

TÍTULO ABREVIADO DO DOCUMENTO

ERASMUS @ Switzerland

João Amaral Craveiro

Not really an ABSTRACT of the document (Learning report)

Abstract—Life in ERASMUS is a unique experience, full of activities that can be completely new; once in a life time chances and you don't want to miss one. I decided to go for a beautiful country and a top of the list university even if this would mean living under a very restricted budget and not the usual 24/7 party environment that is possible at some other destinations. Nevertheless the experience didn't fall short on any aspect. I believe I made the best out of every minute I spent there, with new friends and old friends and difficult decisions of where to be every day.

Index Terms—Independent Studies, ERASMUS, Switzerland, EPFL, Lausanne, Studying abroad, experience, learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." - Mahatma Gandhi

WHEN you go on an adventure like I did, the adventure of living and studying in Switzerland, you should have high expectations and you also should be ready to lose and/or change them. What you bring home is much more than you can expect or even perceive; sometimes you're not even sure what it is. This report is as much of an effort on trying to account for what I learned from my experiences as it is on trying to understand what I learned in fact. And a reflexion on the process. I know a bit better what life is, what's it about and what it means, how to live it better and who to live it with. I came home more mature and younger than ever, proud of myself, of my choices and efforts in the past and ready and sure on what kind of future to fight for.

2 A GLIMPSE OF ADULthood

"I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world."

- João Amaral Craveiro, nr. 62530,
E-mail: joao.craveiro@tecnico.ulisboa.pt, is a student in
Information Systems and Computer Engineering,
Instituto Superior Técnico, Universidade de Lisboa.

Manuscript received June 3rd, 2014.

This makes it hard to plan the day." - E.B.White

While living in Zenith I once traded groceries with a friend for a meal for I am such a terrible cook. I wanted to get better at it and eventually I did.

I once went to the university with dirty clothes for I didn't know how to wash them. I didn't want to learn it but eventually I did.

some days I wanted to stay in bed and avoid those cold winter mornings but I never did.

I took the responsibility to learn and to do the good, the bad and the ugly. This is the kind of stuff I am not used to do, not even of thinking about, and even if from the beginning I knew I'd have to, I would neglect it for a couple of hours with my friends or riding a bike by the lake. Besides this I'm terrible with schedules and shops there close even before you think about going home for the first time in a day. To make it much more difficult you're living on a budget so most shopping seems like the kind of thing that can wait for a better financial moment. No money for cleaning products or a good meal is no problem. But it is. In the weekends you have no family dinner to make it right and you can't go home and have mum fix it all for you. I learned how to manage myself and my life from the beginning until the end. I believe people call this adulthood and it sucks until you get it right. par

Making plans so that I can have some free-

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dom later was a lesson for life. Without any help I understood the true value of establishing routines and how important it is to stick to them. This allowed me to save money and time, enough to do fantastic trips and go to parties with my friends. It also allowed me to get the laundry or the skype calls done without all the stupid suffering of thinking about it and postponing. Life is about balances but sometimes our conceptions of what is needed, on each side of a healthy equilibrium, is so skewed by the guardian angels we have next to us on everyday life that we really need eye opener experiences.

I could list all the important practical things I learned like using a washing machine, buying fresh vegetables, keeping track of the best prices at the different supermarkets and making soup but I now realize that was not the real lesson. I'd probably be stuck if I had to use a different washing machine and if the quality of the vegetables varies, I need a lot more practice on all that, but the sum was bigger than the parts. These days I feel comfortable managing a budget and having a holistic view of my life and my spending and my time. I learned to be aware of everything that's going on around me and matters, without other people making the invisible, unpleasant and boring tasks for me. This sense of awareness and independence feels good once you get a grip on it.

The difficult part to manage, the one I feel I only started to understand, is making choices. This sort of independence leads to endless combinations of desires and you need to make the most out of what you need and what you want. A classic subject of philosophy that once is put to practice draws very few from long hours of reading.

Today I think the point is to be conscious enough about the choices, to avoid regrets, and besides that live every second of a day. I gave up on many local visits and plans with buddies from college to do the interrail and I know it had an impact on my social relationships at the university right from the beginning but the trip was amazing. I learned that it's not only about not being able to have everything, my parents taught me that, but how to digest the decisions that leave a mark on you. When you



Figure 1. Cooking lesson at Zentih's kitchen

have one of these every few days you start to understand how much of a narrow path life is and how lightly you have to take it to keep peace of mind.

