

Reflections on the semester exchange in Croatia (09.2022 – 02.2023)

More than an exchange

The student life in Croatia and a unique journey to over 25 countries

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Abstract:

This reflection is for those who would like to know more about the short-term study and living experience in Croatia. Knowing that there is a limitation in getting the relevant resources about studying in Croatia because of its less popularity than in other western countries, I decided to provide more first-hand experience and personal observations in this mysterious Balkan nation. In this report, readers will learn the essential procedures before the mobility, the lectures and campus life, a brief introduction to Croatian society and cultural differences, the difficulties and challenges I faced during the entire exchange, and how I turned my challenges into the most unforgettable experience in my life. In the span of five months, I have visited over 25 countries and territories. I learned the most when traveling and interacting with people from multicultural backgrounds instead of merely sitting in classrooms. What matters is not simply the destination, it is all about the journey you go through. Lastly, thanks to National Cheng Kung University, which kindly sponsored my budget and supported my “life-changing process.”

Abstract (in Mandarin Chinese):

這篇心得記錄我在克羅埃西亞交換的所見所聞，提供更多第一手資訊，也讓更多有興趣的人對位在巴爾幹的小國有更多的認識。深知克羅埃西亞並不是成大學生的交換首選，在這篇心得中我會解釋去克國的理由以及在那幾個月裡所遇到的挑戰跟校園生活。同時，我在交換途中也自己去了超過 25 個國家海外考察，包含東歐、北歐、中東跟東南亞，遇到各式各樣的人跟各種挑戰，看到不同國家的經濟發展、國家建設。比起坐在教室上課，教室外的學習、遊歷是我最大的收穫，也大大改變我的性格跟看待世界的方式。最後，感謝成功大學給予我在探索世界的路途上一些資助，讓我完成這趟改變我人生的重要歷程。

The reason why I choose Croatia:

Apparently, Croatia has not always been a famous exchange destination for most NCKU students, only known for its breathtaking nature views and outstanding World Cup performance last year. However, considering its relatively lower living expense and my wish to stay in Europe for a while, Croatia is a suitable option to meet all my expectations. Thinking about doing an exchange program isn't like studying for a master's or bachelor's degree, which can get an official diploma. I suggest getting into the most prestigious university you can; if not, control your living budget and explore as many places as possible. After missing the chance to study at the Technological University of Munich (TUM), my first pick in the application, I started my exchange program at the University of Zagreb in the fall of 2022.

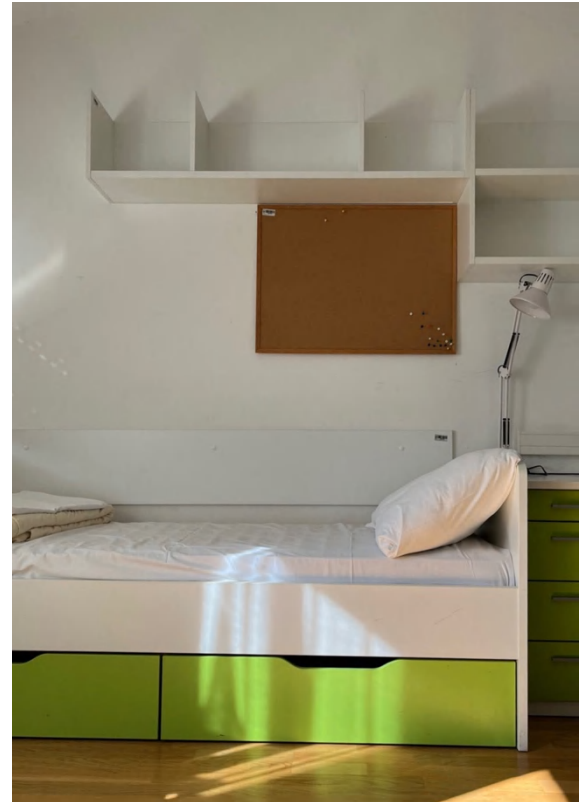
Before departure:

With only a little previous information on the website, there were not many resources I could get before heading to this mysterious nation. My suggestion is to keep following emails from your exchanged faculty. You will be asked to complete an online form to finish the online enrollment and get the OIB, your official identity number in Croatia, which can be used to apply for Student ID cards and temporary resident permits. After getting the OIB, you will receive the welcoming letter with the attachment for the enrolled students, and then you can pack your luggage and book flight tickets.

