

My exchange experience studying abroad in Taiwan

My name is Gemma Vall Marsal. I am a 4th year at Escola Universitari Mediterrani located in Barcelona. My degree is called International Marketing. I am one of the Exchange students who went abroad in 2016 to study in a foreign university for one semester.

The country I have chosen to challenge myself was Taiwan. Before starting my degree I was really interested in Asian Culture. After 3 years of studying Chinese at the University I had the challenge to come to Taiwan, so I accepted it without thinking. I was really sure about that. The Exchange Programme made my dreams come true. Several universities of Taiwan offered to Marketing students an opportunity of student exchange. But finally I decided to go to National Dong Hwa University located in Hualien because of the large campus that this University offers.

Despite my aspiration to go to Taiwan, I had some doubts before going. Nobody of my university have ever been to Taiwan. I was worried about missing my friends and family, or missing out on things happening back at school - but I'm so glad I took the chance and the leap of faith. I chose Taiwan because I'd never been before and I wanted to learn from my semester abroad. I wanted to experience full blown culture shock, I wanted to learn the language and immerse myself in the country and culture, and I wanted to grow as a result of my experience.

After lengthy preparations, I finally embarked on my journey to a place that was to be my home for at least a period of five months. The departure date was August 25th 2016 in the Barcelona's airport. Eighteen hours after I arrived in Taiwan, a long and tiring journey.

Initially it was difficult adjusting to the food, culture, weather, the life on a Taiwanese college campus, but by the time I left, my little corner of Hualien felt so much like my home.

It was my first week when a Typhoon was coming. My first impression was a little bit scaring because I had no idea of the magnitude of the so called, "Typhoon". I just knew they were pretty much like hurricanes and they could do a lot of damage if we did not take care of ourselves. In my situation, my first typhoon encounter was not one of fear or apprehension, but it was an opportunity to see what happens during and after the event.

Also, I would like to talk about something that was really weird for me. The public restrooms in Taiwan are some of the biggest obstacle which I had to overcome. There is a glorified hole in the ground as the toilets, where there is porcelain made toilet, with no seat, that you must squat over. My first time using this was a confusing situation for me for there was no instruction manual posted on the wall for the proper form required, One of the best parts of my experience was the friendship I developed with one of my roommate, who was a full-time student at NDHU. At first, I struggled with Chinese and she struggled with English, so our communication was very broken. By the end of the trip, we'd both learned so much from one another that we were able to have conversations about the cultural differences between our two home countries. A few weeks after I arrived in Hualien, she took me out to dinner so we could get to know each other better. Once we arrived at the restaurant, she told me we were going to order only traditional Chinese foods. So, she encouraged me to try things I would never have tried on my own

Moreover, as a student who doesn't speak good Chinese, everyone was very friendly and tried to help me whenever I had any problem. Travelling to various countries, Taiwan has shown me that the warmth of the Taiwanese people is everywhere. Regardless of language barriers, people truly know how to make me feel special in this country. One day I was lost in Taipei, and I asked a group of Taiwanese people for directions. Although they could not speak English, but they still took me to my destination that was 4 MRT stations away. From my point of view, nobody would do

that in my country (Spain). As you can see, Taiwanese people are more welcoming and friendlier to each other in general. I think that is something we all can learn from.

Something that I would like to point out is the food. You can find a great number of small restaurants where locals eat on daily basis as well as the street food stands offering a large variety of food. As far I realized, Taiwanese doesn't prepare food at home because of the cheap prices of eating in a restaurant and also the high supermarket price for staple food. These restaurants offer so many different kinds of rice, noodle, and soups (most of the food is eaten with chopsticks, luckily I'm not so bad with chopsticks, but I'd still rather eat a chicken wing with my hands haha). If I have to say which is my favorite food in Taiwan I will say dumplings. It looks like a small ball of dough cooked and eaten with meat and vegetables.

The Night markets also shouldn't be despised, and offer of multitude of fascinating specialties such as the notorious stinky tofu. If there is only one smell that comes up when thinking about Taiwan, it is definitely the Stinky Tofu smell. Taiwanese people love it and it makes them hungry whereas most visitors find it horrible. To be honest, the first time you smell stinky tofu; it doesn't really make you hungry. In my opinion, once I have tried, I can say that it taste as terrible as it smells. (I will not try it again; it was one of the worst experiences in Taiwan haha). The best thing about convenient stores in Taiwan such as 7/11, FamilyMart,.. Is that you can find it around every corner. The convenient stores provide more services than any other countries' convenient stores I have ever been to. It does not matter where you are, you can be sure that there will be a FamilyMart nearby. I will miss going to buy something at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Coming to Taiwan also allowed me to travel around Asia. I have been in Bali (Indonesia), HongKong, Macau and Philippine Islands. It makes me open my eyes to the fact that I could travel comfortably and inexpensively for long periods, and it also helped me realize that there was a world to explore beyond Europe.

Last but not least, I would like to talk about studying in NDHU. National Dong Hwa University is one of the biggest universities in Taiwan. The campus, located near

Hualien, is with its long palm tree alleys surprisingly beautiful and offers several nice places. You can find many different cafeterias in each department, restaurants and convenient stores. The variety of courses taught in English essentially depends on the field of study: in my case that I was studying business it was pretty vast. Therefore, the university provides to exchange students different Chinese courses with different levels, lasting three hours per week.

Although, the university facilities outdoor and indoor Sport Centers in excellent conditions, where you can practice several types of sports.

Describing my Exchange trip I could write a whole book. Taiwan is a land of treasures for everybody, and I am very glad that I have taken this opportunity of studying abroad. Now, I have new friends all over the world, I have improved Chinese as well as English, I know better many cultures and I am more self-confident and also independent person.

During these months, I understand that cultural differences are much more than just differences in language, food, appearances, and surroundings. Your culture reflects very deep perceptions, beliefs, and values that influence your way of life and the way that you view the world too. Opportunities like this help to discover new strengths and abilities, overcome new challenges, and solve new problems. Coming across situations that are really unfamiliar to you, you begin to learn to adapt and respond in effective ways. I don't think before that I was on the road for potential success.

It is so hard to leave Taiwan and say goodbye to all my friends and favorite places, but the things I learned about myself there will continue to stick with me and make me who I am. I would encourage anyone considering studying abroad or traveling to step outside their comfort zone. Take every opportunity you can to learn and explore and you'll be amazed at what you experience!

Thank you Taiwan!! My experience has been incredible, I have had the chance to learn and see so many magnificent things around Asia. I am grateful for having this opportunity and experience in this country. I hope one day, I will come back to this amazing country.

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