

January 2024

The EXCHANGE EXPRESS

EVERYTHING ABOUT STUDYING ABROAD

by the University of Amsterdam's **Cultural Exchange Ambassadors**



Introduction

BY MOHAMED EL HIRECH

Embark on an exciting journey with us as we unlock the doors to a world of exploration, learning, and personal growth! In this edition, we present the voices of Cultural Exchange Ambassadors who have transcended borders and transformed their study abroad experiences into an array of skills, memories, and friendships.

Filled with testimonials on the ambassadors' study abroad experiences, tips on how to navigate living abroad, as well as some of their favorite places in Amsterdam, this magazine is your guide when navigating the possibilities of studying abroad.

The Exchange Express is not just any magazine - it's an invitation to open your eyes, expand your horizons, and seek out new adventures. Join a community of students passionate about exploring cultural diversity and developing intercultural understanding.

The Cultural Exchange Ambassadors play an important part in representing the UvA and function as inspiring spokespeople for prospect exchange students. They are trained in cultural diversity and intercultural competences during weekly extracurricular sessions and workshops spread throughout the semester.

The Exchange Express is the culmination of their hard work and a celebration of their study abroad experiences.

**HAPPY
READING!**



PHOTO

CONTEST

WINNER

Category: 'favourite place'



Northern Lights with reindeer in Svalbard, Norway

Luc
Landry

“While walking in Longyearbyen at night, we looked up and saw a faint northern light. Moving to the city's outskirts, we admired the magnificent northern lights of Svalbard. Three reindeer joined us, and we ended up gazing at the arctic sky together.”



the
**STUDY
ABROAD FAIR**
2023

PHOTOS BY: JUR KOUS



ABOUT THE STUDY ABROAD FAIR

BY JINGMEI XING



By actively participating in the World Café at the study abroad fair, I seized a valuable opportunity to share insights into my own study abroad experience and respond to inquiries from students.

Spending my entire afternoon engaging in meaningful conversations, I delved into the concerns surrounding studying abroad, and learning about their concerns regarding studying abroad reminded me to reflect on how I decided to study abroad and venture to different countries.

Having studied in California, the United States; Melbourne, Australia; and Osaka, Japan before coming to Amsterdam, it was interesting for me to move between Asia, Oceania, and North America during the session. I had the chance to talk to other students who are currently on exchange or have

been on exchange from the three locations I mentioned, it was truly inspiring to hear about their journeys. Listening to their stories and attending the storytelling workshop made me think about my friends, the food I enjoy, and the initial culture shocks I experienced in each place. I finally had time to reflect on how far I've come and who has always supported me. I told myself that I should contact and catch up with my friends and family after this.

During the session, I spent most of my time in Asia, not only because I had been to Japan as one of the study abroad experiences, but also because I could collaborate with exchange students from China to inform people about my home country. I felt really proud to represent my country and introduce it to people interested in going there for an exchange.

Initially, I had only signed up for the first shift, but since I was having so much fun and didn't realize how much time had passed, I stayed until the end. I also participated in one of the workshops about internships, which was really helpful for my future study plans. The entire fair was well-covered, and I had an amazing experience helping out, more than I had anticipated. I truly appreciated all the staff and other students for bringing the whole event together and creating a memorable experience for everyone!



EXPLORE AMSTERDAM WITH THE AMBASSADORS

Whether you've lived here your whole life, are about to embark on your study abroad journey, or if you are just visiting the city for a couple days, Amsterdam has a lot to offer. From its vibrant and lively streets, quaint canals, diverse people and cuisine and incredible art spaces and night-life, Amsterdam is a city worth exploring! These are some of the ambassadors' favourite places.

De Pijp



"De Pijp is hands down my favorite spot in Amsterdam, and it's not hard to see why. The neighborhood's unique charm and atmosphere are simply magnetic. It strikes the perfect balance, right in the heart of Amsterdam without the hustle and bustle of the city center.

What makes it even better is the array of activities you can dive into. Whether it's cruising along the picturesque canals on your bike, relishing delicious ice cream, or sipping a glass of wine at a cozy cafe, the options are endless. The iconic Albert Cuyp Market is a gem where you can score delectable food and discover cute souvenirs.

What's more, there are nearby parks that invite you to take peaceful walks and soak in the greenery. De Pijp encapsulates the essence of Amsterdam's diverse culture, making it my all-time favorite spot in this incredible city."

Roxanne Casutt

De Laatste Kruimel

There are a lot of places in Amsterdam that are dear to me, ranging from favorite little spots in parks and corners of streets and canals to places that hold dear memories with friends. Especially in summer, when the sun shines brightly and the canals are sparkling, I feel nostalgic for all those little spaces and for all the moments it holds and will hold.

However, there is one place that, even in the cold and brisk wind of winter, I adore going to - whether it be with friends from here or friends and family visiting from home. It is a little café close to Kalverstraat called De Laatste Kruimel - the last crumb. During my first year of University, my friends and I were walking past that little spot and it looked too adorable, too warm and welcoming, smelled too much of cinnamon and Christmas, we had to go in. It is a small, quaint space, barely fitting a dozen people but - after Covid - I learned it tends to be packed no matter when. Their food ranges from pastries to salads, sandwiches and vegan cakes. It takes maybe ten paces to walk towards the other side of the shop where you'll be greeted with the smallest of balconies that barely fits six people on tiny tables with even tinier seats. However, the terrace is fit into a small crook of the Grimburgwal canal facing Rokin. You see the boats pass by, can see the people, and still it is tranquil and calm, like viewing it from a little passageway in the distance. It is one of my favorite places in Amsterdam no matter the weather or time, no matter the company or lack thereof, and I always find myself back there again to get some quiche, salad, or scones with clotted cream.



Noelani Luckas

Vondelpark



To get into the city centre, I have to bike through Vondelpark every day. It's 2km long and takes up about half of any trip I have to make. To start and end every day riding through a park filled with greenery, people, pets, wildlife, ponds, monuments, and murals is truly so impactful on my mood, to the extent that even when a destination lies outside of my usual route, I go out of my way to include it.

Especially in the rain, Vondelpark becomes so peaceful. Muddy dogs walk with bundled-up owners; kids under tiny raincoats stomp in rain puddles, their parents dodging splashes; bikers struggle with umbrellas-turned-parachutes. And my favorite-the trees hold the raindrops back long enough to turn them into tablespoons of ice to smack into raincoats. Imagining the sound alone is enough to make me smile.

I love Vondelpark, and I can't wait to experience it in all weather, seasons, and stages of life.

