EXCHANGE REPORT

Exchange university
Instituto Superior Tecnico, Lisbon

Degree programme
Computer Science and Engineering

Name
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Year and term for exchange
Autumn 2022

Portugal is great for a vacation

Before departure

I have been to Lisbon once before for a short trip with friends, and I really enjoyed the city, the great weather, nightlife and cheap food and drinks, along with the beach and surfing – a perfect destination for a student looking for a fun time. I knew I wanted to go to a southern European country, as I wanted to enjoy a warmer and lighter winter than the one in Stockholm, plus I wanted to experience a different culture to what I am used to (more western and northern). I remembered my experience with Lisbon, so I looked up the university – Instituto Superior Tecnico and found that the courses listed were quite interesting and overlapped with my Master's at KTH. I therefore decided to give it a go and signed up.

Lisbon view from the Panoramico de Monsanto Viewpoint

For preparations for the exchange, I think one crucial thing is accommodation. Due to the recent boom of "digital nomads", who come to Lisbon and can afford to pay higher rent, in the few months that I have been looking for accommodation, the prices were increasing exponentially. An apartment that cost 650 EUR in May, cost more than 1000 before the end of summer. I would therefore recommend to start looking for accommodation early.

Upon arrival

I arrived in Portugal a week early, because I wanted to go explore the country a bit. I flew to Algarve to start my exchange studies with a trip in the south. I got to see the entire south coast, the Benagil caves, the nature and different small cities and villages. I really recommend getting a small car and driving around the countryside, as you get to see a lot in a short span of time. After a week filled with great experiences, fully relaxed, I took a FlixBus up to Lisbon to start my exchange.

Upon arrival to Lisbon, I got to meet a lot of the international students through the introductory week organised by the student organisation of Tecnico. The activities were a lot of fun – you got introduced to the different spirits and drinks of Portugal, while talking to new people. What I would recommend is to sign up early, as there are limited spots on some activities – I initially wanted to go surfing in the intro week, but the spots filled up very quickly, so instead I went to Quinta da Regalheira in Sintra This was also a very nice trip, and I definitely do not regret going on this trip.

Quinta da Regalheira

I signed up for the student union at the start of the semester – you receive a hoodie and access to different sports clubs of Tecnico. Looking back, I haven't made too much of a use of this, so maybe it was not necessary for me to sign up – I tried out going to the Basketball B team, hoping to have fun and play a bit, but instead there was quite a strict coach who only spoke (screamed) in Portuguese, so I dropped out immediately.

The school year then started quite quickly, with courses picking up the week after the intro week.

Financials

I received the Erasmus+ scholarship for the duration of my studies, which amounted to roughly 400 Eur per month. If you find accommodation early, this might cover the cost of it for you entirely, which is great, and then you just need to worry about the food, drinks and trips. The food and drinks are definitely cheaper in Lisbon than in Stockholm, but accommodation is slowly getting equal to the prices of Stockholm. It might even be higher than a Corridor room through SSSB.

The student union fee is not mandatory, but it is not too high and might be worth it if you want to make use of the student clubs or the outdoor padel/tennis/football courts at Tecnico. One other great thing, which helps you save money, is getting lunch at the canteen under the mathematics faculty, as an entire lunch costs only 2,80 Eur, and you get a soup, main course, drink and dessert. The food is not of the highest quality, but it will get you full, and you save a lot of money. Buying groceries in supermarkets such as Pingo Doce and Lidl is also a great way to save money, as most of the smaller "street grocery shops" that are everywhere in Lisbon are more expensive.

Accommodation

Accommodation is one of the things I had the most problems with. I was lucky enough to go on my exchange with my girlfriend (who also was on an Erasmus exchange with her school), so we were looking for a place together. We found an apartment for an affordable price (not cheap though), which we thought would be perfect. However, after arriving in summer, we quickly found that there are a lot of problems in Lisbon's buildings. In the summer, the apartment was extremely hot. We had two fans, and it was not very helpful at all. On the contrary, during the winter, the apartment was extremely cold. The coldness, however, wasn't the biggest problem. For most of the winter months, Lisbon was hit with torrential rain – even the locals said that it was not raining this much for years. Our apartment was very

poorly isolated, and the coldness was coupled with extreme humidity. The apartment was so humid, that papers that we printed would get moist just by laying on the desk for a few minutes. After a few weeks, the walls in our apartment started to get mouldy. We tried to resolve this on our own and with our landlord, but it kept coming back.

