenings was said to be too busy to spend some time together. All this, however, changed on a Saturday afternoon when, while I was going to visit the Atomium, I realized I could not do it by foot, so I decided to take the metro. I went to the first available stop and went down the stairs. I found myself in a rather strange place: the walls were dirty, falling and chipped, but it was not a simple little 'shabby stop; it was cold, full of sadness, gloomy. It was the following seconds that I realized where I was: Maelbeek station, where one of the bombings carried out by ISIS terrorists took place a year before. I remembered all the images that the whole world had seen on the news, like those of the attack at Zaventem airport, where I had landed two weeks ago. I realized how certain images seem distant and do not affect us so closely until we find them in front of us: men, women and children fleeing, covering their faces with blood or trying to trudge among the turnstiles, holding a leg or an arm. Those images were true, they had happened here. 57 people died and 340 were injured there. I thought about how important life is and how (unfortunately) the possibilities to shine during our lives can be cancelled without warning and without remorse. So I decided to put my legs on my shoulders, to be able to make my stay in Brussels and all my life a challenge to myself, a constant attempt to seek new opportunities and new hopes. So I started to participate in dozens of events organized by the European institutions and so I managed to get a pass for the Parliament. In the meantime I found a much nicer and cosy apartment shared by four amazing guys and I met new girls with whom I am still in contact. In addition to this, I also had the opportunity to work on issues such as tax evasion, which led me to choose this theme for the thesis that I am working on at the moment.

You always feel disoriented when you are thrown out of your reassuring corner, but you always have to see the positive side of each

experience, always feeling up and pushing yourself to your limits and feeling electrified to overcome them. I decided to challenge life, to do my utmost to ensure that every possibility is grasped. To know that I have the possibility to shape my life at will is a luxury for me, a continuous stimulus. That's the way things are from my point of view. Simply, I have to live.

To mark 150 years of being 'Open to the World' Ca' Foscari invited students to write about their mobility experiences abroad, and to focus on a learning experience – not necessarily a formal one. More than a hundred students participated. This volume brings together the winning accounts and all the short and long listed entries. As well as illuminating the significance of the mobility experience to students' personal development and celebrating fundamental human values of tolerance, friendship, and hospitality, they reveal a great well of creative resources in the use of English as a lingua franca.



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