Charlotte O'Connor

CREA Café

In the few weeks I've been in Amsterdam, I've been able to visit few places that provide an environment of connection as the CREA Café. It's a place of community, where people can join together to share food and drinks after a long university day, or just to catch up. The fact that it's basically in campus also helps! But what I love most is that it's not only a café, but is also attached to a cultural and activity centre, with its own programmes but also partnering with the university to host seminars and lectures, making it a perfect opportunity to create both a social and academic community.



Catalina Echiburu

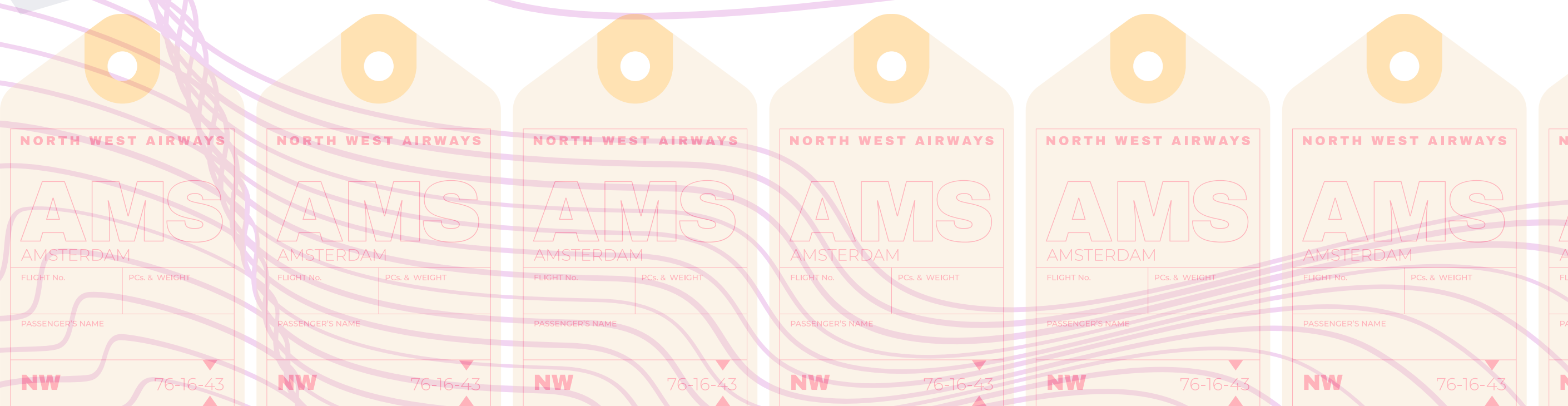
OBA Oosterdok



Recently I had to read a paper for class that reviewed a qualitative study discussing the lived experiences of refugees in the Netherlands. The primary objective of this study was to comprehensively capture these experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the emplacement and the appropriation/occupation of (public) spaces and their as meaningful means to create a sense of home and belonging.

In an excerpt of an interview, a Syrian man mentioned the OBA Oosterdok as his favourite place. I go there quite often to study and there I see a lot of diverse people claiming a piece of space for themselves. This public accessibility to this beautiful place with a beautiful view I feel like makes it a very inclusive space that belongs to everyone - which makes the OBA Oosterdok my favorite place in town.

Kai Hoffmann



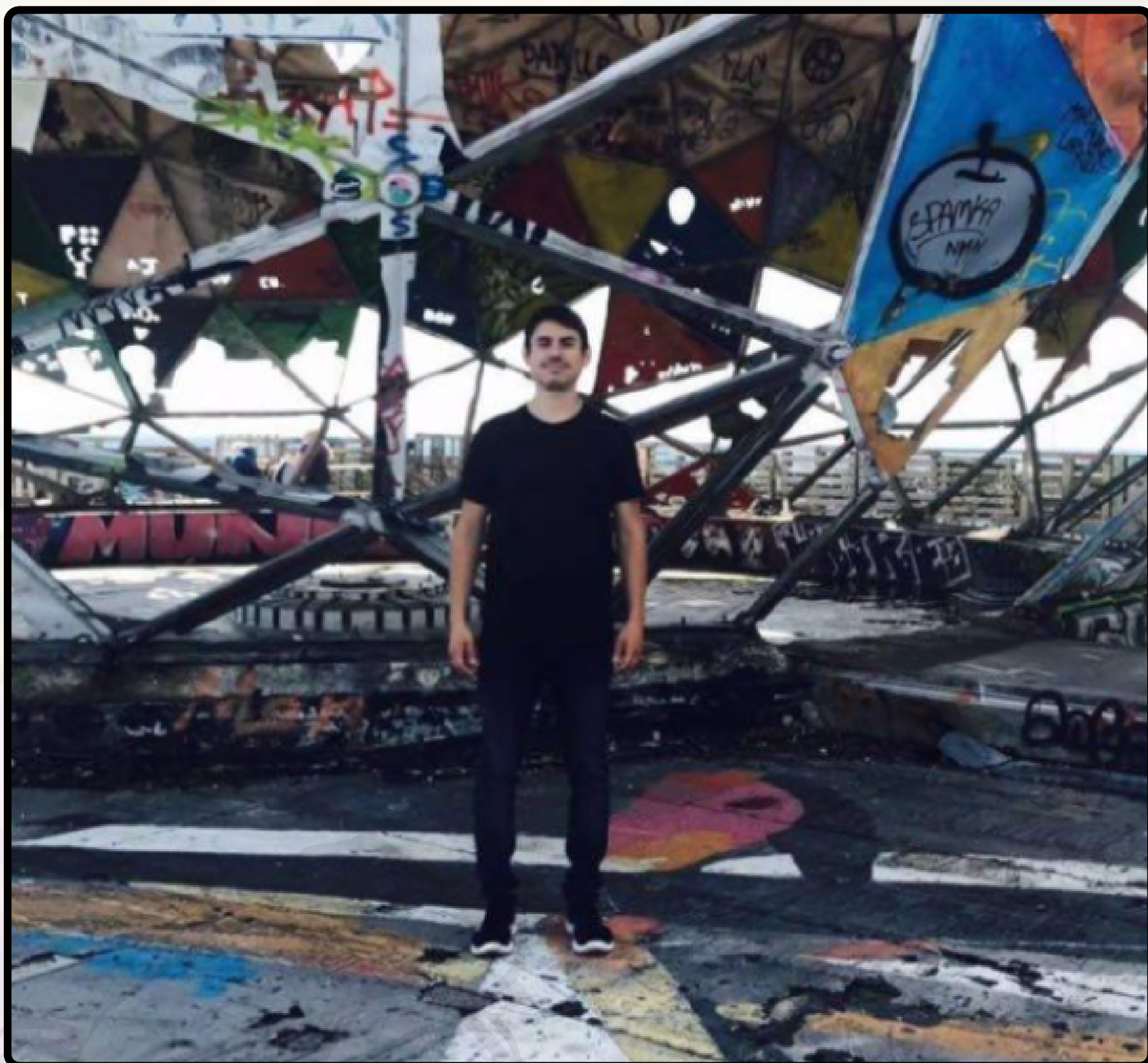


the
**Beauty of
Study Abroad**



I said to myself: “That's where I want to go. FREEDOM!”

