

Exchange in Coimbra, Portugal:

During my exchange from September 2014 to January 2015 I spend 4.5 extremely fun, interesting and educative months in Coimbra, Portugal, where I studied at the Universidade de Coimbra. Even though Coimbra was not my first choice, I had a great experience there and looking back, I am extremely glad my path had led me here.

First of all, I will explain you why Coimbra is such a exciting city to do your exchange. Because, before you leave, friends and family at home will not always know the city and wonder why you would go to this tiny, unknown city, if there are places like Porto and Lisbon in the same country. Well, I can tell you some very good reasons for this. Let's start with the fact that the university of Coimbra is one of the oldest universities of Europe and the oldest one of the Portuguese speaking world, as it exists since 1219. Having one look at a picture of the old part of the university, will make you want to study at this beautiful, old location. Not only remained the old university building including the magnificent Biblioteca Joanina, for which tourist from all over the world come to Coimbra, also the academic traditions are still visible on any day, time and place. Hazings take place throughout the entire year all around the city, since students are more or less obliged to participate, and students walk around in black capes and very nice suits on just a normal day at university. These outfits might seem familiar to you, once you arrive, as J.K. Rowling based the outfits of Harry Potter and his friends on this Portuguese tradition.

So Coimbra is all about student-life. The entire city survives on the expenditures of students and prices are set accordingly. At praca da republica, every night, you can go for a drink at one of the bars around the square or simply just chill with some friends and some very nice wine (or Port, if I may suggest) right on the square. Moreover, no matter which semester you go, there will be one insane student festival happening, which lasts for a week. These festivals involve many cool artists (I was lucky enough to see the Crystal Fighters), a big parade and festivities all around the city, just for students. Even though Queima das Fitas in June, which celebrates the end of the academic year, is the largest and craziest of the two, at Festa das Latas in October you will definitely also have an amazing time. This latter one has a great opening night, during which everyone, dressed in the capes and suits, quietly listens to the student choir singing Fado, a typical Portuguese music genre. But of course, the city is not only about parties. On the other hand, there are the student canteens with great and cheap food. There are the malls, where you have all well-known brands, the very cheap cinemas, movie nights in one of the 'republicas' (typical student residences who organize a lot for communities) and delicious restaurants where you can eat Portuguese chicken or the famous *bacalhau*. And if you like, you can go for a run around the beautiful and calm riverside, but don't expect to run in the city except for when you enjoy running uphill and downhill a lot.

Finally, Coimbra is located right in the middle of Portugal and in between Porto and Lisbon, which makes it a perfect starting point for any trip. Portugal is a beautiful country, with great national parks, cities and obviously the wine-region Douro, which is recommended to go to around harvest time. Also, do not miss out on the beaches in Algarve. ESN or any other association for Erasmus students will bring you there.

So, I hope I have made you a little excited about going here now. On a more practical note, I will give some hints in order to have your perfect Erasmus. First of all, don't book a room in advance. Try to arrive at least a week before the academic year starts (but even later, it should still be fine), become

a member of one of the Erasmus Facebookgroups in Coimbra and plenty of rooms will be offered to you. I assure you it will be much better to see both your room and roommates in real life before choosing or paying for your new home. Personally, I found a room and moved in, all within 24 hours after arriving. If you do want to book in advance, you could always contact me, and I can help you with contacts or good locations, especially as the economic faculty is somewhat further from the city center. Moreover, it is most optimal to fly to Porto and take a train or bus from there to Coimbra. Lisbon is another option for this, but slightly further away. On a side note, Portugal has great public transport in my opinion (don't forget to show your student card when buying a ticket as it gives you 40% discount).

Although most people will be able to speak English, they are much more used to speaking Portuguese. Having some knowledge of the language up front might therefore be useful, however, in any case I would suggest to take the intensive language course the university offers at the beginning of every semester. All students will arrive early to take part in these, so arriving late, will mean you miss out on most of the introduction events. Also, you can combine it with finding a room, while in the mean while you can crash in the Seranata Hostel (highly recommended, as all arriving students stay there and it is right above the bars) or the NS hostel (this is where I stayed, a very nice place as well, but not as many students compared to the Seranata Hostel). On the other hand I want to note, that you can easily also survive Coimbra without knowing a word of Portuguese, I would just say it connects you a lot better to the city and the people. Another advice I could give you, in order to make friends, is finding a nice house with fun roommates and participating in all the ESN activities organized at the beginning of the year. Also, the intensive language course is a great opportunity for this.

University-wise, do not expect it to be like the Netherlands. Portuguese culture is much more relaxed, easy-going and laid-back, as I would describe it. The only important thing is to go to Casa de Lusofonia after you arrive, where you will get all information. Also realize that it does not matter much which courses you subscribe for before you arrive, you can change anything. There are not so many English courses, but enough, to receive the required credits (and the Portuguese Language Course is recommended!). One important note regarding the courses is that exams will take place in January. Luckily, most courses have continuous evaluation, but when choosing a course, check the exam date via the website of the economic faculty (FEUC).

I personally really liked the courses, it was very interactive. We had small classrooms and a lot of discussions during class. Moreover, the topics were very different of what I was used to in Econometrics, as I took the courses Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility, Globalisation Processes of the Contemporary China, Data Manipulation and Statistical Operations with R (a program) and Lingua Portuguesa level 1. Also, rules are not as strict as they are back home. Classes are easily cancelled in the first weeks and if the international office says the open at 2, it might just open at half past 2, as they were still getting some coffee. This is actually in general the mind set in Portugal. Expect the same things to happen when having a meeting with a Portuguese friends, your landlord or just the city hall. Just do not get frustrated about it, you have time when being on exchange. Nothing is very urgent, once you get to Portugal. Relax. Enjoy it.

So I hope I have given you some useful information for an exchange in Coimbra. Below you can find some additional information on the costs of all this. I personally had a great time, and I truly hope

you will have too. If I can help with this in any way, don't hesitate to contact me. For now, enjoy your lucky position of having this amazing experience still ahead of you!

Additional information on costs

Below I have just mentioned some prices/costs I made and could remember, expressed per month or per unit:

Rent including expenses	€240 (€200 without expenses)
Phone costs (get a Vodafone card at the ESN-office)	€10 (for 300MB p/m if I recall correctly)
Public Transport	€0.60 (for each bus trip)
Sport facilities (gym is very expensive, just go for a run)	€50
Administrational costs	€35 (in total for the entire exchange)
Beer/Shots	€1
Sangria	€1.50
Bottle of wine at the supermarket	€2 - €3
Cinema	€5.50 (for the movie of the day)
Taxi	€5.50 (gets you basically everywhere)

Supermarket have just a 20% lower costs on average, compared to the Netherlands, I would say.