My memories from Belfast

Reflective Journal
Agnieszka Jania from Poland
ST. Mary's University in Belfast
Tutor: Paul Anthony
Some time ago, my cousin who spent part of her studies in Germany told me about an opportunity of the exchange between European students. When my university in Poland announced the recruitment for Erasmus, I did not hesitate long to submit my application. I could not escape the feeling of happiness, when after several months of anticipation, I saw my name on the list among other students qualified for spending one semester in a foreign country. However, as the time to leave Poland came closer, my enthusiasm began to weaken and doubts started to accumulate in my mind. The thought of having to part with my family and friends for three months appeared to be daunting. On the other hand, the possibility of getting into the environment of English speaking country, meeting new people from across the world and most of all, experiencing something unique and unforgettable increased my impatience to face this new adventure.

This is how my journey to Belfast began, full of expectations and hopes...

**ACADEMIC STUDY**

As a non-native speaker of English, studying at a foreign university seemed to be most challenging part of my Erasmus experience. Despite the fact that all my lectures and seminars in Poland are in English, participating in the classes with students for whom English is a first language is something completely different. From a wide selection of available courses, I decided to choose the ones that best comply with the curriculum of my home university.

One of my favourite courses was *Modernism in English and American Literature*. During the seminars we got familiarized with the poetry and prose of writers such as, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf or Robert Frost. The form of the classes was based on the analysis of a given work and further discussion between the teacher and students. Owing to the interesting way of conducting the seminar, enriched by PowerPoint presentations, as well as the charismatic and open-minded character of the lecturer, I discovered that Literature can be something enjoyable and inspiring and that this subject plays an important part in explaining various phenomena happening in our culture and civilization.

The choice of the next course, entitled *Ireland in Europe* arose out of my eagerness to learn more about culture and history of this country. Lectures delivered on a twice-a-week basis were aimed at broadening students’ perceptions concerning Ireland and focusing on its relationship with other countries from the continent. Film-screening sessions functioned as a complement and extension of the information given during the lectures. I was
very appreciative of tutor’s knowledge and eagerness to cooperate with students. However, I found the form of course slightly disappointing. The course, instead of being an overall cross-section of the European continent, Ireland among them, focused primarily on several main countries such as Germany or France.

Another course was a combination of two seminars run weekly by two different tutors, 'Written Communication' and 'Oral Communication'. The latter gave me a great opportunity of participating in discussions and team-works together with Irish students and provided me with some hints, invaluable in delivering presentations or while applying for a job. 'Written Communication' was to a large extent based on self-work. Every other week, students were supposed to submit an assignment on a given topic, usually related to politics, which was then evaluated and criticized. The courses contributed to developing my writing skills and the information that I acquired will be certainly useful in my dissertations at my University in Poland.

'Irish film studies' was another interesting course, which consisted of film-screening preceded by a short introduction of the tutor. The broad selection of movies explored many aspects of Irish Culture and Life. The films sought to enhance our understanding of Ireland and its inhabitants. Unfortunately, probably due to late hour of the course, we did not manage to conduct discussion which was an initial part of the course.

My general feelings towards the University are very positive. I was especially surprised by the warm and friendly atmosphere between tutors and students. Teachers at my home university are considered rather unapproachable and calling their by first name would be unthinkable. At St. Mary’s, however every student is treated as an individual and all staff are always there, ready to help and support.

CULTURAL PROGRAMME:
While in Belfast, I had a possibility of participating in a range of cultural events and activities, the majority of them being organized by St. Mary’s.

Student’s Union took great care of our nightlife. They organized a lot of club-parties and we did not have to pay for the entrance! FRESHER’S BALL was the first ‘official’ party, during which all Erasmus students could get to know each other and meet some other people from the university.
Another long-anticipated event was **HALLOWEEN PARTY**. The customs such as trick or treat or dressing-up for scary creatures on 31st of October are rather obscure in Poland, which made me even more excited about this idea. The best part of it all was probably looking for suitable fancy dress. Together with my housemates, we decided to become witches.

Before the proper party, we met up in one of the houses to have some fun. Some people gave real vent to their imagination and were barely recognizable in their disguises. It was such a great night that we decided to use our costumes again at the weekend and have some ‘craic’ in another club in the city.

The idea of dressing up was also a theme for another event – **TOGA PARTY**. This time however, we had to replace fancy dresses for the bed sheets! The party was organized by History students in order to raise money for their musical. Everybody had a great time and I really loved a peculiar atmosphere of the Club Parlour.

Apart from that, Erasmus students were provided with many opportunities of travelling.

One of the best trips was a weekend trip to **DONEGAL**. The members of Student Union, in order to lessen the costs connected with transport, decided to drive the mini-bus on their own. The programme of our trip included a hike to the Errigal Mountain, walk along the Atlantic coastline and water sports – only for the boldest ones. 😊 In the evenings we went out to pubs for some drinks and opportunity to listen to some traditional Irish music.
Another great trip was the one organized to the north coast. The weather on that day was perfect, which made the landscape of GIANTS CAUSEWAY even more beautiful and mysterious. Apart from visiting this wonder of nature, we also made our way to BUSMILL’S DISTILLERY in which the whole process of producing the whiskey was explained to us. The last point of our trip was crossing through CARRICK-A-RED Rope Bridge, which connected two small islands and from which we could marvel at amazing cliffs of the coast.

INTERNATIONAL OFFICE organized several evenings which again gathered all Erasmus students together. At the very beginning Paul Anthony carried out the EUROPEAN QUIZ during which representatives of various countries could check their knowledge of the continent.

PUB TOUR was another interesting evening. Together with Briege Ellis and a guide we explored some of the oldest pubs in the city, learned about their history and importance that they play in the lives of Irishmen.

