

Study Abroad Journal
Part I- Study Abroad Report

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ESADE Business School
Barcelona, Spain

Monthly Activity Log

January 2023

I arrived in Barcelona on the 4th of January. As soon as I landed, I was immediately in tourist mode- It was important to remind myself that I was here for an academic exchange and immediately after, I decided to set my agenda for the month.

I decided to focus on the following aspects for the first month of my stay:

1. Try to get a local network with data roaming that would not only be friendly for my stay in Barcelona, but would also permit me to travel to other parts of Europe without the hassle of having to change sim plans.
2. Figure out the rent breakdown and decide which roommate would make direct transactions with the housing agency, since it would be confusing to have all of us make transactions with them every month.
3. Figure out everything related to the University, including travel, course selection and cultural mingling (with other exchange peers and locals alike).

What immediately struck me as soon as I landed was the laid-back lifestyle that the people had as compare to what I had seen in Hong Kong. It was normal to find people at 11 am, sipping a coffee with a croissant in the outside space of a café. Seeing this, I immediately knew that I would have a staple breakfast of a cappuccino and a croissant throughout my exchange!

Going to ESADE as an exchange student, there was a trade-off between living close to campus and experiencing life in the city centre as campus was around, 1 hour away from Placa Catalunya, which was the equivalent of Central Station in Hong Kong. Despite this, I enjoy the scenic route to University, which is technically in an area called Sant Cugat.

The courses during my first month were intensive, and I took Spanish, Business and Government relations and Trends in Real Estate. I would highly recommend taking Spanish (intensive) as this was a good introduction, not only to Spanish culture as a whole but also to ESADEs teaching style.

Here's a few important realisations I made in the month of January:

1. Do not underestimate the cold in Barcelona. Not only did it snow once during my stay, but I had to make use of a thick blanket and at least two layers of clothing until the end of March!
2. Barcelona is known for its party and clubbing culture. While I would recommend everyone to be safe and engage in this only if they feel comfortable, a trip to the club is a good insight into how people from all over Europe come to Barcelona just to party!
3. The Ciutadella Park is an understated picnic spot that is free on certain weekends. Going there will give you a beautiful view of Victorian style Gardens, fountains, and even a life-sized maze which one can explore with their friends.

February 2023

After that initial bout of homesickness, February, welcomed me with open arms, and I really got to know the essence of Barcelona and fell in love with the place.

Not only was, I now attending classes on a full-time basis and as a regular student, but I had now become more comfortable with my area of residence (which was near the city centre) as well as my roommates.

It was also in February that I started my culinary expedition in Barcelona, and tried the following items from a variety of restaurants:

- Churros and hot chocolate
- Tapas such as gambas de ajillo and patatas bravas
- Paella
- Sangrias and Tinto de Verano

Here are a few highlights from February:

1. Do not miss the Santa Eulalia festival at any cost. They have what is known as “fire runs” on the last day of the festival, for those who are a little adventurous (I would highly recommend enough protective gear to avoid being burned). Besides this, the festival also includes a series of local dances, parades and a human tower being built in public. All of this is free of cost.
2. If one has managed to attend the Santa Eulalia festival, I would recommend giving the Sitges carnival a skip, even though many people will hype the event. This is because it involves long hours of waiting and parades which weren't as good as the one I had seen in Barcelona itself.
3. I made a three day trip to Valencia which was a four hour drive away from Barcelona, and I would say it is more than enough time to explore the city and also get an insight into a culture other than Barcelona's, but which is also Spanish.

March 2023

The month of March was one of many first in that this was the first time that I got sick abroad, this was the first time that I had pursued my academic interests outside of my exchange University, the first time that a friend from HKUST had come to visit me and the first time that I had made a trip outside of Spain!

By now I and most other students on exchange in Europe, had become comfortable with our home environment and wanted a change of scene to venture out and know more about other cultures in Europe which happens to be easy, since one doesn't require another Visa to travel to other EU countries.

Here are some highlights from the month of March:

1. I discovered the impact of colonisation on modern day Spain. People know the impact of colonisation on the colonised countries, but on a former coloniser this takes the form of migration of people from the colonised countries to countries like Spain. As a result of this, I came across many Filipino people, noted the cultural similarities between the Philippines and Spain, and also tried some Filipino food!

2. While taking trips outside of your assigned exchange country, it is a common misconception that travelling across Europe is very cheap. I've learned that it's only cheap when you book them very well in advance and this is not always possible, so I would suggest every exchange participant to budget themselves accordingly.
3. It's important to try and look for opportunities outside your city, or even Home University. Not only does it provide good exposure to a pool of people other than the ones you're always exposed to, but is also a good source of knowledge about the subject matter that we are studying, as well as a new culture. Having followed this belief, I travelled to Madrid to check out a taster of IESE University's MiM Program.

