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"They tried to make me go to Rehab, but I said Erasmus, Erasmus, Erasmus"

As a 21 year old cavalier jack of no trades and master of equally few, I embarked on an Erasmus adventure as part of my third Year Abroad in the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, located in the town of Alcalá de Henares just outside of Madrid, Spain. I hadn't heard of it either. What followed was one frantic, fun-filled fantastic foreign fiesta, far from forgotten. Despite having only six months as an Erasmus student, this proved more than enough time to enjoy everything the lifestyle offers, as well as all those hilarious stories and cultural mishaps that come with it. I hope these next few paragraphs can provide some convincing reasons of why you should do Erasmus. And help me alleviate my withdrawal symptoms.

For many, Erasmus is the first experience of living abroad for an extended period of time and it is arguably one of the most comfortable and enjoyable ways to immerse yourself in another culture whilst appreciating the challenges that living in a foreign country can pose. Before my arrival in Alcalá, I had never spent longer than a month in a non-English speaking country, nor did I know much about my destination. That would all soon change. A part of me became incredibly attached to the little town, birthplace of one Miguel de Cervantes himself. A mere glance at the magnificently well-maintained medieval University buildings had me wishing I was strolling through their extravagant courtyards in a dressing gown, casually smoking a cigarillo and expounding on all manner of intelligent things. I did not do this, but Alcalá was incredibly hard to leave behind. The University itself dates back as far as 1293 when a study program was approved by King Sancho IV, known as 'The Brave'. That's an old university, and we need more people with great nicknames founding universities these days. I want to see a University founded by "Crazy Dave".

It was not difficult to notice I wasn't a Madrileño, with my fair light-reflecting complexion in stark contrast to the mahogany veneer of los españoles. Nevertheless, despite evidently being a foreigner, Alcalá and its prominent Erasmus community welcomed me with open arms, and making friends was like looking for hay in a haystack. There is such a great bond, a sense of togetherness, in an Erasmus community, and with Facebook these days folk can get to know each other and arrange meets even before arrival! (incidentally it turns out that walking into a bar in a foreign country and asking "excuse me are you Nicolas?" is a fantastic conversation-starter). The language barrier never stops you making friends, and although conversations can sometimes resemble the ramblings of two madmen:

"Qué?"

"Sorry?"

"What?"

"Perdón"

"I don't know"

".....Si"

...you'll always find there is so much common ground across borders. Along with improving my Spanish, during my time in Alcalá I brushed up on some Italian, learned some French and remembered that I cannot speak Romanian.

I lived with an Andalusian girl who spoke no English and an Italian girl who had studied neither English nor Spanish. The set-up was like a sitcom for language students, and communication was often through the medium of mime. Together, we lived in a cheerfully 'rustic' flat with lights that, like many things in Spain, chose to take siestas and stop working for a few hours and a shower-head that couldn't stay on the wall (we never reached an understanding whereby it didn't choose to assault me). Despite all this, I will run out of superlatives to describe those six months in that flat. Living with an Italian definitely had its advantages. It turns out that being Italian means you know how to cook from birth, and they take their food seriously – we would spend ten minutes in the supermarket just choosing tomatoes and cheese and many times after a long night I would wake up in the afternoon to find an assortment of vegetables and spices were already stewing in the kitchen. During these moments I would find it difficult to make the process of pouring milk on Special K seem elaborate. The food was exquisite, and meals were just one of the ways over which we were able to bond. The three of us became really good friends and they are just two of many wonderful people I still keep in contact with, although mime is hard to achieve by email.

Erasmus grants you so many opportunities to try experiences and activities you probably wouldn't even contemplate elsewhere. In Alcalá, I went to Italian-themed barbecues, conversation exchanges, attempted acoustic versions of Christmas carols in Spanish ("Rudolph el reno Rojo-Olfateado...") and enjoyed a full-on festival dedicated to Cervantes, when the streets were full of stalls selling some of Cervantes' favourite things such as falafel, keyrings, plush toys and decorative lamp shades. All of these were appreciated in the company of other internationals, which definitely enhanced every moment. There was something indescribably special about two Englishmen, two Italians, a Romanian and a Polish girl watching a Knight ride to work on a skateboard.... I even tried my hand at group salsa classes, the source of endless entertainment. In those classes there was none of the intensity and self-awareness that might be found elsewhere. It didn't really matter how good your moves were, the Erasmus atmosphere is always relaxed and light-hearted. Still, despite half a year's worth of efforts, to say that I had not mastered the intricacies of salsa is like saying the Boston Strangler never mastered the art of the cuddle, and I continue to move round the room with all the grace of a tramp having a three-legged race with a heavily injured pony. It was all a bit of fun, and leaving the proper salsa to the Spaniards, I pursued more classic moves such as "the lawnmower" or "making a Subway sandwich" on the dancefloor during many an Erasmus night.

