

Studying in Azerbaijan within the Erasmus programme

Why did I choose this country? To be honest, I didn't have much time to think about it, because by the time I saw the possibility to apply for non-EU countries, there were only a few days left until the deadline. Luckily, I had some knowledge about the region and the country because I like to know what's happening in the world and I'm incredibly interested in the Middle East region. I knew beforehand that this was a place where living and studying would be a truly unique opportunity that not many students have had the chance to experience.

In Baku, I won a scholarship to the Azerbaijan State University of Economics, which is located in the heart of downtown Baku, just outside the walls of the old city called Icheriseher. I contacted the university already in September to arrange all the necessary paperwork. Meanwhile, I also visited the Azerbaijani Embassy in Budapest to apply for a 180-day multiple-entry student visa. I received a call within a week of submitting the documents to pick it up. Before I left for Baku, I received a call from one of the diplomats at the embassy inviting me to lunch. During lunch, he offered to help me if I needed anything for the next semester. We also talked about the current political and geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and the post-Soviet countries.



I packed my suitcase and set off on my adventure on 15 February. Luckily, Wizz Air operates three flights a week from Budapest to Baku, at a pretty cheap price, so there were several times when I simply popped home for a weekend to visit family and my girlfriend in Budapest. On the plane on the way there, I wondered whether it was a good idea to go to Baku, and for 5 minutes I was in doubt as I was the very first student from BME to come to Azerbaijan to study with Erasmus. However, I knew that it was all up to me what I would make out of it.

Is the Caucasus part of Europe or Asia? No one knows for sure, as there is an incredible mix of cultures, landscapes, people, and religions in this part of the world. I was able to see this with my

own eyes after getting off the plane and taking a taxi to the city centre. Skyscrapers lined the main road into the city centre, and then I found myself face to face with renovated 19th century apartment blocks. At first, I couldn't believe I was in Baku, but I was soon reminded by the locals that the city was growing at an incredible rate thanks to the oil found here. It is no coincidence that Azerbaijan's oil revenue is one of the greatest blessings a country can have, that Hitler wanted to conquer Baku during the Second World War, and that the hegemony of the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus is so extensive.

I really wanted to save money on accommodation, so I decided not to rent an apartment for myself, but to stay in a hostel during my stay. This was also a challenge for me, which I wanted to do, because I wanted to step out of my comfort zone by living for months in a place where I am constantly surrounded by people, even in my own 'room'. I think it was a very good decision, because I got to know a lot of people from the hostel (one or two of them became my very good friends), and I could really save a lot of money that I either spent on travelling or invested.

The Azerbaijan State University of Economics was founded in 1930 in the Azerbaijan SSR, but the university building itself was completed towards the end of the 19th century. On my arrival, I was greeted with cakes and tea and enthusiastically told about the institution. Exchange students are very rare at the university, so I felt a bit like I was being treated like a celebrity. They told me what to expect during the semester and confronted me with the fact that I could hardly take any of the subjects I wanted to. Fortunately, this didn't turn out to be a problem because after a bit of organising I was able to take subjects that I could accept at my home university and that were interesting to me. In a semester, there is a mid-term exam and a final exam, the results of these and the points gained in the practical classes are added up, which give the semester's result. You have to attend lectures, but it is up to the professor whether or not they will record absent students.



People are very friendly and helpful so it's easy to make friends with the locals. Most of my friends here are locals and it's very interesting to get a glimpse into their lives. Apart from me, there was one other exchange student at the university, Philip Guelat, from Bern, Switzerland, who I became friends

with very quickly. Both of us were surprised to learn what the other was doing here in Baku, but he had come to study here for the same reason as I had, thirsting for adventure.

What shocked me most was how different I imagined Azerbaijan to be from what it really is. I thought it would be like a little Istanbul or mini-Turkey, but it's not at all. So much is different, from the people to the customs. The Soviet influence was so strong that it can still be felt almost everywhere in the country. Be it the architecture, the public transport, the vehicles, the customs, the culture, the religion and even the mentality. The Soviet Union changed this region incredibly and that explains a lot. For example, the fact that more than 90 per cent of the population are Shia Muslims, but only about 15 per cent practise the religion. This means that you don't hear Ezan in the street, mosques are very rare, alcohol is everywhere, cheaply available, especially vodka, and women hardly ever wear hijabs.

I was keen to travel around the region and visit some countries so before the semester practically started, I took a bus across Azerbaijan and managed to cross the officially closed border into Georgia. The Caucasus is a very different world, so you have to be resourceful to achieve your goals. Tbilisi is very different from Baku and the language, religion and culture are also different. I took the train from Tbilisi to Batumi, where I managed to see a few places on the way. From the main Georgian port, I crossed another land border and found myself in Turkey. As there is a huge distance between Istanbul and Trabzon, I had to take a plane instead of a bus. In Istanbul, I was welcomed by two dear friends with whom I have been very good friends since 2017 and I was able to spend a few days with their family.

After my trans-Caucasian adventure, I flew back to Baku and started my studies with my yearmates. The classes were very interesting and during the exercises we had to contribute to the class that was evaluated and marked. Luckily, making friends was very easy and I soon had a small group of friends. The teachers are also very nice and helpful, so if I needed any help with exams or the course material, they were always happy to help.



I took Azerbaijani History, Marketing, International Business and Information Management. Except for the history class, all of them were held offline and the exams had to be taken in a separate exam room full of computers and cameras. I had to study a lot for the exams, but in general they didn't ask difficult questions or ask you anything you hadn't learned.

In Azerbaijan, every week in spring there is a holiday or a break, so I had a lot of free time. Only Novruz (Persian New Year) meant a 10-day break, and then Ramadan (which we are told the locals don't observe) extended the break with extra days off. I also took advantage of this time to travel to India, Nepal, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. I could write hundreds of pages about these trips, but then I wouldn't get to the end of this report. If I had to sum it all up in one sentence, I would just say that the Taj Mahal is the most impressive masterpiece I have ever seen in my life, and that alone makes it worth travelling to South Asia.



After my big tour, the weather started to get better, and I was able to organise more and more leisure activities with my friends. We travelled to several cities in the countryside, and I even visited friends from Hungary during my time out. I also made several friends from the hostel who were travelling through the Caucasus, and I was about to be their local guide in Baku.

The exam period started on the 1st of June and ran until the 30th of June. While studying and writing exams, my friends and I made several visits to the beaches on the shores of the Caspian Sea in the Northern part of the Abseron Peninsula and enjoyed the sunshine. At the end of June, my girlfriend flew to Baku, and I ended the semester with one last trip to the Caucasus, through Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia (again, exclusively by land).



I can confidently say that this semester was full of challenges, I have improved a lot and I have stepped out of my comfort zone. What I have been able to experience in these 5 months is priceless and I owe a huge debt of gratitude to BME and the Erasmus+ programme for giving me so many experiences.