Our **FELIPE NÚÑEZ** will shape the way we will be living in the future.



I am Felipe, from Santiago de Chile, and I study *North American Studies* at the Free University of Berlin. Now, I am on an Erasmus exchange at the University of Amsterdam. Being from Chile, studying in Berlin is already a study abroad experience. Being in Amsterdam is an exponential experience abroad, navigating between the canals and its university classrooms.

I always wanted to live in Berlin. I grew up in Chile under the **military dictatorship** of Pinochet. There were soldiers everywhere, and I thought we were at war, like in the movies I saw on television as a child. One day, I saw on the news the fall of the **Berlin Wall** and people celebrating in the ruins of the Iron Curtain. I said to myself, "**That's where I want to go. Freedom!**" At that age I had no idea that Germany also had its own history of military authoritarianism.

When my flight started landing in Berlin, I was surprised that the buildings were low compared to other big cities, like New York, where my flight took off.

The other thing that surprised me was that Berlin seemed like a city torn between chaos and calm. Berlin is a city characterized by its dichotomy. It has clubs where you can party every day of the week, if you want and can. And on the other hand, there are numerous parks, museums, universities, theaters, memorials, film festivals, etc. Berlin is aware of being an international city and strives to be tolerant and inclusive. I have always felt welcome there.

BEING IN BERLIN HAS ALSO ALLOWED ME TO OBSERVE HOW GERMANY APPROACHES ITS HISTORY, RECOGNIZING ITS PAST TO CONTINUE MOVING FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE

This differs from the policies of Chile, a country still struggling with the consequences of Pinochet's constitution.

There are many international students at the Free University of Berlin. I have had the opportunity to meet classmates and professors from Germany and the world. The cultural diversity in FU Berlin allows for academic interaction with a global perspective. Studying outside Chile has allowed me to see reality beyond the Andes mountain range.

My Unique Study Abroad Experience

testimonial by Hannah Krakolinig

As a child of an intercultural marriage, embracing more than one culture has always been part of who I am, part of my identity. Living in a country other than my own (Austria) is also not a foreign concept. My parents work for the United Nations, therefore moving around was commonplace and simply part of routine. As a 'third culture kid', I never questioned or saw my family's lifestyle as different from anyone else's. Only when starting my bachelor's degree at the University of Vienna did I come to realize and appreciate my unique life experiences.

I assumed that I would never participate in a study abroad since I had already experienced living in a different country and assimilating into a new environment. However, after the third year of my bachelor's program, I did question this rationale.

Did I really assimilate in the countries I previously lived in? Did I really leave my bubble? Did I take full advantage of my unique opportunities? Did I even realize them?

A study abroad opportunity opened my eyes to the importance of experiencing new cultures and places, practicing intercultural communication, learning a new language, and stepping out of my comfort zone (trying something new!).

After arriving alone in Amsterdam, I discovered so much about myself and my capabilities. Learning how to be truly **independent**, being responsible for my own success, being open to new ideas to solve unexpected problems, and building my own network are just some of the skills that I had the opportunity to build in my short time here.



Facing challenges

One example was finding a room in Amsterdam. This was an unexpected challenge that I had to solve on my own. The feelings of accomplishment and happiness were unmatched ☺. The picture shows my first day in my new room!

As the semester progresses, I hope not only to improve on skills such as communication, adaptability, and networking; but to also enjoy this unique experience and make the most of it! The University of Amsterdam offers so much to their students; therefore, I am so glad to have chosen UvA as my home away from home.



“

Beyond just travelling as a tourist, I felt that studying abroad would give me time and opportunities to immerse myself in the culture, to have a deeper appreciation and understanding of global diversity and increase my intercultural competency.

Megan Kym - on Studying Abroad

In the era of social media, the **world feels so small yet so big.** Having watched different vloggers and content creators from around the globe gave me the **desire to learn** more about different cultures and people not through the narratives of books, nor the stories of others but **through interpersonal conversations and shared experiences.**

Amsterdam felt the same but different – something Singaporeans would say when situations are similar yet different. Singapore and Amsterdam are both major port cities, financial hubs, has rich multiculturalism, their citizens speak English and more. However, as many similarities you may find in places, they are uniquely different. Coming from a multicultural society, I thought I wouldn't experience a culture shock in Amsterdam, but I did. Singapore is home to mainly 4 different nationalities but Amsterdam is home to up to 180 nationalities! Thankfully, I stay in international housing and have the opportunity to meet and converse with people from all around the world. I believe that growing only begins outside of my comfort zone and look forward to having my beliefs and values challenged, allowing me to be more open-minded as well as having a more informed worldview. Adventuring into **unfamiliar environments** is something I look forward to!



Student's Insight: One-Tip Interview

Hello fellow students!

Welcome to the vibrant city of Amsterdam. We're thrilled to have you join us for this exciting chapter of your academic journey. To ensure you make the most of your time here, we've gathered some insider tips that might not be in the guidebooks but can certainly come in handy during your stay.