3 A LIFE WITHOUT MUSIC

"If a composer could say what he had to say in words he would not bother trying to say it in music." - Gustav Mahler

I call myself a musician. I play the piano since I was a little kid and since then I studied classical and jazz music, learned to play guitar and the drums. My bedroom has a small bed camouflaged in the middle of instruments and posters from my favorite bands. Back at Zenith there was no music for me to make and I felt a part of me and my inspiration was going to waste. At the beginning I tried to let it go, not to think about it, but this is never a good solution. Eventually I think I learned how to manage it for the best. During those months I would use the audio recorder in my smartphone to capture myself humming the melodies that came to mind when walking the streets of Lausanne and the corridors of École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and the margins of the lake. Back at my room I would use a MIDI sequencer on the computer to make arrangements and consolidate ideas. I missed the practice of an instrument but I got music back to my life and it made a difference.

I still have lots of ideas to compile and perform from back then and the first days back home I spent hours playing what I had stuffed in my mind and in MIDI files.

It was very important to me to realize how dependent I am on some of the things in life I take for granted and despite this I could find a solution by changing a process and not by avoiding or forgetting this part of me. I rescued this essential part of myself like I did with others but I could only understand the true value of it once I was there (otherwise I would have paid the 50 euro tax to take an instrument with me on the plane).

This kind of experience is very important when you live in an environment of excellence. Every one is so good and so bright and so talented and can remind you of this in four or five different languages without even sounding smug. From the classrooms of EPFL to the BCG course conference rooms I met some really bright young minds and having my identity and my strong points assured and well present was very important to stay sharp and competitive and motivated. I learned how I must struggle to keep my identity and my self-confidence if I want to step up my gain; and now I know that I can do it.

4 LOVE AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage." - Lao Tzu

Love is the one thing you don't expect to find far away from home; and you hope for it too if you decide to have a girlfriend waiting for you back in Portugal. Some love is ok... but not enough.

I had seen and heard of Skype relationships before, how complicated and demanding it is, but never thought I'd be on that position. I was. I'm not much of a phone calls guy, my mother always complains about this, and skype feels just the same.

During my stay I didn't contact friends or family very often but I had to manage my relationships; I learned to live this love that comes and goes at the speed of light. I thought it was pointless and too sentimental, and maybe it is,

but if it is so am I. I tried to trick it by sending postcards and creating a private photo gallery for the close ones. It's very difficult to share a life with people so far away and for so long but it's rewarding and meaningful if everyone is pushing for the same side. People came to visit and those who didn't I kept close with pictures and text messages and eventual calls. Feeling love made my day almost every day and the more I pushed away these important people in my life, even if not on purpose, I'd feel less and less capable. A kind of distance is necessary when you're really close but a kind of closeness is necessary when you're really far apart. I learned to create and live and cherish this kind of closeness, with the help of smartphones and the internet and social networks, and this was a key for success. I had to give away another part of me to get something I didn't know so important for my own sake.

5 MAKING NEW FRIENDS

"Friendship... is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything." - Muhammad Ali

I made and I left lots of friends in Lausanne. Different ages, different nationalities, different degrees and courses and interests and personalities. More than ever before. I met Zé and Olivier the day I arrived, dozens during my stay, and four Spanish friends the day I left. I call them all friends, good friends.

This is a time in life when friendships are not so easy to find and keep anymore, people become too different, but far from everything and everyone friends are a necessity, not a luxury. Everyone is ready to meet and be met. I was often introduced to a big smile and either a handshake or the traditional three kisses.

I had my friends Beat and Chris and Steph, only to name a few, at college. Zé, Olivier, Ricardo, Guilherme, Alexandre, Patricia and so many other Portuguese ones. Guillaume and Himanshu and all the other guys at the lab. Manu and the rest of the football team. Felix, David, Lisa and so many others at Zenith. Martin, my optional project coordinator. With all these new (some bizarre) friendships I learned

how much I had been missing from the world not having these connections that open the mind and inspire deep thoughts. Everyone has something to teach you with their life stories and their previous love affairs and their experience somewhere in this world. In the end the lesson is all about how limited we are not if we don't look for guidance and experience and help and comfort in others' ideas and stories.

6 THE VINEYARD SOAP-OPERA

"But Portugal has a peaceful feel about it. I sit on the terrace overlooking the vineyard there and I feel cut off from the world. You need that sort of thing."
- Cliff Richard

"My" Swiss vineyard was different from Richard's. I had never seen such a heterogeneous group before I walked in Zenith. And this was a perfect picture of what Switzerland represents. A mixture of different people, very different people, looking for high standards and a bright future. Once I look back on how much I learned, on how to deal with different people and groups, I wonder if I knew anything at all. You can't talk to a German the way you do with an Indian or a Greek and you don't expect the same from both of them. We don't talk the same, we don't eat the same, we don't feel the same... I think we don't even see the same most of the time.