April 2023

During the Spring semester, we are given 2 long, 2 week breaks: One for Easter and the other for midterms. While we don't have midterms as exchange students, we have this time allotted in order to complete any pending assignments and many teachers will reserve this time to give assignments as well, so it's better to be prepared in advance. However, assignment based exams such as these give us the liberty to travel as well as do our work in any preferred location around Europe!

Here are some of the highlights from the month of April:

1. I headed out to Andalusia, which covered the 4 major towns of Sevilla, Granada, Cordoba and Malaga. Looking back, it was a great idea in terms of achieving peace and calm needed to complete assignment-based exams successfully, and explore the life of people in small towns of Spain. I also understood and explored more about Spain's flamenco culture, and facts such as these flamenco dancers were nomads and that they were actually suppressed for many generations together because of being outsiders, was something that really surprised me.
2. I started feeling grateful about my stay in Barcelona overall. This was partly because of one of my friends' visit from Bordeaux. As soon as she came to stay with me, not only was she impressed by my selection of food and culinary discoveries, but she was also fascinated at how I could live in the bustling but touristy city, and at the city centre nonetheless. Her having said these things, made me very grateful for my stay, and the adventures that I had embarked on so far.

May 2023

My semester ended in the middle of May, which is why I didn't have the opportunity to stay on for long but this month was the perfect conclusion to my exchange journey. Not only had I made so many new friends from all across the globe, I had also learnt a lot from ESADE's unique style of teaching and the professors there.

This feeling of ending an exchange opportunity is a bit heart-wrenching as people say, since you have formed a bond with the location, the people you have met, as well as the experiences that you've had- which you don't want to leave behind. I remember taking a mental snapshot of every close friend that I had made in Barcelona, after we said goodbye to each other. This was because I had no idea when I would meet them next, and wanted to preserve their memory.

Here are some things that I learnt in the month of May, which also serves as tips to all those going to Barcelona:

1. Everyone's exchange experience is different and it is important to prioritise what you want instead of what you have been told. One must think about shaping their experience when it comes to taking solo trips, skipping classes or even the places you choose to go for a trip.
2. Racism: In my perspective, I experienced absolutely NO racism at all. From the broad spectrum of staring, to verbal/physical abuse: I experienced none of it. HOWEVER, many Asian friends of mine did report instances of discrimination against them, so please do take this seriously, keep in touch with the news and stay away from especially sketchy areas.
3. If you are below 25, I would highly recommend, taking a look at all the museums and historical sites that EU has to offer at a discounted rate. This holds even if you are not interested in museums and history. I say this because when you're older, you don't want to get into a situation where you have to go to those places at a higher price.

General study abroad Information

Visa procedures

It's important to note which country is eligible for which kind of visa when you are travelling for exchange. I happened to possess an Indian passport and had to apply for a short-term student Visa which allows you to study in Spain between 3 to 6 months. Although getting my Visa documents processed and the Visa itself did not take a lot of time, other students who did go on exchange to Spain or even Portugal had a hard time communicating with the Visa authorities, as well as getting the Visa after submitting all the application based documents. This is why I would highly recommend applying for a Visa well in advance, after you have confirmed your exchange University.

One thing I particularly had trouble with, was getting a translated copy of my birth certificate in Spanish, for which I had to independently contact a Consulate certified translator and pay them a separate fee for copies and translations of the document.

Many also complained about the consulate people being rude. I found them to be straightforward, not particularly nice, but as people who got straight to the point. They were very particular about the kind of document I had to submit to obtain a Visa which are as follows:

- Completed National Visa Application
- Photograph - Valid passport
- Proof of acceptance for the study, training or volunteer activity or internship.
- Proof of financial means
- Health insurance
- Criminal record check certificate (depending on how long you want to stay)
- Medical certificate and local Insurance
- Proof of residence in the consular district

- Proof of the representative's identity and capacity
- Authorization of legal representatives

The Visa can cost anywhere between €50-€100 depending on where you from originally, so please be mindful of that.

Orientation activities

When getting to ESADE, I was very happy to know that they were delighted to receive us because we had been the first batch to have had exchange and orientations physically after Covid. The orientation mainly focused on the rules and regulations of ESADE and how to avoid getting scammed in Barcelona, it was a good segue into learning more about the academic culture there and I would highly recommend all exchange students to attend this- not just to learn more about the people who can help you out in times of need, but also to get in on a great lunch spread!