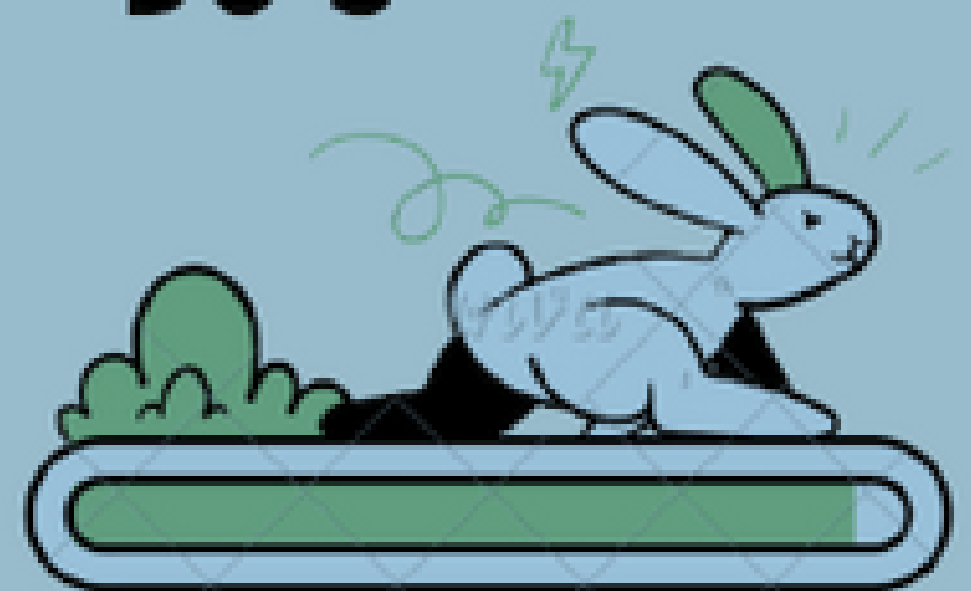
1

“ Invest in a good bike, it will be worth it. Transport gets really expensive over time, especially if you do not have an OV chipcard (OV-chipkaart)! ”

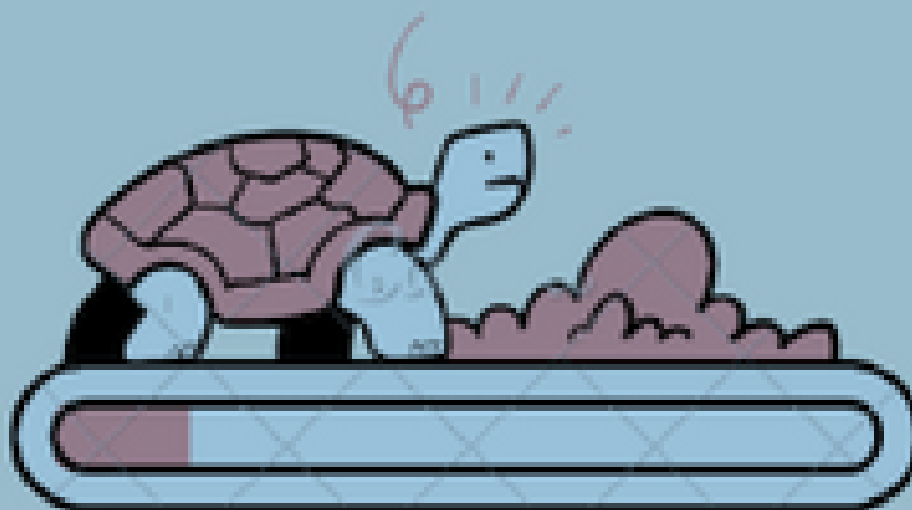
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“ Drop 60 euros on a Museumcard for Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Anne Frank House, and beyond! It's your golden ticket to art and culture. ”

DO'S



DONT'S



3

“ NL grading system is really difficult especially if you are doing a masters degree, so don't expect to get 9 or 10s in your courses as it's normal for professors to grade very harshly! ”

4

“ Walking on sunshine is great, but stay clear of the bike lane - locals are on a roll, and I've got the pavement scars to prove it. Trust me, I'm a survivor! ”

5

If you live in Amsterdam, there is a Facebook group called "Free Stuff Amsterdam". it's amazing, I got all my furniture from there for free!

6

You can get beer for really cheap. I buy mine at Jumbo and Aldi for 49c! Although the Aldi one is much better.

7

Amsterdam can get pretty isolating for people who don't socialise often so definelty do not be scared to put yourself out there and step out of your comfort zone.

THE ESSENCE OF STUDENT MOBILITY

BY ANDREEA BRATU

My name is Andreea and I am a student from Romania. During the first semester of the 2022/2022 academic year, I got the chance to go on an Erasmus+ Study Mobility in Marseille, France. I arrived there at the end of August and I left at the beginning of January. All those months were full of new experiences for me. I got to meet people from all over the world, from Spain, Italy, the USA, to Morocco, Algeria, Mongolia and so many more countries with amazing cultures and languages. I got to travel to places I've never heard of before and I tried food I never thought I would get to taste.

I wanted to take advantage of every hour and new opportunity I encountered.

I have many memories from my first week, but I think the most beautiful one is when I first hiked on a calanque. Before then I didn't even know that something like that existed, so naturally I was very excited to try it out. The first calanque I went on is called Calanque de Sugiton. It was a wonderful hike that ended with an even nicer swim in the Mediterranean Sea. The nature was everything and the fresh air was so refreshing.

After my classes started, I tried to find a way to balance my studies and the activities that I still had planned and after I found that **with balance everything became a lot easier**, as I got to visit the entire South of France and had good grades at the same time. I am very glad I got to experience the French educational system, as it is very different from what I was used to back home and I tried to make the most out of that experience. The subjects I studied there were focused more on Marketing, which helped me understand this area of business more profoundly.

I must admit that **my favorite part of the entire experience** was traveling. I visited every city that I could and walked around to discover its true beauty. The city that I loved the most was Nice. Even though I was there for only one day, the blue sea, the nature, the monuments, the architecture made me fall in love with it.

Another experience I remember with a **smile on my face** is the New Year's Eve. For that occasion, we gathered a large group of people, with the plan being that together we would start partying at our student residence, then until midnight we would go to one of the clubs in the city and do the countdown from there. Having said that, we had started having so much fun at the residence that the plan to go to the city was postponed, and thus we ended up counting down in the subway, on our way to the city. **I still laugh when I think of this memory** and when I see the video of that unexpected moment. That was indeed a New Year that I'll never forget!

To conclude, I am grateful I got to experience such a semester and I made memories that will forever stay in mind. In the end I think **this is the essence of a study mobility**: to give you a chance to try another educational system, including ways of teaching, grading and classmates' interactions and to give you an opportunity to socialize with so many different people!

MY EXPERIENCE ABROAD SO FAR HAS BEEN THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME!

Hello, my name is Glenda and I'm a Canadian undergraduate double majoring in Philosophy and English, minoring in Psychology at the University of Toronto. On the night of August 1st I hugged my roommates goodbye and flew to the other side of the pond, to a continent whose ideas and cultures I'd explored in the abstract but never the concrete. From then, I embarked on a solo backpacking journey through eight countries in Europe: France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Czechia, Germany, and at last settled in the Netherlands—a rainy green country small in size but expansive in every other sense of the word.

