

# **Becoming Myself Across Borders:**

## **A Reflection on Growth Through Erasmus+**

When I left for Prague, I didn't expect to find the answers to questions I hadn't even dared to ask. I had hoped to develop academically, yes, but what unfolded was a layered transformation—intellectual, emotional, and deeply human. My Erasmus+ experience, followed by an internship in Tenerife, didn't just give me tools for my future career in ecology and marine conservation—it gave me tools to understand myself.

### **1 Prague: The Unfolding of Self**

The first few weeks in Prague were a storm. Emotionally, I felt scattered. There's a recurring pattern I've noticed in myself—whenever I'm placed in a new environment, a sense of self-destruction surfaces. I rush, I lose sleep, I forget to eat, and I crave connection almost to the point of obsession. It's as if I don't know how to love myself until others show me I'm worth it. But something shifted in Prague.

It started at an Erasmus Club event in Vysehrád, where I found myself in a deeply personal conversation with one of the organizers. He asked questions no one had asked before—not just about my studies, but about my patterns, my pain, and why I tend to unravel in unfamiliar spaces. It was uncomfortable, but illuminating. I realized I had been trying to prove my worth to others so they could reflect it back to me. That conversation made me stop and confront the cycle.

Then, on a field course for zoology, something clicked. We were walking through České Budějovice, hiking from one site to another, when I felt it: peace. I had never been much of a hiker—walking seemed boring unless it had a purpose—but there I was, chatting, laughing, observing nature, and thinking: I created this for myself. That moment showed me that ecology wasn't just a subject I liked—it was the space where I felt most grounded. I realized that not only do I want to be an ecologist—I already am one, in my way of thinking, observing, and connecting.

My academic program of the last year at home is split—molecular biology in the first half, ecology in the second. Prague gave me the chance to live out the latter half fully. Working on group projects, attending fieldwork, and adjusting to a new academic language pushed me. But

it also affirmed something: my home university is doing a good job. I was proud of the foundation I had and grateful to test it in new terrain. I woke up at 4 a.m. for field courses and loved it. I saw my own dedication in action, and I embraced the part of myself that thrives in problem-solving, consistency, and projects that demand depth.

A defining moment came in a conversation with a professor who had done diatom research in Antarctica. I was captivated. The idea of combining laboratory work with extreme environments felt right, almost like a reflection of my emotional landscape. I often operate in extremes—either light or dark—and rarely in the grey. That’s something I’m working on. But that idea of extremity, of pushing limits in a controlled way, resonates with me. Antarctica became a symbol—not just of career ambition but of personal truth: I want to go to the ends of the Earth to understand it better, and in doing so, understand myself.

Prague was the place where I first felt confident that I’m choosing the right path. It also revealed to me how much I complicate things—internally and culturally. In Slovenia, I often feel caught between the life I want and the one others expect of me. There’s an unspoken standard—what success should look like, how ambition should manifest. Wanting a life of simplicity, of living in a tent by the ocean, of being dirty but fulfilled, doesn’t quite fit. But Prague showed me that fulfillment doesn’t have to be flashy. It can be walking through nature, talking with people who get you, and feeling—quietly but certainly—that you are on your path.

## **2 Tenerife: The Ocean as Teacher**

Tenerife brought a different kind of transformation. If Prague was where I found my academic footing and emotional grounding, Tenerife was where I fell in love—with the ocean, with marine biology, and with the sense of being part of something vast and vital.

I’ve always wanted to be an explorer. Not just in the romanticized sense, but in the sense of diving deep—mentally and physically—into problems and figuring out solutions. The ocean, covering most of our planet, is one of the greatest problems and mysteries we face today. Pollution, biodiversity collapse, habitat destruction—it’s all happening underwater, often unseen. And in Slovenia, with only 50 kilometers of coastline, marine conservation feels like a fantasy, like a unicorn. But it shouldn’t be. We’re all connected to the sea, and we’re all responsible for it.

Working in a dive center opened my eyes to how little many people know about the ocean. Some were afraid of fish. Others didn’t even know what a sea urchin looked like. At first, I was

baffled. Then I realized—this is why I want to be a marine biologist. To educate, to excite, to inspire. To fight for the “little guy”—whether that’s a nudibranch, a coral, or a seahorse.

Nudibranchs, actually, are what pulled me in. Their biological adaptations are wild—they can eat cnidarians, steal their stinging cells, and repurpose them in their own skin. What?! That’s the kind of beauty and intelligence that thrives in the sea. And I want to protect it. Because right now, the Mediterranean is a shadow of what it could be. We’re losing biodiversity before we even understand it.

Diving itself changed me. The first time I saw a turtle swim directly over my face, I forgot to breathe. Not literally (I know how to dive!), but emotionally. It felt like love. Being underwater is like meditating—no weight, no noise, just you and the world as it was meant to be. For the first time, I felt safe. I felt home. In the silence of the ocean, I heard myself most clearly.

### **3 Intercultural Connections and Challenges**

Both Prague and Tenerife showed me that, despite cultural differences, people want the same things: love, acceptance, connection. But they seek it in different ways.