You don't expect to share food with most Europeans but the Indians might think you're being disrespectful by finding their food not good (it's not bad but looks terrible) as they give it for you to try. The Germans will never let you see their room, the Spanish will invite you for theirs and the French will be offended if not invited to yours. The Chinese will cross you off their list if your bad mood in the morning suppresses a colloquial greeting. The Swiss don't care about you. The Czech couples will find it almost offensive if you make conversation with the girl, the British if you make it with the boy, while others will be offended to be treated differently just because they are together and "not available". People from the south of Europe will be glad if you open the doors of your house for a summer visit and the guys from the north just don't get the point of

that with so cheap hotels and a temperature high enough to sleep in the beach.

Our not so ethnic environment in Portugal conceals us from crucial learning on the habits and cultures of the people of the world and I'm sure it's a huge advantage to know what they expect and how to deal with everyone. We live in a globalized and collaboration dependent world, especially in areas such as Computer Science that are becoming ubiquitous and ever connected, but at each end of a line there's a different human being and there's where you're most likely to make a difference; whether you're making a friend or a deal.

7 SWITZERLAND BABEL

"If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without climbing it, it would have been permitted."
- Franz Kafka

Besides my Portuguese and English all other languages were on a really bad shape before ERASMUS. I should have practiced my French but I didn't. I know a bit of Spanish and Italian but it was lacking practice and falling to oblivion. Living in Lausanne you can practice any of these languages every time you want (and also German but I wasn't up for the challenge). I rarely found anyone that spoke less than four languages fluently either working as a supermarket cashier or a sports instructor. It's mandatory not by law but by culture.

My French improved significantly because of shopping and of the football team practices. Reading the names of what I was about to buy in French gave me the necessary vocabulary to formulate my doubts and requests; the heat of the game led every player on the team to talk in French and I had to adapt to it to keep up with the team play. Sometimes the hard part was to kick the ball while formulating a phrase. I found myself in the last practices shouting "sur l'outre côté!" without even thinking about it.

The Spanish community is huge and a lot of people from northern countries also speak it a little bit and understand just fine. We Portuguese, after a couple of drinks do sound great even if some of the words are made up. The famous *portunhol* gives no vocabulary but improves a lot the annunciation.

At college, all the classes and most of the talking was in English so I had an intensive exposure to the language with the funny French accent. Not so good for the annunciation but just fine for vocabulary, especially technical one. I always like to improve my English and I could also do it when talking to Martin or trying to understand the weird accent of the South African Kamusi Project developers.

I also had to make use of my best English because they would take every chance to state they couldn't quite get what I was trying to say. Language can become not only a barrier to understanding but also to trust. Earning the trust of the Kamusi NGO team was difficult and I had to spend long hours working and talking with them. I learned about their own jokes and idiomatic expressions and could even put up a little bit of their accent. I'm sure this was determinant to a good relationship and a trust base that allowed for collaboration and great results.

8 CULTURE TANTAMOUNT TO OXYGEN

"The atmosphere of the theater is my oxygen."
- Plácido Domingo

I've always found the comparison of spiritual guidance and the wind very happy. You can't see it but you see things moving with it. And if the wind can make it for the spirit, oxygen can make it for the culture. You don't see it but you breathe it.

One of the most difficult things for me was to let a new culture take in, to breath a new kind of oxygen. You start by feeling like you're betraying yourself, your personality and beliefs and life style, but eventually you see a way it can all go together. You don't have to give up who you are to fit in and still fit in.

The schedules, the indifference to others, the blind trust in one another, an almost snobbish politeness. No one will make you buy a ticket in for anything around Lausanne, but expect the worst if you get caught. No one will treat you wrong but expect social exclusion at the first sign of defection. No one will even comment on the power and wealth of the rich and the powerful; immigrants are to blame on most things. From social standards to politics it's

hard to feel comfortable with the Swiss way of life but once you turn the picture upside down you can bring some color to it. Here you're the underdog and you're surrounded by others just like you. The culture becomes what you all want it to be, a mixture of the Portuguese calm, the Spanish fiesta, the French taste, the German rigor and the Swiss laws and landscape. The outsiders are a majority with fewer resources but full of aspirations, and every one that takes a deep breath of this kind of oxygen with an open mind can shoot for the stars. (I wouldn't say the land of the dreams to avoid getting it any closer to the classic "American dream" but just so you know the city is known by *Lausanne* among the younger).