By Glenda Fu



Travelling has taught me humility and freedom. It reminded me of what it was like to leave my childhood in the humdrum prairies for Toronto's entropic metropolis. **When everything familiar is stripped away, you can only be present before the world with open eyes.** I was a nobody—eavesdropping in the Parisian cafes with my intermediate French, passing through Venetian alleyways at dusk, attending the opera house in Vienna, trekking Liechtenstein alps, night markets in Budapest, smoke-stone fortresses in Prague, and evading Deutschebahn inspectors in Berlin. But the greatest exploration was through conversation. I met locals and fellow travelers who taught me about the culture, history, politics, blessings, and grievances in the places they called home. We engaged with similarity and contrast in philosophy, personality, language, art. A new identity as a global citizen emerged, in addition to being Chinese-Canadian. However, I was also made painfully conscious of my identity through racism and misogyny by travelers at a Budapest hostel. There were harsh realities to take in, too.

Now settled in the Netherlands, I've had the pleasure of meeting genuine, open-minded-hearted people, both Dutch and international. My Dutch friends have taken me on some wild adventures and continue to teach me about this country and its people. I look forward to learning so much more through deep conversations, traveling again, and some brick-thick philosophy books at the Singel Library!



THE THRILL IS WORTH IT

By Jiaxin Xie

I came to Germany in 2017 and now I'm doing my masters. During the 6 years living in a different cultural environment, the first lesson I learned is that **language is the most important key to explore a new culture**. In the first year in Germany I could only read the basic German alphabet. Every time I went outside, watching other people speaking a completely different language, I felt like an outsider. This year, I took language and forced myself to learn German. Time went fast, now I can communicate with my German roommate fluently about topics from psychological science to cultural difference, also with colleagues in the company meeting, and also see German culture in different perspectives — not that fantastic as described in the film or tv series, but more lively, emotional and colorful since through language my connection to this place got deeper. Studying abroad also taught me the importance of the ability to be respectful. Starting from active listening, the key step to have this ability is to let go of some of my own ego because in a new place it's not that I know 'everything', so I have to listen to others input to learn more and observe more. The city I live in told me that everything is possible and understandable. Living in an immigrant country, I saw a mix of different cultures, and everyone has their own story, just like me. However, we should light up the ego after listening to others as well, but instead of being arrogant, ego here means a clear understanding of who I am so that I'm able to think critically. This important ability which was not often being mentioned in my life before, yet plays an important role in my study abroad— this prevents me from going to the extreme that everything from abroad is better and I need to change myself to get used to this culture. **Critical thinking made me realize that I'm different, but it also gave me the possibility to accept my own differences and choose for myself how I should explore new cultures.**

SUMMER SCHOOL IN ASIA

Partaking in an exchange program is a valuable and exciting experience. But what if going abroad for half a year seems like it's just a little 'too much', for whatever reasons? Then a short term mobility program might just be it for you! Three ambassadors participated in the INCiTE 2023 summer school program for two weeks, which was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Read more about their experiences here!



“Aرسال Ur Rehman”

Staying with a group of 150 people for 2 weeks, it would be impossible to try to get to know everyone individually and listen to their stories. It would also not be justice to the program had I just made a few friends and stayed with them for the duration of the project. In order to make my **first impressions** long lasting, I took with me **150 Pakistani flag pins** and tried giving them to everyone I met. By doing this, I ensured that both my culture and myself would be shown in a positive light.

The highlight of this was during the farewell dinner. A plethora of guests were invited, including ministers, ambassadors, and other significant dignitaries. One of the important guests was the British ambassador to Cambodia; Dominic Williams. I offered a Pakistani flag pin to the ambassador, after which I asked if he was willing to give me his own pin, as a form of an exchange. He happily accepted my offer. The pin that was given to me, was a pin that commemorated 70 years of relations of the UK with Cambodia. A memory, as well as memorabilia, that not only I but my team will never forget.

Between the days filled with classes, I also had a time to explore Cambodia. It is a country **rich in culture** and with history that has both moments of **beauty** and **tragedy**. I got to learn about Cambodian cuisine, about Khmer Rouge and Southeast Asian art. However, **my biggest takeaway** was religion. Living close to a Buddhist temple offered a **unique opportunity** for me to delve into the teachings of Buddhism. Right now, a month later, I sit in Amsterdam with a red bracelet on my right wrist - a blessing from a monk from Wat Ounalom. And it keeps reminding me that there are souvenirs like moral beliefs and knowledge that are so much more valuable than just a Cambodia magnet for the fridge. And I keep thinking **“oh, how grateful I am that I went on this exchange.”**

“Anete Paula Tomina”

When I landed in Phnom Penh, I thought “this is it, my first time outside Europe.” I was faced with the everyday things that were different than back home - markets were the new grocery stores, people talked to me more on the street and Tuk-Tuks were the new taxis. I wasn't scared and worried though, because I had a friend with me on this exchange. Looking back, it is **the biggest luxury you can have** - someone who makes you feel safe and someone you trust.

My summer school in Cambodia was **an experience like no other**. From the people I met, to the places I visited, to the food I ate, traveling to this part of the world was probably one of my best decisions ever. Wedged between Thailand and Vietnam, this country **pushed me out of my comfort zone** both physically and mentally. Working in an international team had its challenges but was also so much more rewarding. Everybody has a different way of thinking, and approaching a topic from multiple perspectives always creates a better final result. I was fortunate enough to visit some beautiful parts of the country both in the South and the North. Between the picturesque landscapes of the pepper fields in Kampot and the magnificent temples in Siem Reap, **Cambodia does not fall short in attractions to see**. I was also introduced to **Khmer cuisine** which is really delicious. As someone who likes spicy foods, I really enjoyed the curries and noodle based dishes as well as the flavourful fruit juices on offer. I know it sounds a bit cliché but what really made the trip amazing was **the people I met and friendships I made along the way**. I met some really kind people and built strong friendships which I hope to maintain in the future. **The people of Cambodia are warm, respectful, and extremely accommodating and friendly**. Over the trip, I definitely grew as an individual and learnt a lot about myself thanks to this trip. It was **my first time** traveling alone and also my first time in Asia and I can 100% confirm that I will be returning back to this part of the world soon.

“François Denaro”



VR Experience at the UvA: the Future of Inclusivity?

Some ambassadors joined a vr project centered around inclusivity at the UvA. Read more about their experiences here!

