

Latvia on the Flesh

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Roman philosopher Seneca said, “Luck happens when preparation meets opportunity.” This is exactly how I felt when I took the sequence of steps that brought me to the beautiful country of Latvia – *lucky*. I have always prepared myself for opportunities like this as I have always desired on studying in another country as part of my education in the field of Biology. What was once a dream now I’m experiencing firsthand. Thanks to the ERASMUS+ Mobility Program of the European Union (EU), Daugavpils University and my home institution, University of Mindanao, for making this experience possible.

It’s my first time to visit another country and I was not really able to synthesize my feelings the moment we started travelling. I was anxious to be in another place thousands of miles away from home, yet at the same time, I was excited and in bliss to be emerged in a whole new culture and environment. It was really something to look forward to and I have waited long enough. And so we journeyed for approximately 28 hours consisting of both air and land travels, as well as lay-over times. The funny thing was, I don’t feel that far from home as I embarked on every airplane we took. I was consistently convincing myself that I was placed inside a huge box and within a few hours, I was teleported to another country in Europe. That way, Philippines, *my home*, felt closer to me.

As we travelled farther, the change in culture was becoming evident in each airport we landed. I was able to see the transition of the different facial features of the population and it was very surreal to realize that the world is really huge. There are a lot of things yet to be discovered and tested. It felt that everything was possible. When we landed on Riga Airport, Miss Velta Dilba, who was very accommodating, fetched us. As we stepped outside, the chilling wind of snow seeped through our jackets and we half-realized that we are in treat of Latvia’s winter season. It was our first time to see and feel snow that we giddily created wisps of smoke from our breaths just to see how cold it was. I felt like a child in a fairytale story, as cheesy as it might sound. We travelled for another five hours from Riga to Daugavpils. Along the way, Miss Velta brought us to this restaurant named *Panna*, which means frying pan, where we ate our late lunch. It was very exciting to have our first taste of Latvian food and we were so pleased to see rice on the menu. Rice is our staple food in the Philippines and we’re not used to other alternatives. Just as we received our meals, we realized that the food servings here in Latvia were really huge for each of us. Needless to say, I was full before I could even finish all that was on my plate. Guilty.

We arrived at our dorms between 6:00PM to 7:00PM. We were literally shivering when we stepped outside of the university vehicle. The receptionist was really accommodating to our need even though there is an existent language barrier between our group and her. She was very considerate of our need to insulate ourselves as much as possible as we are not used to the weather. We were provided with extra blankets and other linens to make ourselves comfortable. We’ve also met our fellow exchange students from Turkey and Lesotho at the same night. We were so excited to see a part of the city that we went for a stroll at *Maxima* that night to buy some groceries. After that, we just slept almost like forever, our bodies impossibly tired from the trip.

The next day, we were shown around the city by Miss Velta specifically on the stores selling necessary means for our stay in the city. Almost everything overwhelmed me – the food, the people, the architecture and other mannerisms of Latvian people – but definitely in a good way. They said Latvians are shy but they don’t realize that I’m shier than them so I guess it was okay. In addition, Miss Velta took us to the main building of Daugavpils University, as well as the university’s Natural Science

Department. At first, I was curious as to the vacantness of the university halls. I've only seen three students around. Later on, I realized that the totality of this type of ambience was really comforting for learning. After that, we were welcomed by the International and Public Relations Office, with Miss Liene Leikuma-Rimicane. It was good to see a familiar face again. After the brief meeting, we were left to explore the city by ourselves which mostly consisted of a lot of photo documentation. Thankfully, we found ourselves back at the dorm in one piece.

The next days were completely bizarre. As I went to know my colleagues more, I also had the chance to mingle with the other students in part of the exchange program. We met students from Italy, England as well as Kazakhstan. It was very interesting to be a part of this small crowd coming from different backgrounds. To see them act and prepare small things, like food, gives you a glimpse of their culture. It was very enlightening and humbling. We also tried ice skating with our Zoology Instructor, Miss Anita Rukmane, who patiently advised us on how to skate. She really took a lot of extra effort to make sure that the experience was memorable. There were also Latvian children who were every eager to teach us the basics. It was kind of disappointing to see the language barrier emerging but the mere expression on the children's face was enough to let us see that they were having fun as much as we have. It was priceless. To add, the joy of trying different foods within the city was a test of wit and palatability. We were exploring foods that were suited for our taste and found out that rice was definitely a must. It takes a lot of time to get used with the food, not because it's not palatable but simply because we are not used to the taste of Western foods. In our country, we like our food with 'extras' – not extra in size but in the magnitude of taste. We like foods that are spicier, saltier, even sourer. But one thing's for sure, the variety of breads in this city is to die for. And it's available in almost grocery store making it very accessible.

We also went to Coleoptera Research Center in Ilgas where we stayed for a night. It was very exciting to see the sole building intended for beetle research. This was one of the places I was really looking forward to visiting. Former Rector Arvids Barsevskis cooked a Latvian delicacy for us which was very tasty and pleasant. He was so generous and welcoming that it felt like a home rather than a formal academic building. Aside from him, we also had the chance to reunite with Dr. Alexey Shavrin and Dr. Alexander Anichtchenko, whom we've met back in the Philippines. My admiration for these three is so high, leading in Coleoptera studies. I'm so thrilled to learn many things from them.

Aside from the Coleoptera Research Center, we also had the opportunity to witness the latest technological laboratory advances of the university. The responsible people in each laboratory were very informative on their latest research endeavors, sharing with us the milestones they have accomplished. What amazes me until now is the inter-webbing of researches from the different scientific disciplines, each resource useful for each field. For instance, the Chemistry field produces bioluminescent stains used by Parasitological studies. Everything they produced is a part of a larger unified vision that will definitely bring novel discoveries for the university. Seeing them accomplish their current goals and moving to higher fields of Biology, such as stem cell research, is something I'm really looking forward to.

Overall, my firsthand experiences in Latvia have been remarkable and life-changing. My perspective of the world has widened to measures that I haven't expected. I'm submerged in a whole new environment, breathing different alien air but I couldn't care any less. Instead, I want to dive within it as deep as I could. This is an experience that I will wholeheartedly embark to the very last minute. I just wish that I could share enough knowledge to the people around me as learning is always a two-way process. I will always try to look and recognize these opportunities that will allow me to partake on this aim. And again, I have to be prepared for it so that at the end of the day, I will not be the only one who feels lucky.





