

My Experience in Daugavpils, Latvia Under the Erasmus+ Student Mobility Programme

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Setting foot in Europe have always been a great and almost impossible dream. Studying here is an even unimaginable thought. But, with the Erasmus+ Student Mobility Programme these things were brought to reality.

My journey to Daugavpils, Latvia in Europe is by far the farthest and most thrilling voyage of my life. The flight was long. Hopping on and off one aircraft to another, my excitement cannot be contained in hours of sleep I forced in my seat. From Amsterdam, one last, short flight and we landed in Latvia's capital city, Riga. At the airport, a relatively tall and gorgeous lady was holding a sign which reads Erasmus, letting us know that she's the one who will welcome us into our destination. She was Ms. Velta Dilba. We posed for our first few pictures and sat aboard the University vehicle that took us to Daugavpils. Along the way, we sat amazed by the beauty of the snow covering the magnificent city. Our first experience of the snow was cold but our hearts were warmed by the thought that finally, we are here. We stopped by a restaurant called "Panna" where we had our first taste of Latvian food. Fish, rice, and salad were on our plate. We also picked up a slice of cake and some bottles carbonated drinks. The first bite was like an entrance to a different place, a sign that we are now in another country. The taste of unfamiliarity was drawn in our faces making Ms. Velta chuckle a bit as she knows it was all new to us. After our first and very interesting meal, we posed for a few pictures outside the restaurant as suggested by our warm and very accommodating driver, Mr. Vjaceslavs. Then we headed to Daugavpils. We reached our dormitories and met one of our land ladies, Ms. Lilya. She communicated to us a few reminders about staying in the dorm, gave us some linen to keep us warm, and helped us to our rooms in the fourth floor of the building. Our room was spacious with a number of cabinets for our clothes and necessities. We then met Kader, the pretty girl from Turkey who arrived a few weeks earlier. She also showed us to the kitchen and talked us through how she just got used to living in the dormitory. After Kader, we met our two gorgeous roommates from Lesotho, who also will study Biology with us, Margrett and Sindiswa. After the HI's and HELLO's, we met again with Ms. Velta the following morning and was shown around the city. The visit to the city center and seeing the streets of Daugavpils was like a dream to us. The architecture of the buildings, the clothes worn by the people shouts Europe. It was something I've only seen in movies. I was astounded walking around the city. To me, it was the first day of the rest of my life. We then visited the Daugavpils University buildings in Parades iela and Vienibas iela. We met with Ms. Liene Leikuma-Rimicane in her office to say hello. She was the one who helped us through everything to finally get to Daugavpils for our master studies. An indeed approachable and accommodating person despite her understandably busy schedule. There, we also met Ms. Jelena Tamane who also helped through our visa processing. After the excursion, we did our first grocery shopping in Maxima, the store adjacent to our dormitory. We basically, did not understand anything as almost everything was written in either Latvian or Russian. Funny as it may sound, we made sure to first convert the price of whatever we picked up from Euro to our currency in Peso just to make sure we are not overspending. Then we searched for the most important item, Rice. Thank the good Lord, we were able to find packets of rice. After almost an hour of roaming around the store, we realized we weren't able to find salt. This was perhaps our first biggest challenge, to find salt. We were laughing around the store as we can't find a very simple item. We were hesitant to ask for help until one of our friends stood at the corner of the vegetables section and jokingly uttered "*And the lucky person is!..*", referring to the person we might decide to ask. An old man passed by and smirked seeming like he realized

we're in a bit of trouble finding something. In the end, we did not ask anybody and continued to roam around the store until we found salt. We thought it was so funny and will be one of our memories in our first days in Daugavpils. A couple of days passed, we were invited for an ice skating experience by one of our mentors, Anita Rukmane, to welcome us to Daugavpils. Another first for me. I was unsure if I was excited or scared as I never tried ice skating before. We got inside the skating ring and I realized it's going to be a challenging activity for me. I and my friends were outrageously on the ring side, making sure not to slip. Very surprisingly, kids who were also skating started to come to us one by one holding our hands and giving us gestures telling us they would hold us around the ring. Some middle-aged men and women who were watching on the ring side were also giving us helpful instructions on how we should correctly carry our body when sliding on the ice. It truly touched my heart. This was probably one of my most heart-warming experience in the midst of the snow cold in Daugavpils. The faces of those kind people will definitely be painted in my memory forever. The night ended and Anita walked us back to our dormitory. After the skating experience, Anita led us to an excursion around the Science building in Parades Iela and the research center in Ilgas. There we saw what we were mainly here for. The advancement of the apparatus and equipment in the laboratories was outstanding. But, what really amazed me was how integrated were the different science departments. As we met the researchers and heads of the laboratories we came to see their works and how they actually incorporated and utilize the work of one another in their own researches. That to me was incredible. These people were in love and serious about the work they do and generating new scientific knowledge. We then headed to Ilgas to see the work of few of the world's beetle experts. Before the serious stuff, Dr. Arvids Barsevkis, the man we all admire, dared us to our first snow ball fight experience. And we did. It was cold, but it was a notable experience. We then headed inside and were shown around the magnificent research building, Ilgas. Dr. Arvids showed his beetle collection and how they were kept. Both his work and Anita's work were showcased to us. We then met, Dr. Alexander Anichshenko, the expert in Carabidae beetles. He also showed us his great work and how he does it. The night after the excursion was also a remarkable one as Dr. Arvids and Anita prepared for us a traditional beef soup with sour milk which, to our taste, was so new. The day after, we had a seminar with Dr. Arvids about the Latvia and its beetle species. We learned a lot from this man who was also an expert for beetle studies. We then had our first lecture for the semester, with our teacher Anita Rukmane, for the subject Zoology and it was such a fun learning experience with a bit of a challenge.

Overall, our first few days in Daugavpils was fun, fruitful, and exciting. We are looking forward for more great experiences as we start to work with the professors for our subjects, learn more about beetle research, learn cultures, meet more people, and see the beauty of the cities of Latvia.



