

I am Maria Paula Castillo, a master's student of mechanical engineering at TU Ilmenau and I am currently in Italy doing an exchange with the Erasmus program.

I am a Peruvian student who has been living in Germany for 6 years. After experiencing moving abroad and meeting so many foreign students during my studies, I was motivated to give myself the opportunity to go abroad again. Now that I am at the end of the semester and a few days away from returning to Germany, I must say that it was one of the best decisions I made.

I've decided to come to Italy because of the language and the culture. Since I am Peruvian, my mother tongue is Spanish, which is very similar to Italian. I took a basic Italian course before traveling that I continued here in Italy.

On the website of the TU Ilmenau there is a section for study abroad, exchanges and internships. There you can read all about the Erasmus program and the Partnerships that TU Ilmenau has with different universities in other countries and their respective study courses.

My process with Erasmus was as follows:

I first approached Ms. Franziska Rau, who is the Erasmus representative at TU Ilmenau. I wrote to her telling her about my interest in doing an exchange semester, that I had already chosen the country, and that I was interested in knowing how the Erasmus program works. She offered me a video call where she answered all my questions and doubts. Then she sent me a link to the online portal of Erasmus, where it is shown step by step what to do and the necessary documents to submit. For example, my motivation letter for going on an exchange, my CV, the list of my grades at the university, etc.

Following, a learning agreement must be prepared, which states the subjects you have chosen to take at the host university. Next, the Erasmus managers of the host university must confirm that you can take those subjects and sign the learning agreement. Additionally, me and the Prüfungsamt of my university must also sign it. Once the learning agreement is finalized, the Erasmus contract is signed, which specifies how much money the program can give you. A check list helps verify all the steps to follow before departure (for example: visa, health insurance, and accommodation).

With the health insurance I had no problems, as mine has good coverage throughout the European Union. Regarding the visa I had some problems, since I am not European and I live in Germany with an Aufenthaltstitel (residence permit). This allows me to travel in Europe, but this was not just a tourist trip. On the website of the university of Pisa they explain the steps to follow in order to be able to announce in the city that I had arrived and to get a permit to stay in Italy. This step was a little more difficult than the rest because it was done at the immigration office of the police station in Italy (I didn't speak Italian and they didn't speak English). But I found people, who were tutors for the group of Erasmus students and helped me in the process, so everything went well.

To find a place to live for the whole semester in Pisa, I looked on websites like the ones here in Germany to find a WG. But the rent was a bit expensive, so I started to do more research. The website of the university of Pisa has a list of student residences that cost less, some are religious or they are pensions.

I've decided to stay at the Cappuccini Hall, which is a convent transformed into a residence for people in an education phase of any kind. It doesn't matter if you are studying, it only matters if you are enrolled in an educative institute. In this residence we lived about 30

people. There was a person in charge of the place, who was the director and was in charge of making sure that everything worked well, and it was with whom I made the first contact. He explained to me how the place worked, he explained the contract and when I arrived, he gave me a tour of the place to explain the security measures and where everything was. He was very kind and very attentive. The residence was next to the church. It was a very big place with one floor for women and one for men. I decided to experiment by sharing a room, since it was the only one that was free. I shared a room with a very nice Italian girl who helped me with everything: with the language, with the city, how to find my way around, with the university. At the beginning she was like a guide, but she ended up becoming a good friend. She also made living together easy and fun, and we had no problems. I was very happy because it was my first time experiencing living in a shared room. On each floor there were at least 3 bathrooms that were shared. Other common spaces were the study rooms, kitchen, dining room and garden. The truth is that it was a huge place, which I really enjoyed sharing with all my Housemates. It felt like living with a big family.

Something very traditional in Italy and that happens also in my country, is that we all like to eat together and share. So many times, we would get together to eat something. It was great because in the garden we also had tables, so we could eat outdoors, we could grill or sometimes my companions would cook something typical of their region that we could all taste. In this way, we could all get to know a little bit more of each part of Italy. This was very enriching for me because, not only did I live surrounded by Italians, but each one came from a different region and, although they are all very similar, they have certain foods and traditions specific to each region (for example, the way they eat a certain type of pasta). So, I learned so much from each of them.

I had already learned a little bit of Italian, but only the basics. Where I lived I was required to speak only Italian, which was ideal for me because I got to practice it a lot and everyone could correct me. It was like having intensive Italian classes. The truth is that I have a lot to thank my housemates for, because they had the patience to always try to understand me, correct me, and teach me.

On the other hand, I was lucky that the classes at the university were hybrid. You could go in person, but you could also attend the class online and most of the professors recorded the class, which I could listen to later to be able to take better notes. Taking subjects in a foreign language helped me a lot. Most of the courses were in English and one was in Italian. I always went to face-to-face classes because I wanted to get to know my classmates better. They were all Italian, but they spoke English. I always tried to communicate with them in Italian so that I could improve my Italian, but in case I didn't know how to explain myself I used English.

The classes were structured the same way as here, there were lectures and seminars. In one class we also had a lab experience, which was great because they showed us different types of machines that we could use and let us experiment with them a little bit. So, it was full of amazing opportunities.

And like any good exchange, it is not only about the academic part, but also about how one adapts and learns to live in a different society and a completely new culture. While I've learned a lot about the history, culture, and traditions with my housemates; I also decided to learn to travel on my own, live my own experiences, and learn from every step I took.

Pisa is a very small city, but since it is full of students and thousands of tourists who come every day to see the tower, the city is alive. The atmosphere is amazing, it's a lively city full of things to do. You can always go for a walk along the river, go to the beach, eat an ice

cream in the square in front of the tower, go to play sports, have an aperitivo in the afternoon, go to a concert in a square, theater or church, visit an art exhibition, and more. Furthermore, Pisa has an international airport and has very well-connected flights with the rest of Europe, which makes it a port from where you can travel everywhere, not only by plane, but also by bus and train. This was a great advantage because I was able to travel and visit many other cities and it did not cost so much. As every student we must always travel low-cost, which is possible from Pisa. I traveled to Udine, Venice, Rome, Cinque Terre, Sardinia, and within Tuscany I went to Firenze, Lucca, Livorno, and Pisa surroundings.

The truth is that I have lived an incredible experience. Today I can say that it was one of the best decisions I made, because I learned a lot and I also feel how I grew as a person, how I improved my soft skills, and how my self-confidence grew.

So, I can only thank Erasmus for the opportunity that it gives to all the students and encourage more students to live this experience. You can really get surprised of all that there is to know out there and within yourself.