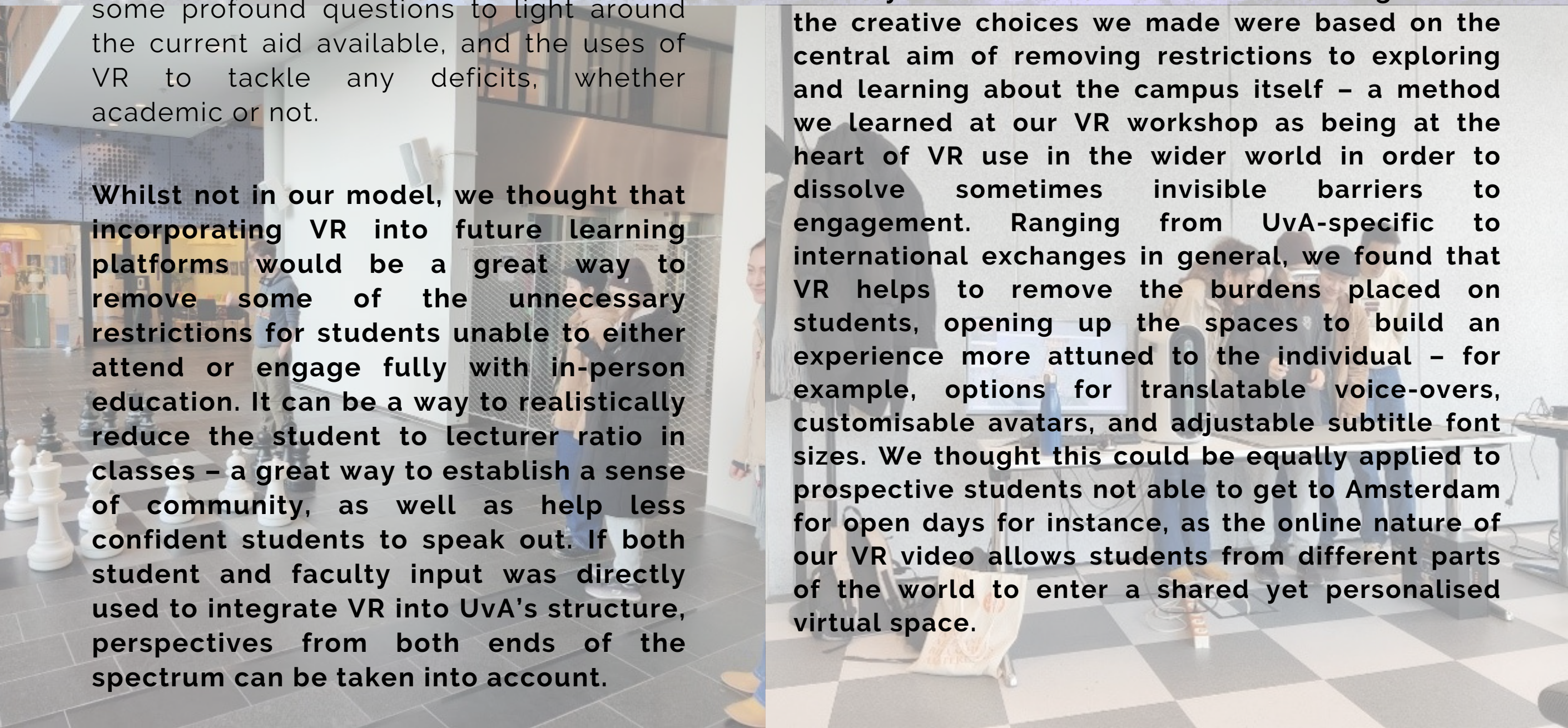


The brief we had for creating our Virtual Reality experience was broad: to 'produce an immersive and socially-inclusive film centred around a UvA campus building' gave ample room for our group to **think outside of the box** on how to approach the task. Nevertheless, it was not straight-forward. To us, the link between Virtual Reality and **inclusivity** was not immediately explicit; on the contrary, the technological know-how, equipment expense, and video-editing proficiency seem more like barriers to making VR an accessible format to engage with. However, attending a training workshop at one of the Science Park Visualisation Labs before starting helped us to see the **variety of opportunities** which VR has to offer for an educational institution such as UvA. During the session, we learned about how to compose a 360° experience from scratch, using different cameras and technological platforms to understand the **range of possibilities** out there. This helped to lift the fog, but it was upon using it that the ideas for our project started to flow, as we began to see ways to create a virtual community for UvA and prospective student

We chose the Roeterseiland Campus for our project because it's often cited as complex to navigate. It was interesting to explore the buildings from our different experiences there (discovering a common room with cheap coffee and pot noodles was one of the highlights!). But it affected us on a more deeper level too: through trying to orient ourselves into the perspectives of students who are unable to fully access the campus, it brought some profound questions to light around the current aid available, and the uses of VR to tackle any deficits, whether academic or not.

Whilst not in our model, we thought that **incorporating VR into future learning platforms would be a great way to remove some of the unnecessary restrictions for students unable to either attend or engage fully with in-person education. It can be a way to realistically reduce the student to lecturer ratio in classes – a great way to establish a sense of community, as well as help less confident students to speak out. If both student and faculty input was directly used to integrate VR into UvA's structure, perspectives from both ends of the spectrum can be taken into account.**

So, for an immersive VR experience of the life of a student at the Roeterseiland Campus, check the QR code below (code: 1234)! Our video follows the typical day of a student in non-academic settings. We wanted to showcase the options for independent, quiet, and group study spaces, as well as indicate places to relax and enjoy the scenery and food on offer. Our reasoning behind the creative choices we made were based on the central aim of removing restrictions to exploring and learning about the campus itself – a method we learned at our VR workshop as being at the heart of VR use in the wider world in order to dissolve sometimes invisible barriers to engagement. Ranging from UvA-specific to international exchanges in general, we found that VR helps to remove the burdens placed on students, opening up the spaces to build an experience more attuned to the individual – for example, options for translatable voice-overs, customisable avatars, and adjustable subtitle font sizes. We thought this could be equally applied to prospective students not able to get to Amsterdam for open days for instance, as the online nature of our VR video allows students from different parts of the world to enter a shared yet personalised virtual space.



Studying abroad, away from home, can be challenging and scary at times. Read our ambassador's tips to help fight homesickness!

Remedies for Homesickness

CATALINA ECHIBURÚ CARRASCO

You've made it! Embarking on a journey in a foreign land, studying at a new university, encountering fresh faces each day... every day is a wonder for the senses, new experiences to be had wherever you go. You've waited for this day for *so long* – it's the time you've dreamed of! Something no one prepares you for when living your dream, however, is that it can really feel like a dream, and not only in a positive way.