In Prague, I encountered people who were analytical, reflective, and structured—traits I recognized in myself. In Tenerife, I met people who were expressive, spontaneous, and emotionally open. I had stereotypes—especially about Spanish people. I thought they would all be overly touchy, proud because of colonial history, and unable to speak English. I was wrong. Yes, they’re expressive. Yes, their pronunciation is unique. But they’re also generous, multilingual, and deeply kind.

Interestingly, it wasn’t just locals I learned from—it was the expats. Italians, Scandinavians, Argentinians, all rebuilding lives far from home. I met a guy from Scandinavia who taught me what stability could look like, even if his emotional expression was more subtle. I realized that cultural tone can mask—or reveal—more than we think. And I saw my own patterns mirrored back at me: the need to rush, to connect, to overcompensate when I feel unstable.

But I also saw what happens when people are given the space to rebuild their families, their lives, their identities. Tenerife was full of people who left home not to escape, but to heal. And

in that, I found healing too. I learned to ask for what I need. A hug. A conversation. A moment of stillness.

They showed me how much I struggled to express needs and insecurities. It made me reflect deeply on how, back home in Slovenia, there's often a cultural tendency to struggle silently. We are very afraid to appear weak and be judged. I realized how much this held me back. Vulnerability is now no longer a weakness but a bridge. And inclusion is not just a word, it's a practice. We made time for each other's stories, decompressing after long days, turning private pain into communal care. And suddenly living in the moment didn't feel like a failure anymore.

#### **4 Conclusion: Growth That Transcends Borders**

My Erasmus+ experience gave me much more than academic credits. It gave me clarity, direction, and a sense of self. I learned that my passion for ecology and marine conservation isn't just intellectual—it's personal, emotional, and deeply rooted in my desire to protect what is misunderstood or unseen. I learned to navigate cultures, challenge my assumptions, and hold space for emotional complexity—both mine and others'. In Prague in particular, I found stability, curiosity, and purpose. In Tenerife, I found courage, love, and belonging. These experiences showed me that identity is not something fixed, but rather fluid. And inclusion isn't given, it's created.

Despite this growth, I know there's more to work on. I still sometimes struggle to clearly express my needs, especially in professional or uncertain settings. I want to build more confidence in setting boundaries, in asking for help, and in standing my ground. I also want to deepen the kinds of connections I make—less surface-level, more open, more real.

Professionally, I hope to strengthen my diving and field research skills and to explore how science can be made more inclusive through education and communication. In Slovenia, where marine biology is rarely taught or talked about, I want to become someone who brings the ocean closer—through research, outreach, and storytelling.

Above all, I learned that I don't need to chase extremes to find meaning. Sometimes, it's in the quiet moments—walking through a forest in the Czech Republic, or floating under a turtle in the Atlantic—that the truth finds you.

And when it does, it feels like home.

Poetry for me is form of vulnerable expression. The poet has to find creative ways to reflect on its experiences. On the other side the reader is persuaded to find meaning in the material as a reflection that will lead to a higher understanding of the poem.

I have enjoyed poetry althroughout my life and have found great meaning in creating it myself. Sometimes it subtles the caos, sometimes it's just a way to tell a story. I feel that poetry initiates a lot of emotions in a reader, therefore including topics as impressive as these international experiences have been for me, is a challenge.

Reflecting on all of the emotions and memories created through academical, professional and personal experiences has highlighted how much I have evolved. I have been able to expand my academical and professional horizons and broaden the limits of my comfort zone.

Enjoy my poem:

## **Ending**

Instantly felt.

Never forgotten.

In the ocean with a forest of kelp,

or a Czech forest with a tree trunk almost rotten.

This is the story of two worlds,

colliding and embracing.

Grinding eachother like friendly swords.

Right now,

I am the only one that is chasing.

In the city under the trees,

I found structure.

I found myself in the city park's breeze

when I studied another lecture.

I got lost for a little time.

It was all that history in architecture.

Mass-produced memories that didn't feel mine.

There is no other feeling than being prevailed by nature.

Being fluent in nature,

listen to water and air,

drink from a glacier,

do I dare?

Dare to be bold.

Show respect in all forms.

Should I stick my fingers in gold?

I am no hero to interact with the storms.

On the broad spectrum of words,

It allowed me to finally see.

What it's tranquility restores.

Is oxygen for the tree, that is me.

In the ocean,

a peace and stillness overtook me.

I suddenly felt an emotion.

The instinct has shown that I can be free.

In the underwater there was connection,  
the movement and reefs,  
forming a colourful reflection.  
A beauty never to be in the hands of thieves.

The darkness and cold  
are beautiful there too.  
The shimmer in light  
always showing what is next to you.

In the chaos of it all,  
I found stability.  
Miraculously knitted ball  
that allowed some mobility.

Moving through places,  
experiences or people,  
they all leave heartborne traces,  
where letting go of all of them is not that simple.

In the vision I have now projected,  
the “passion of life” wave,  
my heart has been respected.  
And grounding is no longer what I crave.

