

Erasmus Semester Abroad in Lisbon: My Experience

Introduction:

I had the privilege of participating in the Erasmus program from September 1st, 2023, to January 31st, 2024, immersing myself in the vibrant city of Lisbon. During this transformative experience, I attended the Instituto Superior Técnico (IST), drawn to Lisbon for its southern charm, coastal allure, and status as a bustling capital city.

Academic Experience:

At IST, I delved into a diverse range of courses, including Computational Biology, Deep Learning, Management and Administration of IT Infrastructures and Services, and Software Security, all within the realm of Software Engineering. Semesters were split in half, meaning I had 2 courses from the beginning of September to the end of October, and two courses from the beginning of November until mid-January. Because of that, every course was limited to 7 weeks of teaching, which was unusual for me. What struck me most about the academic environment was its emphasis on practical learning through projects, diverging from the traditional reliance on exams. E.g. in Computational Biology, I had to do 2 projects and a mini test for the practical part, and two tests during the semester or one final exam for my theoretical part. This was as much work as it sounds like, especially because the project deadlines and tests were within the same week. But not all courses had projects and exams, in Management and Administration of IT Infrastructures and Services there were exercises each week that contributed 50% to the final grade and a big project that contributed the other half. This was a pleasant change because at Uni Würzburg I'm used to work intensive exercises over the semester that only grant a grade bonus. All of that emphasized the practical part of learning and taught us properly how to use our learned theoretical skills, which is ultimately the important thing. The good teaching is the reason why IST is the most respected university in all of Lisbon, and they also see themselves that way (A friend of mine tried to negotiate a shaky point in the exam review and they plainly told him that they are the elite university institution and will and cannot give away points). Therefore, it was much more difficult than I would have expected but doable.

Social Life:

Despite hurdles, I forged memorable connections, from my first strolls through Lisbon with my friend Andi to immersive electronic music experiences like Brunch Electronik in Parque Florestal de Monsanto. A great place to meet new people is of course the Bar district Bairro Alto, especially the Erasmus corner. And a lot of people I met, but sadly few where I felt like a friendship could develop. To be clear that doesn't necessarily mean anything, I do not connect easily with new people. But in the end, only a few people stuck, and those were (sadly) almost exclusively German. It even went so far that many of them also came from Würzburg, e.g. Achim, who was the first person we randomly met on our first night in Lisbon. But in the end, the place we went to the most was the Couch Sports Bar to watch basically every sports event we were interested in, ranging from the Bundesliga to the basketball World Cup final (they have roughly 15 TVs in there and show more or less every sporting event if you ask nicely).

The nightlife was a bit of a disappointment for me. Apart from techno, every club I went to played Portuguese and mainly Spanish songs. To me, as a non-Spanish speaking person, this made it hard to

enjoy myself there. This, in combination with me not being much of a bar guy, made me go out not very often.

Exploration and Travel:

Beyond the confines of Lisbon, I traveled to explore Porto's enchanting streets and Nazaré's breathtaking waves. This was possible because, like I mentioned before, there were 2 weeks in each semester half that were packed, but the rest was comparable to Würzburg, meaning there was time for other activities or trips.

Lisbon was also great in terms of weather. Of course I was glad to avoid the German winter, as the temperature were around 15 degrees in mid-January. On the other hand, it's common in Lisbon for apartments to not have heating, meaning the temperature in my room was around 15 degrees as well. But another upside was that I expected the weather to be much rainier than it actually was. There was a week of rain in October and a week of rain in January, but that's about it.

Personal Growth:

While the experience didn't drastically alter my personality or view of the world, academically, it posed stimulating challenges. Despite the occasional struggle to connect with new people, I enjoyed my time there.

Conclusion:

My Erasmus semester in Lisbon was a great experience, academically as well as trying to get out of my comfort zone. I'm glad I did it, but I was also glad to be back home/in Würzburg again.