We discovered that close to the university and place where we live was a centre of Irish Culture, Culturlann. Once, students of St. Mary’s gathered there to play Irish instruments and sing traditional songs. Together with a group of my friends, we joined this evening and had a very nice time.

Speaking of Irish tradition, I cannot forget to say thank-you for two Irish students who organized lessons of Irish language and dance for Erasmus students - GO RAIBH MAITH AGAT!

SOCIAL PROGRAMME

During my stay in Belfast I could not complain about the lack of social events. Together with my roommates and other Erasmus students we always found ways to entertain ourselves. Although in Poland I rarely visit pubs, I got to enjoy it after coming to Ireland. One of my favourite places was ‘THE ROBINSONS’, especially because of live Irish music performances. Another pub often visited by us was ‘HAWTHORN’. Some students called it their ‘private pub’ as it was located just opposite to their house. I liked it for its homely atmosphere and the possibility to have a chat with Irishmen.
One evening, we went to THE ODDYSEY ARENA to try our strengths at BOWLING. Although, I have never done it before, I managed to put down all the pins several times.

When nobody was in a mood for going out to the town, we organized some entertainment in our houses. There were at least three or four ‘food evenings’ in which some delicious meals were served, including Italian Specialties, American Hamburgers or Nefla Soup. Most enjoyable for me was a PYJAMA PARTY organized in our house. During the evening we prepared some treats such as Brownies with Ice-Cream and cocoa drinks with marshmallows. In addition, later on I did some fortunetelling, to show my friends how we celebrate St. Andrew’s Day in Poland, which coincided with the day of the party.

As me and my roommates have all very adventurous spirits, we decided to explore as many surroundings of Belfast as possible. We made several hikes, for example to Black Mountain or Cavehill and some other excursions to the towns situated in the area of Belfast Lough, such as Carrickfergus, Bangor, Portrush. We also visited Dublin on our one-day trip.

GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE STUDENTS

Everybody experiences things in a slightly different way. However, I hope that some pieces of advice given by me will be useful for other Erasmus students coming to Belfast.

Travelling

While in Ireland, take the opportunity of exploring its beautiful places. Although many people consider Belfast to be gloomy or even unattractive, to my mind there is plenty to see in the city. For a start, I would advice to take a tour on a SIGHTSEEING BUS or a ride on a BELFAST WHEEL, which will give you an overall orientation of the area. There are a number places in the centre not to be missed, which you can access for free (!), among them City Hall, Queens University, Botanic Gardens and Ulster Museum. Only about a 10-minute drive from Belfast, there is a Belfast Zoo and The Belfast Castle, which I personally would recommend as a tourist must. Places outside of Belfast are all listed in the cultural and social section above 😊
Accommodation

Although, the conditions of the houses might not be as good as you are used to, I think they are decent enough for their prize. However, if you are completely dissatisfied with your roommates or something in a house gets broken, do not hesitate to contact your landlord or Briege. The sooner you do it, the shorter the time of your frustration.

Shopping

I presume that none of the students wants to spend a lot on food and other essentials. As the exchange rate of zloty is much weaker in comparison to pound, the prices of food seemed to be quite expensive to me. Therefore are tried to find some value shops. The cheapest and best loved by us was ASDA – it is situated about 20-minute walk from the College. Other cheap 'low-cost' shops include: TESCO, SAINSBURY's and LIDL. For the girls interested in 'shopping spree' I would definitely advice visiting PRIMARK or DUNNES STORES as it offers a mine of clothes and accessories for very affordable prices.

Below I present the list of general hints that other students may find useful:

**DO**

1. Attend lectures and seminars (an opportunity of listening to native tutors may not repeat)
2. Go out and socialize with other people, also outside of Erasmus circle – this is the best way to get to know about Irish People and Culture
3. Stay positive about your Erasmus experience. Remember: if you convince yourself that everything will be OK, there is no reason why things should not go according to your wishes 😊

**DON’T**

1. Speak aloud about your religious or political attitudes, the question of ‘The Troubles is still in the air
2. Sit and worry if you have any problems or worries. There are a lot of people to help you: your roommates, coordinator, and other students
3. Ever complain about a bad weather. It’s not Italy but Ireland. Rather get yourself a good umbrella and think: Tomorrow, it can be sunny again!
All in all, I must admit that my Erasmus experience was successful. I gained a lot from my stay at St. Mary’s. However, it was not always easy for me as I had double work with making up for some of the subjects from my home university. I also feel that I brushed up on my English, even though I expected perhaps to express myself even more fluently after three months.

I especially appreciate great reception of the University, Student’s Union and International Office did their best to make us feel at home here. Also other students from St. Mary’s were friendly and always ready to help. I can recall one situation, when together with my friends we were walking to the centre and one boy who was passing by in a car recognized us as Erasmus students and asked if we needed any help.

I was also very pleased with our accommodation. We had a nice house with a big kitchen, which became our hearth. Our place was furnished with facilities such as microwave, dishwasher and DVD player. The landlord was a fantastic person and always helped us when something went wrong.

Last but not least, my stay in Belfast may have been different but for my roomies which turned out to be the best girls under the sun. We became like a family. We were shopping together, cooking together and partying together and never got bored!

(Below, the picture of the greatest roomies ever!)

I bear in my mind the words of the university principal who said that “Erasmus Exchange may be the best experience of your life, but it depends on us if we take advantage of that opportunity”. My stay in Belfast opened my mind and whetted my appetite to travel more and discover new things.

My time to go home is inevitably coming forward. It will be difficult to say hallo to Belfast and all the people I met. However, I still have my great memories...