International Service and activities

Exchange students mainly enrolled into international service societies just to get around or get to know more about different cultures in Europe. One such organisation is Erasmus, which is highly recommended in order to travel across Spain and Europe on a budget. However, for students who don't really like a party culture I wouldn't really recommend it. Even joining the Erasmus WhatsApp group chat (you are added almost immediately after you join a common ESADE WhatsApp group chat) is a good introduction into knowing more about cultural and student-based extracurricular activities in Barcelona. This includes everything ranging from a weekend market called Palo Alto festival, to helping children of migrant workers in the daytime with various recreational activities.

Accommodation

With my place of stay, I was lucky enough to be referred to the agency by a friend who was previously considering the accommodation. This way he had already checked for the safety of the area, the kind of neighbourhood it was in, as well as rates.

It is very tough to get accommodation near ESADE (as I mentioned before, it is a trade-off between getting close to the university versus living in the city centre, because of the distance between Sant Cugat and Barcelona city) which is why I would recommend searching for affordable housing, well before applying for a Visa. I used SH Barcelona as my agency for this, and although they are very helpful and timely in reminding about the rent and other accommodation related formalities, one main critique about this agency is that if there's something wrong with the flat or something doesn't work, it takes a while before you can contact them and get someone to look on it.

I lived in a neighbourhood called Gran Via, which was a 15 minute walk away from the city centre in Placa Catalunya. I came to know later that this wasn't considered the safest neighbourhood and more popular areas for students of our age was around Gracia and Sagrada Familia. Nevertheless I had nothing to complain about in Gran Via, and amenities such as a supermarket, enough variety with restaurants and transportation connectivity was pretty good.

Course Registration

The procedure for course registration is actually a model for other universities and something that HKUST can consider. It involves a combination of a ranking and point system, wherein ranks are given first preference in allocating courses, but points are just used to affirm your decision. The instructions to do this will be sent in a separate email well before the semester starts and isn't a process for worry or for rush as is common in HKUST. Being a global business and economics major, I did not find a lot of courses that cater to either of my subject areas but I did end up transferring Negotiation, Spanish and I'm currently working on transferring for an economics course about the Currency Crisis in Europe. This being said, ESADE mostly caters to students with a ISOM, Finance and Marketing background in terms of the course offering.

Teaching and Assessment Methods

The assessment methods were very easy to follow and comply with. What was mandatory was at least 80% attendance for every class, and I did see a trend of increased class participation in a lot of course assessment rubrics but that shouldn't be much of a problem since the average class size is pretty small compared to the average HKUST class and there is a general understanding from the Professors' side that you are on exchange and would want to explore while you are in Barcelona.

If you are focused on obtaining a good grade for your courses then instead of your assessment performance, I think it is your class participation that influences your grade, which is something to keep in mind as it does require effort being put in right from the beginning of the semester.

Sports and Recreation

Barcelona is a very bike friendly city, and it does have separate lanes for bikes and taxis. Renting a bike works just like in Hong Kong within it is connected to an app system and you can pay the rent virtually. Besides this, I found many people subscribing to the campus gym plan which is good in terms of proximity to classes, but more affordable options such as VIVA gym is also available if you want to get a discount.

Finance and Banking

It is important to take into consideration your travel costs, rent and daily expenses when it comes to budgeting your Exchange stay. In order to do this properly I do recommend getting a certain amount in cash as well as in your bank account (for me that was around €1000) to use and log for the first month of your Exchange stay, so that you can plan the rest of your monthly budget accordingly.

My rent was around €600-€700 every month and I planned my travel such that I ended up spending at least €100 on each round trip, so hopefully this gives you an idea of what to expect if you're keen on taking trips and happen to live in the city centre.

For payment I only used the HSBC world debit card which I would highly recommend for anyone going abroad. Not only was making a foreign bank account free of charge (since I already had an HSBC account) but even the process of obtaining a card and converting Hong Kong dollars into euros was very seamless through this debit card. Throughout my stay, my

payments did not bounce back ever, and even setting up the card takes just two weeks at the most!

Social Clubs and Networking

This is actually an aspect that ESADE lacks, since it is common for students to come to university, and then go straight back home after the class are done. While they do have sports teams such as rugby and dance, they are not advertised as much and the societies themselves don't seem very active. Regardless if you're interested, they do give you details during the orientation, but I would keep my expectations low with regard to having regular team meetings.