During the mobility

1. Dormitory

School dormitories in Croatia are less expensive than in Western European countries and even cheaper than renting a flat in Tainan city. It only costs 90 euros (around 2800 NTD) per month, which covers electricity, water bills, internet, heater, fridges, and a free kitchen in public areas. It is a great option to stay in Europe with a limited budget. However, one thing that must be mentioned is that single rooms are not available; students need to share a flat with other roommates, which would be a challenge for those who prefer more privacy. Unfortunately, the poor internet connection causes me massive trouble, at least in my room. With the unstable and often disconnected internet, using laptops became torture, and I couldn't do my coding assignments without staying at my friends' place.



2. Lectures and campus life

Like most European nations, faculties and research institutes are separated in different areas in Zagreb city. It is disappointing for those who wish to enjoy an interesting campus life like in US colleges. Feeling isolated and barely seeing any diversity of students was part of my experience because there was limited interaction between students from different faculties.

It took me over a half hour to get to my faculty by tram, but it would be closer if you enrolled at the political science or engineering department. As for my study at UNZG, I took three courses during the exchange: Sports Economics, Cross-Cultural management, and Econometrics.

Professors were passionate, talkative, and willing to listen to our opinions instead of keep speaking all the time like most professors in my home department. Students were from multiple nationalities, including France, UK, Germany, Switzerland, Czech, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Indonesia, etc. They are engaging and proactive. It was interesting to engage these courses even though students were generally not talented compared to NCKU students.



Sports Economics class

My favorite class. Abundant course materials and case studies. Students were encouraged to share their opinions and experiences, but sadly there was no group discussion and projects during the semester.

Student canteen in Economic faculty

UNZG offers affordable meals with limited selections. Students can enjoy a meal for around 1.5 euros (45 ~50 NTD). However, the student discount is only suitable for Erasmus exchange students (European students). Those from other continents, such as Asia or Africa, need to pay the total amount, around 4 to 5 euros (120~160 NTD). That's why I didn't go there so much, representing systematic discrimination against non-EU students.



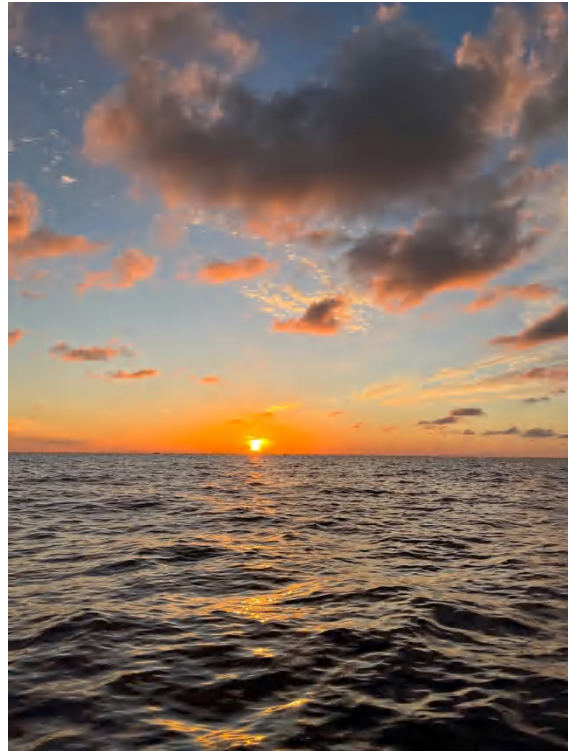
Life and challenges in Croatia:

1. Cultural differences, food, and racial discrimination

Croatia is a travel paradise for couples and backpackers, with one of the most breathtaking views and landscapes I have seen. However, you would feel disappointed if you decide to stay here longer, such as living for a while or doing an exchange program.

