

Hello Everyone! It's time for a new story about an Erasmus experience! Sara will tell us about her adventures in Ankara, Turkey :)

Hey Sara! Please tell us something about yourself :)

Hello everyone! :) My name's Sara and I'm 25 years old. I'm from Poland and currently living in Prudnik. I study English Philology with the specialisation of Teacher Training Programme. My biggest hobbies are travelling, exploring different cultures and food :) I also enjoy taking photos and creating social media content.

Could you tell me what place you decided to choose as your Erasmus destination? What was your first feeling when you arrived to there?

For my Erasmus destination, I've chosen Ankara city in Turkey. I had been there before the exchange programme two times while visiting my partner. That's why when I've arrived there I felt like I know this place quite well. In contrary to other Erasmus students who see a certain place for the first time, I didn't have a big moment of surprise. Yet, I've been extremely curious about exploring the capital city more extensively. From my previous experience of visiting Ankara, I've had some general associations about the city. However, during my exchange, I've discovered the area from many different cultural aspects. I've seen beautiful places which I haven't seen before.

Why did you decide to choose this place as your Erasmus destination?

I have been associated with Turkey for several years. My partner comes from this wonderful country. I love exploring Turkish culture, learning about traditions, visiting beautiful regions, getting to know the local people. Erasmus is a wonderful opportunity to combine a tourist and cultural passion with the option of living in a given place.

Tell me a little bit more about the application process. Is it hard? Do you have any suggestions to students who want to take part in Erasmus+ internship program as well? Was it hard to find this internship? How did you find it?

To be honest, the whole process was a bit stressful for me because of many unknown aspects. I think this feeling is common when you do something for the first time in your life. The first big issue I've had to handle was my programme. Due to the fact, my specialization is Teacher Training Programme, I've had to have in my mind to take the psychological and pedagogical set of courses. The problem has appeared while choosing the courses at my partner department's university. There has been the Literature department to choose so I knew it might be problematic in my case. Surprisingly, owing to the worldwide COVID 19 situation and the fact that classes have been taken online, I solved that problem by participating in both universities classes. From Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi, I've chosen courses involving literature mostly and from the University of Opole, I could continue the whole teaching training programme courses. I have to admit that it has been challenging but worth taking. Choosing Turkey as my destination has involved additional procedures like handling visa and insurance. I could not simply use the European health insurance card there. For the students who want to take part in the Erasmus+ programme exchange, I would suggest not to wait too long about organising their documents, especially if it comes to Learning Agreement. From my experience, I've been waiting too long to get the information about available courses from my partner university. As a result, I ended up way too busy and nerve-racking dealing with all those papers just before the departure. And what's the most important - just go for it! It's a life-changing adventure that you won't regret doing.

Did you think long time whether you should do it? What ultimately convinced you?

I've been thinking about the Erasmus+ programme for a good few years. I've always been curious about it, but on the other side, I kept working and studying, so it's been like forever postponed dream. I think the situation has changed when I started working as a freelancer. I was able to move out and take part in the exchange. I started to talk about the idea of Erasmus+ more and more with my friends. I can say that ultimately it was a very spontaneous decision. I remember I came back from Turkey, and I noticed that there was an additional recruitment for the programme. I haven't thought much of it more and just tried it out.

What do you like the most about this place?

I fall in love with all those cafes and restaurants everywhere. The running life out of the streets and many possibilities to do in your free time always made me motivated to go out. I tried to see as much as I could every day. There are many beautiful parks in Ankara and places to hang out. I've been there during the pandemic. That's why I wasn't able to follow my plans always because of the restrictions. However, I feel like I've explored the city quite intensively.

What surprised you the most when you started to live there?

The first thing that comes to my mind is the cost of living. I always thought Turkey is a country where products prices are cheap and you can easily afford whatever you want. Indeed, it's true, but if you are a tourist and spend in a foreign currency. The economic situation is a bit different than in Poland. I had a chance to experience planning my budget differently for the months I spent there. It's been an interesting encounter for me.

Why do you think it's a good idea to study in a different country? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this decision?

At the University of Opole, I study English Philology - Teacher Training Program, and I appreciate the chance to experience learning at another university, in another country. That is a valuable experience for me as a teacher. I can notice only the advantages of the decision I've made. Honestly, I would encourage everyone to study in a different country. There's a great opportunity to live in a different culture, among people who can bring priceless experience into our life. I see it as an adventure that puts students into an unknown background where they have to adapt. It enriches valuable growth and very often, results in various perspectives.

What do you recommend doing in Ankara? How can you spend your free time there?

There are several possibilities to spend a free time in Ankara. I liked visiting my favourite districts - Bahçelievler, Maltepe, Çankaya - by walking. There are plenty of good cafes and restaurants to check out. And of course, Kızılay - the centre of Ankara, the place which is always full of people. When you get tired of crowded areas, there are many big green parks in the capital city. My favourite ones are Dikmen Vadisi, Kuğulu Park, Independence Park and Seğmenler Parkı. In the meantime, when you get hungry, I would recommend trying delicious Turkish cuisine in Düveroğlu or Aspava restaurants. There are also stunning historical mosques to explore as well as museums. I highly recommend visiting Kocatepe and Melike mosques. For culture and history fans, there is one more place in a category of must seen - Atatürk Mausoleum (Anitkabir). It is the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey. One more aspect worth mentioning - sports fields. I noticed that many Turkish people love playing sport. I found plenty of well-equipped places for

running, which I loved.