Health and Safety

For some reason, my Spanish Visa did not accept the HKUST travel insurance and I had to purchase another health insurance in order to get my Spanish Visa. I procured my student health insurance from SANITAS (the process of which seemed a bit sketchy since they don't have an interface that allows you to make the payment online and you have to call a representative and tell them your card details in order to get the actual insurance) and also had an HSBC medical insurance with me. In terms of health consciousness, I wouldn't really say that the Spanish locals are very particular, as it is common to find people sneezing or coughing without covering their mouths in the Metro. However, Barcelona is relatively safe during the daytime, but just like any other city I wouldn't recommend venturing out after 2 AM especially if you live in the city centre, or in or near a district called El Raval.

Food

If you want to have authentic Spanish food, it tends to be pretty meat heavy and the specialty (tapas) also happens to have a lot of oil/butter in it. So while Tapas bars in Placa Catalunya, Poble Nou or Sagrada Familia are great to go to for authentic Spanish food, for more of a healthy option, you could try Honest Greens, Green Vita or Fit Bar.

Transportation

In the beginning of the semester it is common for the Spanish government to roll out a scheme in which three months of travel is covered for €40 with the T-Jove card. Since the scheme expires after the beginning of the new academic semester, and most exchange students are bound to stay for more than three months, I would recommend going just for the T-Casual plan (double the T-Jove amount) or a 10 trips card for €11, after it expires, depending on the time you plan to stay on in Barcelona. I have mentioned multiple times about the distance between living in the city centre and living on campus, but I have to say that I have no regrets about living in the city centre as I enjoyed a scenic route to and from the University, via the FGC trains

Something that not a lot of exchange students knew about was the fact that you can actually go to the airport via the Metro. It does require quite a bit of walking when you're changing lines, but it isn't hard to find the airport T1 terminal on the Barcelona metro map for which there is an app that I'd highly recommend you download. This also happens to be a more affordable option than taking an airport shuttle, which charges six or seven additional euros,

while travel to the airport via the Metro is included in the unlimited travel perk that comes with the T-Jove card.

Climate

Barcelona goes according to popular notion, in that it is more pleasant than other parts of Europe by way of it being closer to the Mediterranean. But I wouldn't underestimate the winter months in Barcelona (January to March) wherein temperatures can get as cold as -2°C. I was pretty shocked to know that it had snowed one morning while I was going to school, so I would definitely pack a thick coat, down jacket or puffer jacket for the winter months here. For any trips to north Europe or anywhere north of France, I would suggest packing accordingly and getting enough mittens or even snow boots from HK, as it isn't the kind of investment that you would want to make in Barcelona and it's better to have with you at all times in the future.

Communication

WhatsApp is used as the main medium of communication within the University. While I was in ESADE, I did not have any Zoom classes or Zoom recordings for any of my classes, which is something that is contrary to what we do in HKUST. It is easy to communicate in English around Barcelona but basic Spanish is preferred in most public places despite the main language being Catalan.

With regards to the SIM card, I availed the €10 Vodafone plan for 20 GB data every month. To set up, you would need to visit the Vodafone store but each month's recharge can be done online. I found this to be the most cost-effective plan compared to other options such as Orange and Movistar.

Cautionary Measures

I think it's very important to state that in Barcelona, there is a higher chance of getting pickpocketed than most other European cities. Many of my exchange friends have had their phone pickpocketed in many ways, including it being grabbed from the hands, someone pretending to be a tourist and hoodwinking them, and in severe cases, them even being punched for their phone. In all of this, it is important to keep your phone safe rather than your wallet because Barcelona pickpockets are aware that cards in your wallet can be cancelled. Going to the police is also of no help, as if you trace your phone and it goes beyond their jurisdiction, they say that they cannot do anything about it and ask you to leave.

Besides this, rest assured as Barcelona is a safe city overall. It is very walkable, and one can travel alone across the city, or even outside it without worrying too much.

Items to bring

- Laptop & charger
- Mobile phone & charger
- USB
- Passport & Identity Card
- Covid Related Documents

- Clothes (warm clothes for winter and Northern Europe travels, as well as beach clothes)
- Fanny pack (for emergency cash or phone on nights out)
- A Phone String to not lose your phone
- Physical money

Useful links and Contacts

- SH Barcelona for Accommodation: <https://www.shbarcelona.com/>
- Spanish Visa Page:
<https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Consulados/hongkong/en/ServiciosConsulares/Paginas/Consular/Visado-de-estudios.aspx>
- Translators for a Visa:
<https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Consulados/hongkong/en/ServiciosConsulares/Documentos/Official%20Translation.pdf>