First, Croatian people are generally friendly at most tourist sites, but you will realize they are not so friendly once you stay longer. Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, where I study for the exchange, is the heart of the national territory but has yet to become a popular place for tourists. Based on my living experience there, local people were not so kind and knew nothing about Asia and Asian cultures. Sometimes you would see some teenagers mocking you, saying China, China! I was so upset but understood their behavior. Most of the Croatian people were not well-educated; sometimes, they didn't even know their behavior and thinking was racial discrimination. And that's my biggest disappointment in this nation. People should learn how to respect different races and cultures.

Secondly, Croatian is influenced mainly by Italian and Turkish culture. You can see spaghetti, pizza, and kabab everywhere. The most common dish is kebab, bread, and Cevapi (Croatian burger). Frankly, as an Asian who often use many seasonings and ingredients in our daily meals, Croatian food is bland and tasteless and lacks selections and diversity. Sorry for complaining about the food, but European food is generally still having miles away to go compared to Asian cuisine. We should be proud of ourselves for living in a nation with large food diversity. Culture shock bothered me a lot when I was living there, but there was one thing I still couldn't get used to; people usually smoked in cafes. Nowadays, in Croatia and other Balkan countries, smoking inside is still widely accepted by people. Therefore, you barely see any students studying or using laptops at coffee shops, a massive difference from Taiwan and East Asian countries.



Sunset in Dubrovnik, a well-known city to enjoy the spectacular view of Adriatic Sea.



Winter at Plitvice Lakes National Park, a must-visit place in Croatia.

2. Application for a resident permit:

When arriving in Croatia, applying for a temporary resident permit is the first thing to do. According to the official website of our government, any Taiwanese citizen can legally stay in Croatia for up to 90 days without visa requirements. As for those who plan to stay longer for study or work, applying for a resident permit is required.

Based on the experience I learned from the previous students, you should visit the local central police station, fill out the required form, and wait ten days for the response by phone—no need to translate the proof of non-criminal record in Croatian. However, things changed when I arrived there. I was told to submit all the documents by email. After waiting for over two months without any response, I received a message asking me to translate my certificate of non-criminal record into Croatian. Meanwhile, I forgot to get authentication of my non-criminal document by the ministry of foreign affairs in Taiwan, meaning I have to contact my family in Taiwan to deal with the required process and go to Austria to get my documents stamped by the Taiwan economic and cultural offices in Vienna.

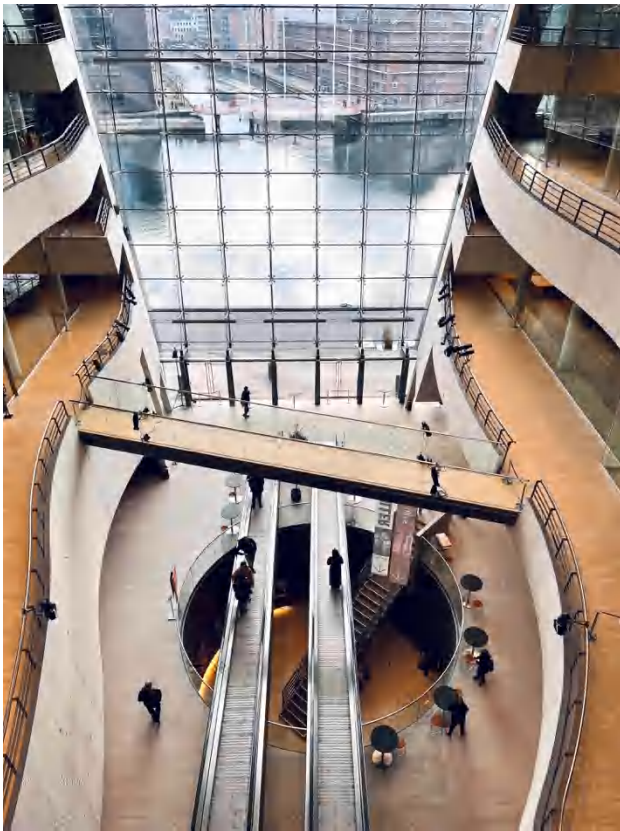
Applying for resident permits (student visas) is complicated, time-wasting, and costly in Croatia because there is no official relationship between Taiwan and Croatia governments, including economic and cultural offices. Therefore, Taiwanese citizens usually take much more time to wait and get documents compared to students from Indonesia, Korea, and Japan. Eventually, after knowing that I wouldn't be able to get the resident permit in time, I decided to travel to other EU nations and Middle East countries to avoid illegally staying in Croatia. Croatia hasn't officially joined in Schengen area before January 1st, 2023, so I could stay in EU nations and Croatia for 90 days respectively. I managed my staying period wisely, leaving Croatia on my 78th day in December and returning in January 2023.