Of course, branching out and seeing other parts of the country is also part of the Erasmus experience, and the ESN (Erasmus Student Network) Alcalá organized memorable trips to Toledo, Barcelona, Granada and even Portugal amongst others. What's more, when ESNs link up with each other and your own Erasmus network finds another, you really begin to feel part of a genuine wider international community.

The Erasmus experience allows you to confront different sorts of challenges that living abroad poses. These can prove to be invaluable experience for the future, should you end up living in a foreign country. There is a wide-reaching sense of solidarity - that we will all encounter the same problems - and so help is always at hand to overcome these, from matriculating and making timetables in the university to finding a flat, setting up a bank account or working out why all tapas on the menu seem to come in bread (*Side-story* Seriously, more or less everything except soup on the tapas menus was served in some form of bread. Since I never ordered soup I may still be wrong on that count. Once I saw a small child munching away gleefully on a chocolate bar and honestly his mother turned to him and said "can't you at least put that in some bread or something!?" In Alcalá, bread is a legitimate solution for resolving most problems). Furthermore, living and studying abroad can often feel like putting into practice all those exam role-plays from school, such as "going to the doctors with a sore throat" which I actually had to do. Armed with six years of Spanish lessons, I still resorted to what was more or less a game of charades to convey the problem. Nevertheless, working together we got there in the end and the doctors gave me a prescription along with an A* grade for content and response. I was only disappointed I didn't receive a sticker for bravery. Other similar incidents included "going for a haircut" and "finding out why my translation class vanished". Some friends of mine faced bigger challenges which really test your resolve, such as the waterworks completely failing and beds breaking in a flat, and my suggestion to put the bed in bread as a solution wasn't appreciated. Whatever the case, the Erasmus community provides a fantastic warm environment to help you gain confidence and flourish while living abroad.

My six months in Alcalá were some of the best I have spent and ultimately I cannot recommend doing an Erasmus placement enough. The places and faces weaved themselves into the patchwork of my memory as I discovered a foreign country, one grammatically incorrect sentence at a time. As for my Spanish? Well, I came a long way from managing to screw up that most fundamental process of ordering a beer in my first week (a 7-Up arrived instead) and conversations that only covered where I am from, what I study and observations regarding shifts in weather patterns. I developed a real confidence in my own ability to convey my thoughts and ideas in Spanish. Furthermore, I learned a great deal about politics, education, lifestyles and other wider beliefs from many wise and insightful students of different nations, and all these contributed to a much deeper and refined perspective of the world which I feel I possess now.

I must confess though, I also learned a heap of completely ridiculous vocabulary. Literature and translation courses in University do tend to throw a lot of rubbish your way, and while phrases such as *empezar de cero* ("to start from scratch") and *me saca de quicio* ("it drives me mad") have proved useful, "the mules require barley" has not established itself as the phrasal gift that keeps on giving. However I still hope to get some more use out of "I will clear up their night-mess in the morning". I digress.

Being in an international community, you truly find yourself appreciating that language is far more than just words and phrases but incorporates a greater variety of skills. It's not just to what people say but how they do it – mannerisms, expressions and gestures all form part of a language as much as the words themselves and these vary between countries – Why is this person talking so animatedly? And why have they summoned large dogs? These things matter and Erasmus once again provided a fantastic social environment to develop these skills. You'll laugh, joke, chat and look confused together, and the memories will live on long after your return to the homeland.

So do it! Throw yourself out there, keep your mind open, smile, nod, get to know everyone and smile a bit more. I found myself starting each day with the adrenaline of someone fleeing the scene of a crime and every day brought another adventure of its own. It's hard not to long for that excitement again. Erasmus is all about sharing experiences and finding common ground whilst celebrating differences. So no matter where you come from, what you look like or who or what you want to be, it is a fulfilling opportunity. Keep all of this in mind, and things *always* pan out for the best on Erasmus. Pan, get it? bread? solution? Ahem.

Ed Prosser, caballero extranjero.