

## **Erasmus Experience in Thessaloniki**

I felt a mix of nervousness and excitement when preparing for my Erasmus semester amidst the Corona pandemic. But I can say now as a spoiler that it was absolutely worth it despite the challenging circumstances.

### Preparation:

The application process started early in July for the following summer semester. My coordinator at the home university was easily reachable through e-mails or via phone calls and I did not feel less supported even though in person meetings were not possible at that time. But be prepared that the process consists of a lot of paper work both for the home and host university. Also, my patience was tested when I did not receive my letter of acceptance from the Aristotle University (Auth) until the very end of December. Other than that, the Erasmus Office at Auth for incoming students was very responsive and kept me updated.

### Accommodation:

Having only one month left before I had to be in Thessaloniki the search for an accommodation was easier than expected. But only until I found out that I had to join Facebook groups for that. Though, I have to admit that I was probably also very lucky and that there is always a risk of being scammed. After finding other Erasmus students who have already been living in flats of the same landlady with who I was talking to, I ended up taking a room in a five-person flat close to the center of Thessaloniki (also known as Kamara). My room had its own balcony which I only later find out is usually very common to have in Thessaloniki. When I arrived, everything was as pictured and as arranged with my landlady. Again, I was lucky as my landlady pretty much owned the whole building so that there were living at least 15 other Erasmus students. This was the easiest way to meet new people in the very beginning and some of them became my very close friends until the end.

### Academic Study:

Classes were held online due to the pandemic which had its benefits, I have to admit. The law program felt like one of the best as we had tons of courses to choose from that were mainly created for us Erasmus students and thus, were all held in English. The professors were very supportive, motivative and even open for discussions not mainly connected to the study topics. Studying law here felt more political, interactive and being up to date which was very refreshing. Also, there are the academic 15 minutes which mean that the classes would always start 15 minutes later than officially announced on the schedules. We were also able to change classes easily which was nice in order to try different classes in the first weeks before making a decision considering the variety of classes Auth has offered. I was motivated and took 5 law classes plus one Greek language class. Even though it was hard to implement what I have learned in

Greek class to everyday life as we all spoke English with one another, I still think it was very helpful to know some basics and be able to read Greek. After all, I spend half a year in this country and knowing the language will bring you closer to the culture. The exams were online starting beginning of June and were a mix of multiple choice, essay questions and oral examinations. With a little bit of studying, they were all manageable to pass and it was even possible to receive good grades.

### Social Life:

The pandemic restricted our social life the most, at least until May. ESN, the Erasmus Student Network of Auth tried hard to organize online events in order for us to meet each other. It was allowed to meet in small groups outside, so the Castle and the Umbrellas became the main gathering spots. Later WhatsApp groups for all different types of sports were created to meet and play together. Also taking walks to the Cantina for University food became a regular, especially since we were able to receive free food three meals a day. For being free, the food was a lot and was as some would say eatable. Life drastically changed when the restaurants and bar opened in May and it was allowed to travel. With every restriction lifted each Erasmus moment became more as you imagined it to be without a pandemic. Thessaloniki has some very nice tavernas and for the amount of money you spend, you can get so much food. My favorite one was “H Rouga” as it offered the best (vegan) moussaka, a traditional Greek food one must have tried. All in all, being vegetarian in Greece was very easy, as all the appetizers are mainly vegetarian and as it is very common to just order a bunch of them to share. I love to cook for which I did my weekly grocery shopping at the fresh market of Kapani. There they offered all sorts of fresh and organic vegetables and fruits for little money but also fresh fish or meat. Further, there are very nice coffee places, especially at the seaside, where the freddo espresso is one of the best Greek inventions ever. It was all we drank when the temperatures rose up to 35 Degrees. ESN organized a bunch of trips and little parties to connect us in person. A must see is Chalkidiki once we were able to travel. It is only a 1,5-hour drive from Thessaloniki but so beautiful and very local, just as you would imagine Greek beaches.

In general, Thessaloniki is a nice spot to live in when it comes to travel. It is only a 4-hour train drive to Athens. But while I loved and would recommend Athens 100% for a city trip, Thessaloniki was personally the better choice to live in. Everything is much closer in walking distance - sights as the seaside with the white tower, the castle, Kamara, Ladadika with alle the tavernas and bars and the university itself – and feels a lot more like a student city. I felt a lot safer in Thessaloniki than in Athens.

Further, there are very cheap flight tickets to catch from Thessaloniki going to islands of the Cyclades, Crete or even Cyprus. Once the semester ended in the end of June many of us took the chance to do some islands hopping and it was amazing. Some even took the chance to visit some islands in June and that is the perfect month as summer just has started, everything is cheaper as tourism has not fully bloomed yet and you have many places just for yourself. But even close around Thessaloniki there are many must

have seen places that are not for nothing marked as UNESCO world heritage sights, such as the Meteora Monastery, hiking up 3.000 meters on the Mount Olympus or visiting archaeological sites like the one of Philipp the II, the father of Great Alexander. There is always something to see for everyone.

Conclusion:

If I could do it all over again, I would not hesitate any second to say yes again. It was six months full of adventures and I loved every minute of it. The people from all over Europe that I have met and made memories with were a huge part of it. 100% I would recommend this once in a lifetime experience to anyone else. It has changed all of Erasmus students for the better and I am so thankful that I have received this chance from Erasmus+.

