

Everything you need to know before moving to Italy!

I would like to start by sharing that an exchange semester in Italy is exactly as astonishing and incredible as you would imagine. From the beautiful cities, breathtaking nature, incredible food, and welcoming culture it was all in all an unforgettable semester. Therefore, I would like to encourage everyone to go to Siena if they can and enjoy every moment there.

To do so here are some information about my experience there and some (hopefully useful) tips and tricks.

Siena, Toscana

Starting with the city itself, Siena is a small city in the middle of the Tuscan region and is an hour away from Florence. It still has the medieval buildings and structure with its walls and gates that outline the city center where everything happens. Also, Siena has many UNESCO world heritage sites like for example Piazza del Campo, where the world famous “Il Palio” takes places twice a year. The city is divided into 17 districts which are called Contradas, each Contrada has its own flag and Mascot. People in a Contrada are very close and take their district identity very seriously. It is also known that the Contradas do not often accept “outsider” and among the 17 districts there are rivalries. So, as you see the city on its own has a very rich present and history that make it unique.

Hopefully by now you are intrigued to know more about living and studying there.

Life in Siena

The housing situation is the biggest challenge over there, Siena is rather small so to get a place inside the city walls is very hard and often expensive. The further you get away from the center the better it gets in terms of prices however, an accommodation that is too far from the center can be an obstacle for you as there are almost no buses at night. I found that an accommodation near San Francesco is the best option for me as the University building of my faculty was right there. Note that Siena is built over hills, so you'll be walking up and down steep streets.

Once an accommodation is secured everything else is rather simpler. The ESN Team offers each semester an introduction week where they have shown us every important

thing about the city, told us all the does and don'ts and in general help us feel more at home in the first weeks in Siena. Throughout these events it was rather easy to get to know the people in the Erasmus program with me and create the first bonds. I encourage you to take part in all the ESN events as they do offer a wide variety for example, wine tasting, all you can eat pizza, sightseeing tours in Siena, and even a trip to the chianti vineyards and thermal bath. All this during the first week, after the semester starts there are also more trips organized by ESN team to Florence, Pisa and a Spring break trip to Napoli, Capri and Pompei.

Now to the most important part about living in Italy, the food. Siena is filled with incredible local restaurants and even some Michelin star ones. Nevertheless, the university provided its students with a huge Mensa, offering lunch and dinner. A full meal with Primo (pasta, rice, etc.), Secondo (Protein and vegetables), salad and a dessert with endless refill of your soda drink all for 4,5€. For the same price you can get a huge pizza and a salad or go to the pasta station and pick two different pastas. So, if you want to enjoy the Italian cuisine without spending lots of money on one meal the Mensa is your best option.

Studying in Siena

As a master student there was a wide selection of courses in English that I could choose from for my learning agreement. The University of Siena does not restrict Erasmus students to choose courses only from the faculty they are in but offers a free selection process, so I ended up attending classes from the finance, business management and economics master's programs. Different to what we are used to in Germany, the Universities in Italy have no classes or tutorial but only lecture that take place twice or three times a week. They also follow the concept of midterms and finals to pass a course which requires student to be present throughout the whole semester. I personally found it challenging at first to adapt to the new schedule and teaching style but with time it became easier. However, the final exams were often multiple-choice questions that needed to be answered in a very short period which is something completely new for me. Students who did not pass the exam on the first try or were unsatisfied with their grade had the option to retake the exams again one month later. What I found surprising is the strong research and the number of published papers by some of my professors. Seeing their work published in top level academic research journals made me appreciate the opportunity of learning from them even more.

Furthermore, the University offered us an Italian language class during the first two months while we were there. This helped us with the everyday language we needed even though Siena is a very touristic city, and many people can speak simple English. It is important to mention that the class costed 75€ extra and our teacher was not that good.

Additionally, this semester has given me the opportunity to learn more about art and history. In the following part I will briefly mention my travel journey through Italy during my time there and you will see that many cities offer an incredible amount of art in forms of sculptures, paintings, and even architectural buildings. Just to name a few of the artists I got to admire their work: Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio and even Vincent van Gogh.

Traveling across Italy

As I was there during the spring and summer it was rather easy to travel around. I tried to see as much as possible, so starting with the cities in the Toscana; Florence, Pisa Lucca, San Gimignano and Monteriggioni. It was manageable to visit all of them by taking the regional bus. Once you want to go outside the Tuscan region, I recommend taking FlixBus or Itabus which are private owned companies as the Italian trains strike often. For example, from Siena to Rome it costs average 12€ and takes exactly 3h to get there. Very important is to pre-book any of the sightseeing places you want to visit in Rome because everything sells out almost immediately online. Try to visit Rome in the spring because in the summer it gets very hot and extremely crowded.

Here is a list of the places I've visited in full: Rome, Florence, Pisa, Lucca, San Gimignano, Monteriggioni, Cinque Terre, La Spezia, Verona, Bologna, Livorno, Napoli, Salerno, Amalfi Coast, Capri, Pompei, Perugia, Palermo, Cefalu, Taormina, Catania, Syracuse & Ortigia.

Even if you do not travel that much Siena by itself offer every unique experience like the famous horse race "Il Palio" that takes places twice a year in the summer in Piazza del Campo and "Mille Miglia" where you can admire beautiful old timers.

Siena is not very close to the beach. However, the closest beach is at Marina di Grosseto or Marina di Alberese but you would need a car to get there as the regional buses are not reliable in that area. In the summer there will be a beach bus where you can book a day trip to different beaches nearby.

I could write endlessly about my experience in Italy but still I hope that my brief description of the semester has encouraged someone to go ahead write that email and start the process. Go on your own journey, dare yourself out of the comfort zone and let the magic of the Erasmus do its thing.

Tips and tricks

Housing:

- be careful of scammers
- Use Facebook groups to find more and often reliable options
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/155305114666827>
- many only rent for women
- landlords try to avoid contracts for tax reasons, standard is 4 years

General:

- use Flixbus or Itabus for traveling
- book everything in advance
- Vatican gives free tickets for Christmas mass and Easter mass
- Uffizi gallery in Florence costs 2€ if you are under 25 years
- Every first Sunday of the month all museums are free