



PORTUGAL

On my first day in Porto, I felt incredibly sorry for myself. I just left my family in Spain where we were on a family vacation, I was suddenly stuck in this strange country Portugal where no one ever seemed to be on time (very unlike people in the Netherlands) and as I realised immediately: the Portuguese language and I do not like each other. I still cannot pronounce the name of hospital São João properly, where I worked at the neonatology department during my exchange in August.

That feeling changed unbelievably fast. I was picked up from the airport by Alex from the local exchange committee and he brought me to the dormitories where I, one by one, met the other students. The exchange group of Porto in August was big, about 35 people from 15 countries, but we soon became quite close. With a group like that, there was simply no time to feel sorry for myself again and, more important, there was no reason! I arrived on the first of August and we were told we would start working in the hospital on the next Monday. The group and I really made the most out of this unexpected week off, so if you are considering to go to Porto, I really recommend arriving early. With (parts of) the group I visited Braga, Guimarães and Aveiro and Lisbon, a bit later in the month, was part of the (highly recommendable) organised social program. The social program in Portugal is quite extended, but adds a lot to the exchange. In the program the exchange groups of Lisbon, Braga and Porto spend two weekends together, one in Porto and one in Lisbon. A weekend is a bit short to see Lisbon, but you get a really nice impression of the city.

Living together with so much medical students in an apartment complex can be quite confronting: you live and breathe medicine, every little cough makes all the eyebrows rise and the differentials are coming from every little corner. However, you will also find that your doubts about studying medicine, how to plan your future around medicine and yourself as a doctor to be, are quite the same all over the world.

There is much more to the exchange in Porto than just the social part though. I had a great time in the hospital. I chose neonatology mainly because of the language aspect: newborns do not speak a word of Portuguese, just like me. It turned out to be an unexpected eye-opener and one of the best things of the whole exchange. Most of the doctors I followed during the exchange speak very proper English and really tried to show and tell me as much as they could. There was also a great availability of books, so if the department was quiet, I used the extra time to learn about the theoretical part of neonatology. But of course, I can study books back home as well. Seeing very premature babies struggle for their lives and to see their parents struggle with them, physically examining babies in their first hours of life, sharing my birthday in August with about ten newborns, observing operations on such tiny and often fragile bodies ... That was the part I did not prepare for. I got a glimpse of life as a doctor. In this department I really found a whole new motivation to become a doctor and it even made me reconsider the kind of doctor I want to be, even though I was so sure of my choices before I came to Portugal.

As I was waiting for my airplane, I once again felt incredibly sorry for myself. I was about



to leave this new kind of strange, unlikely, but irreplaceable family of mine, and the city that I became to love. No matter how long it takes for me to come back to Porto, Porto and its river, bridges, people, will never be a stranger to me again. And nor will my fellow exchange students ever be. To be honest, my Portuguese is just as terrible as it was on my first day. I did learn an Italian drinking song, still swear in German when I am alone and speak to myself with different accents when I am reading my medical books. Mind you, I am reading them with a lot more commitment and enthusiasm than before this summer.

All I can say in conclusion is go on exchange and go to Porto, take the next flight out of here. By going to Porto you are not going to meet one new country, but about 15 new nationalities. You might struggle with letting go of the Dutch structured way of life, you might struggle with the great amount of rice they give you to eat, you might struggle with crazy Italians, like I did, you might struggle with yourself and yourself as a future doctor. But that is exactly why you should go. It adds a dimension to medicine, you will have an unforgettable summer and you will find that the world is not as big and unknown as it can seem to be. I know that for sure, since I am writing, emailing, skypeing and facebooking to people all over the world since August.





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