Amidst the tapestry of new encounters, a subtle detachment creeps in—a feeling known by anyone studying abroad. It resonates most profoundly in the melancholy of homesickness, but it's more than missing the familiar faces of loved ones; it's a yearning for the ambiance of home, and being unable to find it in your surroundings. It's a profound feeling of being out-of-touch, lost in reality.

Remaining grounded is essential to making the most out of your exchange, but it's not a one-size-fits-all situation. Some seek solace in the embrace of familiar flavors, a culinary cure for the ailment. Others find refuge in music, the tunes of their native tongue soothing the homesick heart. A brief call home might be enough for some. For me, grounding myself implies making a heartwarming soup, reminiscent of evenings spent with my family, and listening to that, while not my usual choice, weaves a comforting cocoon of familiarity. Throw in a gossiping session with a friend and the heaviness of homesickness is lifted, as I'm tethered to reality once more.

Yet, there are moments when surrendering to these emotions becomes essential. Let yourself be sad for a second, permit yourself to dwell in the melancholy

"Being abroad can be difficult, and it's okay to struggle. Be patient with yourself and do what you can."

But know that while those out-of-touch feelings are very much real, what awaits you once you get past them is nothing short of extraordinary. **Let yourself enjoy the new experiences and embrace change!** You'll be much better off, and you'll find your resilience will be your compass. And soon enough, before you realize it, homesickness will evolve, not for the past, but for the extraordinary moments awaiting for you in the present.

Developing the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Festival

The ambassadors were tasked with deciding on next year's EDI Festival's theme. This is what they came up with!

From Vision to Action

For multiple years Birmingham EDI Student Ambassadors and Amsterdam Cultural Exchange Ambassadors have organised hybrid format EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) Festival. Next year the 2024 EDI Festival will take place in Birmingham with the theme of "Make Change Happen". This festival is a true celebration of the power of collaboration, strength of diversity and the inspiration to believe that together we can indeed make change happen! On 8th November, 2023 both universities came together in an afternoon filled with brainstorming and sharing thoughts and ideas on how to empower students to initiate transformations on both small and large scale ideas and within groups or alone. The meeting formed an inclusive and diverse space, so everyone felt comfortable to share experiences, advice and opinions. As for the ideas that we discussed, there were many. There were ideas about arts and crafts, city visits where the groups explore local businesses, panel discussions on an array of topics, and storytelling events, amongst many others, including online events mirroring those happening in person. With over 16 people pitching ideas for two hours, it was a completely fulfilling brainstorming session.

Altogether, three amazing final ideas were compiled - roundtable discussion event, post-it wall initiative and a flyer activity. Firstly, the roundtable discussion event could form a meaningful environment to share impactful ideas of both students, young professionals and alumni. Idea was to make multiple roundtables each having an alumni or young professional leading a discussion about certain topics where change is important - inclusive workplaces, climate change etc. This event could be closed by a plenary session to discuss key takeaways and to explore how fundamental ideas of making change are different or similar from one field of change to another. Ideally, local businesses of Birmingham could cater the event, to celebrate the achievements of the host city Birmingham. Altogether, this type of an event would foster a dynamic environment where diverse perspectives of change converge to share, discuss and exchange wisdom of students, professionals and alumni who already make change or are just starting to seek out how to do it.

The post-it wall initiative would involve setting up post-it walls across the Brum campus in order to gather community insights about different pressing matters and what people think is working good the way it is, what is not, what they would like to change in the future and how would they suggest to efficiently change things in order to have a better world. The walls would be positioned in all the main buildings in the campus, including the main library and each wall is going to have a different theme. Towards the end of the week a "STOP and THINK" event will be organised where participants will gather and discuss the inputs collected from all the post-it walls. This is the perfect opportunity for the participants to start debates, spark discussion and brainstorm on the given comments.

The third idea we came up with is the flyer activity and discussion. During the beginning of the festival we will distribute cards with prompts on identity and representation to the participants and towards the end of the festival there will be a session which will include a panel focusing on identity and representation, as well as discussions on the given topics. The participants' answers will also be showcased both online and during the in-person meeting.

At the end, only one or two of these ideas will most likely go forward to the final phases. However, this is what we are now focused on working on and we believe that this year's edition will be a step forward and will help us inspire some change.

All in all, this event not only provides an opportunity and platform for students from the University of Amsterdam and the University of Birmingham to communicate, but also enables students to bring energy, innovation and enthusiasm into the process of solving global problems in a practical way. This engagement not only provides young people with the opportunity to shape the future of society, but also allows us to play a key role in developing a deeper understanding of global challenges such as climate change, social inequality and technological advancement. By participating in this activity, students can develop leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills, while also enhancing their understanding and respect for different cultures and perspectives. Our participation is not only vital to personal growth, but also plays an irreplaceable role in promoting social progress and building a more equitable and sustainable world.