I got an excuse to travel because of the visa issue, and I finished almost all my assignments during the trips. Still, I wouldn't suggest anyone do that with high uncertainty and unpredictable

difficulties. I highly recommend that those who would like to apply for an exchange please pick a country with an official economic and cultural office in Taiwan. Getting all required documents in advance is always a better option to reduce pressure and difficulty.

Life outside of Croatia:

Because of the visa issue, I ended up giving up on waiting. I decided to leave Croatia in late November. I traveled solo to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Bulgaria, Jordan, Israel, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Austria, etc. I learned the most through traveling. I explored different cultures, people, landscapes, languages, and food. Sharing my stories with other backpackers I met on the road. The exchange officially turned out to be a remarkable gap year for me.



Det Kongelige Bibliotek, National Library of Denmark

One of my favorite places in Copenhagen, Denmark. Well-designed library with multiple functions rooms and a large amount of ancient literature, hand scripts, and research materials. As a modern architecture lover, the National Library of Denmark is a paradise to glimpse Danish design and sustainable, eco-friendly buildings. It represents Danish culture's core value, which focuses on the interaction between environments and human beings, pursuing mental balance, a peaceful mindset, and high living quality.



Freezing morning in Tallinn, Estonia



Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland



Wadi Rum Desert, Jordan

In late December, I visited my first Arabic country, Jordan, to explore more cultural differences, and it eventually became my unforgettable experience in the exchange. I spent a night in the heart of the desert with several backpackers I met at the hostel. The view of the sunset was speechless. We enjoyed the peaceful moment and truly felt our inner spirit and the motion of the surrounding. Nobody was talking. It was a great time to reform my thinking, perspectives, the way of life. I was amazed by the hospitality of the Jordanian people and their traditional culture!

Tel Aviv, Israel

Still remember this fantastic moment. It was a windy afternoon on the last day of 2022. People sat on the hill, enjoying the sunset and waiting for the upcoming new year celebration. Israel wasn't like we see in mass media, with terrifying tragedies happening daily. It had nice and cozy weather, and people were open-minded and willing to embrace different ideas. At some moment, you somehow felt you were at beaches in California, the US, instead of the Middle East. Visit Israel has changed my mind and concept about this tiny, remarkable nation.



Gardens by the Bay, Singapore



Bangkok, Thailand

Conclusion:

I regret making such a wrong and naïve decision to pick Croatia as my exchange destination, only considering its lower and more affordable living cost. If I had a second chance, I would study in Germany or Poland, countries with better higher education systems and relatively inexpensive living expenses. Still, this unique experience has given me an unforgettable trial and chance to approach people and cultures that I have never seen before in my entire life. And weird to say that, but thanks to the visa problem, I got a reasonable excuse to keep traveling to so many countries, meeting many people that have changed my life. Compared to an exchange program, I would describe my experience as “a life-changing process.” After the journey, I became mentally stronger, more independent, and willing to accept challenges and difficulties. Dangers and uncertainties might be real, but fear is a choice. That’s how I tell myself during the journeys.