

Oh, to live in Spain...

Hi! My name is Iulia, I'm 24 years old and I come from a small town in Romania called Roman. I have three older siblings that I love, and a dog that's been by my side for years. I've always lived a pretty simple life, in a place that's quiet, rural and kind of traditional. Roman didn't offer many opportunities, but I was happy there. Growing up, I couldn't understand why everyone was leaving. Some people would say, "Go to college, come back, open a business here, it's a safe town." Others would say, "Never come back, go and discover the world." I was stuck in the middle. I didn't know who to believe or what I wanted to do.

Time passed fast. Suddenly, I was 18 and life started to feel serious. Too serious. I told myself it was time to take life into my own hands but then, something unexpected happened. The pandemic. That meant panic, confusion and plans ruined. I ended up studying from home for three of my six bachelor's semesters. In that time, a lot changed. My mom faced health issues, and we had to move cities. I also lost some personal relationships that mattered a lot to me. I felt lost, like I wasn't myself anymore, like I didn't trust myself anymore. In that moment, I knew I had to do something to get back on my feet.

It was a random day when one of my sisters asked me "Why don't you try to go a semester abroad with Erasmus? Don't you have that opportunity at your university?". I tried to find all reasons not to go, starting from fear, the lack of money and the shame of not being the best English speaker, but that was never enough. Something in me was telling me that this experience was going to change my life. So I finally said yes.

The process was long, full of documents and waiting, and honestly, I didn't believe it would actually happen until I landed in Spain. But then it did. I arrived in Málaga with two suitcases (well, one of them broke during my flight, so it was in fact one suitcase and a bunch of clothes) and had no idea what I was doing. It was my first time leaving the country alone. I didn't know anyone, I didn't speak the language and still, somehow, it felt...right. After so long, I finally felt like I was doing something for myself. I felt I was living again.



I still remember my first night in Málaga. I went out to an international event with two Romanian girls I had just met. Funny thing, they later told me they didn't invite me at first because my WhatsApp picture made me look "not nice." We laugh about that now, especially since one of them is now my roommate in Romania. That night, I barely said anything at the event. My English felt clumsy, and I was so afraid of making mistakes. I sat at a table with strangers, and after a few minutes, I had this thought: "None of these people are perfect. No one here knows each other. Why not take the chance, for real?" And that's exactly what I did, I suppressed my fear and went with the flow, one of the best pieces of advice I'm still telling myself.

The next 6 months were euphoric, I remember all of them as if I was dreaming. My first day of university in Spain felt strange, mainly because I had been a student for over a year already, but had never been to an actual class due to the pandemic. My schedule was pretty crazy. Back home, I was studying Economics and Informatics, two completely different areas combined in one degree. But in Spain, they didn't have that double major, so I had to go to classes from two different faculties, located on two different campuses far from my place. It was exhausting. I was running between classes, getting lost, being tired and sometimes even scared. I missed home, my family, everything. But I always reminded myself: I am here for a reason.

The classes were in English, but most students spoke Spanish. I tried to talk to them, to be friendly, but it felt like they weren't really open to making connections. When I joined their groups, they would switch back to Spanish. When I texted for help or notes, they didn't answer. Even professors sometimes taught in Spanish, even if the class was marked "English taught." That made me feel even more like an outsider, like I didn't belong there. I remember sitting alone in class and rushing out the moment it ended. I didn't even try to talk anymore. I just wanted to finish and go home. Except for one class. In that one, there were more international students. That helped. I started to feel like I belonged there. That class gave me a bit of confidence back.



Most of my classmates and the ones that I ended up being really good friends with were Polish. I had never met anyone from Poland before, didn't know much about their country either. But to my surprise, they were kind, funny, warm-hearted and honestly, very similar to Romanians. I always thought only Balkan countries shared that kind of culture, but I was wrong. We shared traditions, jokes, and even taught each other our languages. We became very close, and even now, three years later, we still talk. I visit them, they visit me. I feel like I gained a second family.

For those six months, English became my everyday language. I used it in class, at home, at events and with friends. Before Spain, I had never needed to speak English for more than a

few minutes at a time. But there, I was using it 24/7. That changed me. It helped me grow and see that I'm capable of more than I thought. I was always scared of English. I thought my accent was bad, that I'd make mistakes. But I learned that language isn't about perfection, it's about connection.