Your favourite places in Turkey and close to Ankara. What are the best places to visit? Did you visit any other places in Turkey?

During my Erasmus+ programme, I explored an amazing place close to Ankara, it's called Nallihan Bird Sanctuary. It's a colourful mountains area which gives an impression of being on a different planet when you look at it. Another location, worth visiting that I've gone to is Tuz Gölü (Salt Lake). The amount of salt makes the water look pink and purple. The view is stunning. I also visited Iskenderun, a city in southeastern Turkey for short holidays. It's the seaside place with roads full of palms, warm seawater and perfect hummus. On the way to Iskenderun, I stopped to see Ihlara Valley – a canyon formed thousands of years ago. Turkey has always fascinated me. There are so many places worth seeing. The other ones I explored and I would recommend visiting are Cappadocia, Pamukkale, Antalya, Mersin, Adana.

How about the transport? Is it hard to find buses/trains/flights to other places? Is it expensive/cheap?

Transportation in general in Turkey is common and it has a high standard. There are many options to travel between the cities, one of them are intercity buses. For me, it was a totally different experience travelling by Turkish intercity bus than in comparison to Polish intercity bus. I took a road from Cappadocia to Adana, it took about 5 hours. There was a steward who showed people where to sit. Moreover, the passengers got snacks and drinks, all included in the ticket price. In my opinion, transportation in Turkey is in a good price. One can easily find flights, buses and trains. In Ankara, there's also an underground which I took very often. There's a discount on the student's card, so it was cheap for me.

Can you describe the local people? What are they like?

I find Turkish people very hospitable, kind and helpful. They're also cheerful and very talkative. I wish I could speak Turkish, at least at the communicative level, to join the conversation whenever they've asked me of something. Even though I couldn't express myself well in their native language, there was always someone ready to help me whenever I needed it. That's why I felt comfortable and safe there, it was my second home.

Is it difficult to communicate with them in English? Do they know English or foreigners should know at least a little bit of Turkish?

With the major part of the community, it's been hard to communicate in English. However, I have to admit they always tried their best. I think it's good for foreigners to know at least basic phrases or words. I learnt some of them while doing shopping. If you hear something for several times in a certain context, it's easy to guess and follow the pattern. Of course, it doesn't work every time. I remember I saw and heard "Hoş geldin" whenever I enter the shop. After some time it's been clear to me that the phrase means "welcome". I've started using it all the time until one situation. I've been on the phone with my boyfriend because I needed a translation to buy medicines in the pharmacy. I opened the door and said "Hoş geldin" as usual. The pharmacist's face looked surprised and at the same time, my partner informed me why. "Hoş geldin" is used as a welcoming by the people who are in a certain place, not by the visitors who enter. At that moment, I realised how many times I used it in a totally different context. I think the salesmen were always too kind not to correct me :) Turkish people appreciate whenever a foreigner tries to speak their native language and that's what I told myself always.

Is it an expensive country?

It all depends on the currency that one spends money on while buying. For people who pay in Turkish lira, it's expensive. I was shocked many times when I saw the prices in the supermarkets for different products. But if you are a foreigner with euro or dollars or even with zloty, then the situation changes. For me, paying with zloty was like half of the price cheaper. So for Erasmus+ students coming to Turkey, it's cheap in comparison to EU countries.

Are there any disadvantages of choosing Ankara as your studies destination?

The only disadvantage I can think of is the location of Ankara. If you expect your Erasmus+ destination to be close to the seaside, you should consider choosing a different city. Ankara is situated in the centre of Turkey. Its region is close to the mountains, but Ankara itself is more like a big modern desert when you look at it from the suburbs.

Are classes at the University hard? Is it hard to pass exams?

The level at the Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University was the same as at the University of Opole. The only difference was in the procedure of examination. At my partner's university, I had mid-term exams and final exams. Fortunately, all of the exams were in the form of essays...10 pages essays, but still essays haha. I believe it would be different if we would have taken the classes at the university instead of online classes. It wasn't hard to pass, but still, I had to put an effort to succeed.

Your favourite Turkish food! What can you recommend to non-Turkish people?

Omg... I could talk about Turkish cuisine for hours and hours haha. If I have to choose my favourites, I would recommend chicken kebab of course. The whole service is worth taking because you don't get a kind of tortilla with meat and vegetables inside, like in Poland. The service starts with the different plates of fresh salads, sauces, grilled vegetables, etc. Then you get a plate of grilled chicken pieces, accompanied with pide (Turkish bread) and specially prepared onions. The point is to mix everything and roll with the usage of pide. It's so delicious! And of course, you haven't been in Turkey without trying baklava and Turkish tea - çay.

Would you recommend to others to come here or in general take part in the Erasmus+ program? Why?

I would recommend choosing Turkey as an Erasmus+ destination. I'm sure people would fall for this country as much as I've done. In general, the Erasmus+ programme is a wonderful opportunity to take part. It's been a great privilege for me to live and study abroad and I'm grateful I've decided to go even during the pandemics. As I've mentioned before, the exchange experience has been a valuable journey for me. The journey that no one will ever take back from me. Having this opportunity as a student in the EU is very beneficial. That's why if any of you still considering going, let it be your sign to do it :)

Thank you so much for sharing your experience with us! :)

Thank you so much for having me! :)