The issues with the apartment did not end there. The pipes in our building would get clogged every few weeks, and this would mean that washing the dishes or clothes would become impossible, as the sink and washing machine outlets would be completely blocked and unusable.

These issues combined resulted in us not being happy at home, which made the entire exchange experience tainted. When we had to resolve issue after issue, with very little help coming from the Portuguese people, we started feeling a bit homesick after Sweden (where, as it seems, everything works).

Speaking to my friends at the university, they also did not have the best experience with Lisbon's accommodation. For a comparable price as you would get in Sweden, they had rooms in apartments with varying issues. Some were extremely humid and mouldy, some had rats, cockroaches or bedbugs. Only a few had no issues at all. So as I said before, be sure to look early and be prepared to face some issues.

University and studies

I was part of the Computer Science and Engineering program at Tecnico. I took the courses Introduction to Robotics, Social Robotics and Virtual Reality. The subject areas are very similar to my courses at KTH, however the course structure and way of teaching is very different. While at KTH, I always felt like I knew what I should do, what is expected from me and where projects are leading to, at Tecnico, this was not the case.

Courses

In Introduction to Robotics, the assignments were very non-sensical, the assignments were quite advanced and the support from the teachers was very limited. What we were asked to do was not well documented even online after Googling, and a lot of people online were suggesting to **not do** the exact things our professors were asking us to do. The lectures were also not very fun and in the end, I did not have a lot of motivation to participate (which was shared among other students as the count of attendees decreased from initial 50 people to 3 people by the time I last participated). Secondly, in the Social Robotics class, there was no information about the final project available in the school's online educational system (Fenix), and it was very hard to find out what is expected from the students until very late in the course. I think that overall, when comparing to KTH, I did not enjoy the academic part of my exchange.

However, the Virtual Reality course was quite fun and the teacher structured it well, so I think there are exceptions – you just need to find them. Nevertheless, I am looking forward to returning to the Swedish style of University teaching. I will transfer all of the courses I did in Lisbon as electives, as I have completed the mandatory and conditionally elective courses while I was in KTH.

City and country

The best part about the entire exchange were the numerous trips I was part of. As I mentioned earlier I visited Algarve for a week, then I went to Madeira (the absolute best), Coimbra and the Largest waves in the world, Sintra. I did not manage to visit Porto, but hopefully I will get to go there one day.

The nature and the views were absolutely amazing. I really liked hiking in Madeira, visiting the banana farms, and driving around the nature. Portugal has a lot to offer in the nature-direction, but sadly, a lot of other aspects are lacking in my opinion.

Firstly, it is the people and their attitude. I never felt like somebody from the Portuguese people actually wanted to help me or talk to me (except students in the first intro week). In every issue or thing I needed to resolve – be it sending/receiving a package, finding directions, sitting down at a restaurant and talking to the waiter, etc. – people seemed to have an attitude as if I was bothering them. We even got thrown out of a restaurant once, when we ordered food without drinks. The waiter said "No food without drinks, goodbye!". People just seem to have an issue with foreigners, and they do not give any effort into being nice. This was very sad to see, and again tainted the experience of Portugal for me.

Secondly, surprisingly enough, Portuguese cuisine is not very good. As I love to explore different cuisines in all the countries I visit, I was quite disappointed to see that there is not a big food culture. This was very apparent from the start, as during the intro week, we had a "traditional Portuguese dinner" in a restaurant, which was a dry meat with rice. However, there are quite a few places in Lisbon where you can find very good food – it is usually some fusion of cuisines, or international ones (or even some Portuguese ones, but you really have to search).

Leisure and social activities

As I mentioned before, I tried out Basketball at Tecnico, but didn't find it fun and could not really understand much as everything was in Portuguese. I think the activities at Tecnico are mostly aimed at Portuguese-speaking students, and are not that friendly towards Erasmus students. Overall, I only spoke to international people, as the Portuguese students liked to keep in their peer groups. I think the university was offering some activities for everyone (there also was some music festival with Portuguese artists), but I never felt very intrigued to join them, and most emails I got were in Portuguese.

Most of the activities and great experiences I had were organised by myself privately, which I think summarizes my experience with the exchange – the trips and the activities I did in my free time were great; the school was not so great. Overall, I am looking forward to Sweden (which, for me as a non-Swedish person, is a lot nicer experience when compared to my experience with Portugal).

Sustainability

Sustainability was not a large topic at Tecnico. In my personal life, I tried to separate trash into plastics, paper, glass etc., but not everyone does that here.

Other recommendations and observations

Be ready to be hot in summer and cold in winter – the houses are not very well isolated.