Of course, English wasn't enough in Spain. Spanish was everywhere. I was a little bit familiar with the language from some songs that I was listening to but, before arriving there, all I knew was "¿Dónde está la biblioteca?" (Where is the library?), which is funny because I never used it. I started with basic phrases for shopping or asking for directions. Slowly, I fell in love with the language. Spanish people speak so passionately. They talk to everyone, on the street, in shops, in restaurants. It's normal for them to be warm, to compliment strangers, to laugh out loud. One moment I'll never forget is when an older lady, my neighbor, smiled at me and said "Hola, guapa" the first time we met. That "Hello, beautiful" made me feel seen, welcomed and safe, even though I was new and nervous.

I kept learning more Spanish each day, with every conversation, every street sign, every mistake. And the more I learned, the prouder I felt. Now, after 3 years of continuous learning, I can proudly say Spanish is my third language, after Romanian and English.

Another important person from my Erasmus experience and the only Spanish person that I managed to become friends with was one of my classmates, Jaime. He was the only local who desired to show me the real Spanish lifestyle, the culture, to teach me more of the language and to practically make me feel a bit more Latin than I already am. We randomly started talking after an exam and we clicked, which happened only when my time left in Spain was less than half of it. He liked asking me questions about Romania, killing the stereotypes that foreigners have about Romanians and also liked answering my questions about Spain. At the end of my mobility, in my last week, he took his time to present me his hometown of Ronda, one of the most beautiful places in southern Spain. I really enjoyed living the slow life, outside of the big city of Malaga, being in a traditional household, eating traditional food and trying to talk with his relatives and friends as best as I could, at that point. I consider that this specific experience was the perfect end of my trip and made me feel more included, accepted. If in the beginning I felt like I wasn't in the right place, after all these people that I met and all the activities I participated in, I finally felt like my heart was full. My heart was full of love, gratitude and sadness for leaving this beautiful country and my friends.



Looking back, it feels like time flew and stood still all at once. Six months passed, and I wasn't the same Iulia anymore. I came back home stronger, more confident, more open. I had grown in ways I never imagined. And every time I doubt myself, I remember the girl who left home with nothing but one and a half suitcases and a dream, and I keep going. Writing this essay, word by word and line by line makes me want to go back in the past and hug the old version of myself, telling her how brave she actually is, despite what everyone is saying.

After Erasmus, I started doing more things that scared me. I applied for more projects, I traveled more, I stopped waiting and started living. Last summer, I went to work in the US, alone, again. I was nervous, but I remembered Spain, and I remembered who I became there. I knew I could do it. I went there with a dream, being the first one in my family to leave the continent. That showed me again that I am capable of doing it, even if it feels impossible.

Reflecting on this whole experience, I can say I achieved both the reflective and intercultural learning outcomes. First, I learned how to measure my personal development and understand myself better. I discovered that I can adapt to completely new environments,

overcome fear and rebuild my confidence. I learned to believe in myself again, even when everything felt strange and foreign. Second, I gained real awareness of other cultures and how they interact. I learned that languages carry more than words, they carry values, emotions and identity. Living in Spain, using English daily, learning Spanish on the go and building friendships across cultures helped me truly understand what internationalisation means. I now see cultural differences not as a challenge, but as a gift.

This Erasmus experience taught me more than any classroom ever could. It taught me how to take care of myself, how to connect with people from different backgrounds and how to turn fear into growth. It was not always easy, some days were hard, lonely, or frustrating, but it was real, it was honest and it made me who I am today.

I believe the most important part of personal growth is to do the things you're afraid of: to try, to fail, to get back up and to keep going. One of the biggest mottos I have now in life, after this experience, is "Do it scared, alone, tired, just do it. Someone else could only wish for this opportunity.". In only a few words, that's what Erasmus was for me, not only a mobility but a journey that challenged me and helped me find my place in the world.

In the future, I want to explore even more international opportunities. I already signed up to go to America again this summer, to work and explore new places, and I'm thinking about applying for my second master's abroad. I want to keep learning, keep growing and keep building a life that connects me with people from all over the world.

For me, Spain was just the beginning and I am so eager to find out what the future is going to bring for me.

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