REFLECTIONS

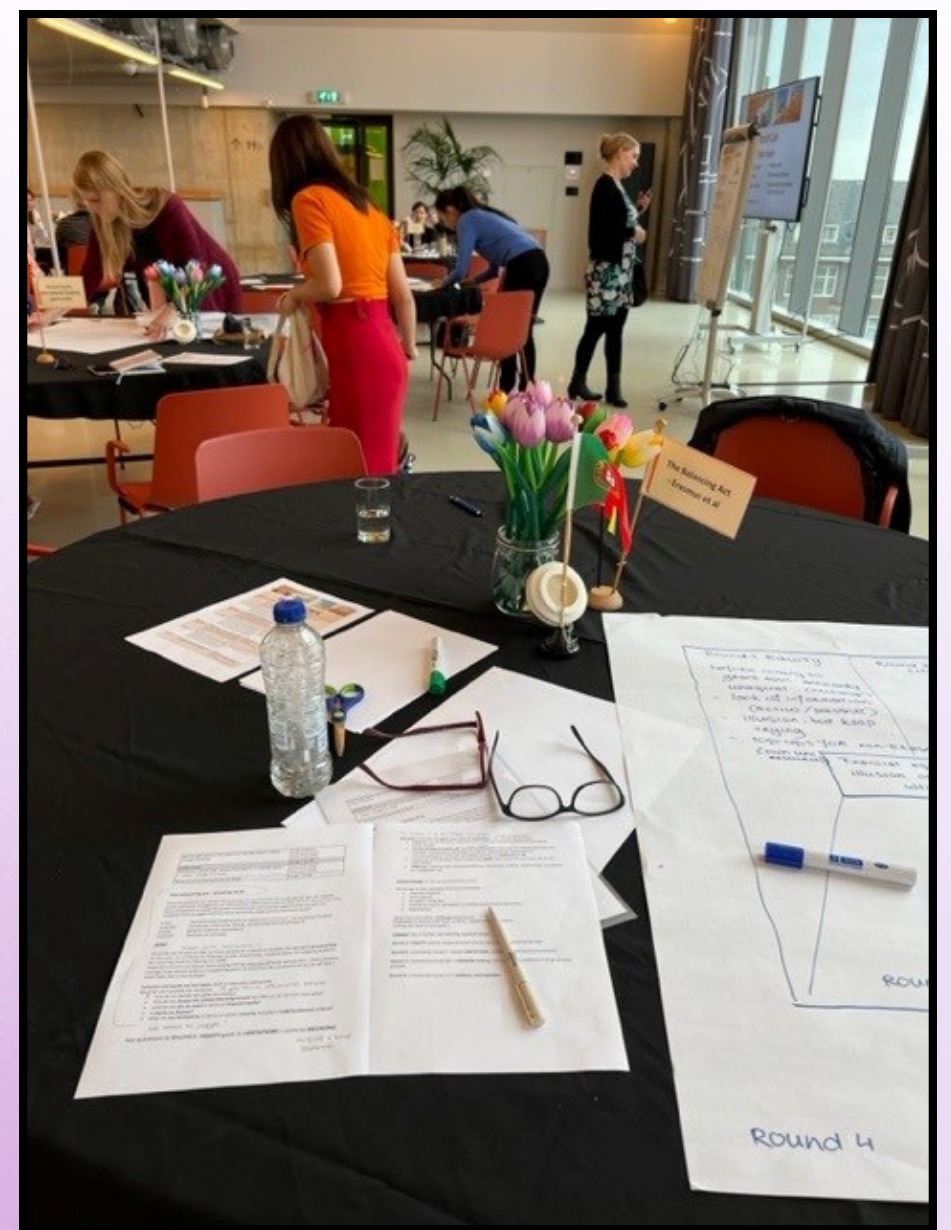
ON THE PROGRAM

International Staff Week 2023

brought to you by the University of Edinburgh and the University of Amsterdam

‘the dynamic world of study abroad’

Between Thursday and Friday, I spent nine hours at the International Staff Week events, meeting the people who organised my outgoing exchange from the University of Edinburgh, and my arrival at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, and nearly every other partner institution I could have exchanged to instead.



But I didn't attend this event for personal reasons—after all, I'm here already. I wanted it to be abstract, almost statistical, and that it was. Spending most of the day as one of only two student ambassadors, my experience was broken down into numerical terms, anecdotes, and administrative coordination by staff that hadn't been on exchange since they were in University.

This is to be expected, and thus what concerned me the most: students lack adequate representation in the exchange process both pre- and post-departure. Abroad students constitute a unique population facing different academic, social, emotional, and professional conflicts. How do you make friends in a culturally insular country? How do you obtain a visa with a “weaker” passport than an American such as myself? How do you adjust credits from a European institution to a British one? These questions are best answered by other students who have gone on exchange in recent years as well as those currently on exchange, not by staff watching through office windows.

Charlotte O'Connor

For that reason, I am so grateful for the Cultural Exchange Ambassadors Programme, where students are supported, not obscured, by staff. This programme connects international students both to each other and to staff at events like ISW, but this programme shouldn't be as unique as it is! Student representation lies at the heart of satisfactory academic and social resources, so spread the CEAP's student empowerment to your home institutions and abroad destinations.

A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY WITH THE CULTURAL EXCHANGE AMBASSADORS PROGRAM

I am thrilled to share my experience having participated in this program, a journey that has not only broadened my horizons but has also added a unique dimension to my academic pursuit.

One of the highlights of my involvement has been the incredible opportunities it has brought my way. Notably, I had the chance to travel to Birmingham and actively contribute to the organization of the 2024 EDI festival. This hands-on experience was invaluable, providing me with insights into event management and fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity.

The program has proven to be a dynamic platform for cultural exchange, enabling me to navigate and understand different cultural nuances on various levels. From connecting with fellow ambassadors to engaging with diverse communities, I have improved my skills in bridging cultural gaps and fostering mutual understanding. This aspect of the program has been particularly enlightening and has undoubtedly contributed to my personal growth.

I must emphasize the program's inclusive and supportive environment. It has provided me with a sense of security and belonging, making every class attendance a source of joy. The positivity and warmth within the program have not only enhanced my academic experience but have also played a crucial role in shaping my overall well-being.

Roxanne
Casutt



THE GIRL WHO ARRIVED AT THE END OF AUGUST WAS AFRAID, DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS ADVENTURE AND DECIDED TO PUT HERSELF OUTSIDE OF HER COMFORT ZONE TO TRY TO FIGURE IT OUT.

STUDYING ABROAD

FILIPA CARVALHO

I am really happy to say that in September of 2023 I joined the Ambassador Programme, while I did a semester abroad in Amsterdam.

Being a Ambassador made it possible to get to know people from every part of the world, enhance my presentation skills and be able to not be afraid to show how I am and express my opinion freely, without any judgment.

When I saw the email to apply, I imagined myself being in events and representing UvA as an Exchange student. In reality, it was so much more than that. Each session brought me enlightenment of different topics, such as Safe and Brave Spaces, Story-telling, Democracy and Leadership. We worked in small groups in different activities, where we shared our stories and gave our opinion, always respecting the others and truthfully listening. Also, we did a boat tour that allowed all the ambassadors to hang out and get to know each other better.

This was an amazing opportunity that I recommend to anyone that wants to put themselves outside of their comfort zone and is willing to challenge themselves to grow their horizons.



NOW, THE GIRL WHO LEAVES AMSTERDAM IS SO MUCH STRONGER, INDEPENDENT AND NO LONGER CONSIDERS HERSELF JUST A GIRL, SHE ALREADY SEES THE TRAITS OF A WOMAN AND THINKS ABOUT THE FUTURE IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY. SHE HAS LEARNED TO DEAL WITH SETBACKS ON HER OWN, TO ARRIVE HOME AT NIGHT WITHOUT A HUG AND TO LIVE WELL IN SILENCE. AND HOWEVER MANY TEARS SHE HAS SHED DURING THESE MONTHS, NOW WHEN SHE LOOKS BACK AND SHEDS TEARS OF NOSTALGIA, FILLED WITH A SENSE OF GRATITUDE.



Photo: Luc Landry