When I considered moving and studying in the UK I went to visit a few friends that live there and one of the things that really shocked me was how people, after a working day, would leave their homes between he pouring rain to catch a bus and go buy some groceries. And this was people making good money. How badly accustomed are we right? Really bad because I also found this same scenario in Lausanne. The weather may not be as bad but unlike most of the people living around London, here the city is quite small and people have very good wages so why not buy a small car and avoid all this? Well, this is the kind of culture you want to take a deep breath of. Here people understand the importance of public services, like transportation, and the need of a solidary spirit. Things work because everyone trusts it, and everyone trusts it because it works. Positive feedback cycles are difficult things to put up but the Swiss do it with art and ease. I tried to learn the lesson well.

To this quality oxygen I would add my own mixture. My lesson learned here was how to mix it right. I didn't want to miss the virtues of the Swiss environment but to keep my Portuguese-self alive I would have to eat a steak and watch a Benfica every once in a while; to scheme a plan on how to avoid the train fare if I went to visit a nearby location by the end of a month; to go out with the Portuguese to talk about how much we miss home, the food, the people, how bad things are in Portugal and so on and so forth. Once you're

able to breathe such an air you give a certain charming status to your immigrant condition.

9 HABITS LEFT TO BREAK

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. - Aristotle

I never thought I would be accepted for the BCG course, for the 2nd league football team, to be one of the best in class, to do a great master project paying to real subjects. I expected things to be very difficult but felt no pressure, and I thought this was a good thing but it could be better. I was used to having people help me with domestic tasks, and a social life based on lifelong relationships, but of course this had to change.

I never had someone who would entertain a thought for me and prove me wrong. I thought I was ambitious but people told me differently helped to reach out for more. Just like Olivier kept the BCG opportunity alive for me until the last second, my colleagues at the lab told me to go for more and more with my master project and my class mates convinced me that I could face homework and the exams. I applied to the IT strategy and got accepted, I conducted an elaborate experience with human subjects with financing from the university and I was top of the class on both Distributed Intelligent Systems and Computer Supported Cooperative Work, being the practical project of the former the best of the year amongst almost 100 groups.

I learned that the last mile to proficiency owes a lot to faith and perseverance as much as it does to talent and hard work. I learned this because I had great teachers that could be nothing less than great friends.

With my startup Lausanne contest participation I also learned about the challenges of working with a management student. We had ideas, skills, motivation and hard work to put but we lacked the experience of putting up a project together. This is a hard experience to have when you come from a very technical university and working with Olivier was an eye opener. We don't talk the same language, we go for different objectives and we want to make our expertise more useful the others. This

is something I still need to work on but being aware of it is a huge advantage.

10 MASTER OF NOTHING

"I would not be a slave so I would not be a master."
- Abraham Lincoln

I learned so much during my short stay in Switzerland that the only conclusion I can take is that there's more to learn out there than in every page of every book. Although not substitutes, living and learning are with no doubt complementary. I come home a better student, a better friend, a better son, a better boyfriend, a better cook, a better house keeper, a better football player, a better wine and beer taster, a more experienced traveler, a wiser boy and an ambitious man. And this reflexion was very important to also think about my limitations too. I know how limited I was and how complete I thought I was, so now I can only feel incomplete. And the space left for all the wisdom I now know I don't have is filled with good sense and secured by wide open eyes.

This space left is why I was never a slave of ever changing beliefs and why I can only become a master of nothing. I finish with the first and last part of a text I wrote in Portuguese a couple of days before returning to Portugal. I think it perfectly depicts my state of mind when this experience of a life time had to come to an end. That day I got my grades, I was almost a master in science, but I felt like a young apprentice of life and it felt really good.

"Sentado num banco à beira lago, espero calmamente que o cenário que me fez parar se retire; que a lua cheia se levante da cidade até à indiferença e que as montanhas se apaguem sob estrelas flutuantes; que o frio preencha as agitações e os bateres de asas sejam apenas vento. Perdi as horas na calma da paisagem e percebi que àquele banco não ia chegar necessidade. "Vou já", ia eu dizendo às paredes do teatro, aos Alpes na nebelina. A lua brilhava mais forte, mais alto, o lago era um um vulto esbranquiçado que uma brisa fazia murmurar. Ali, estar sentado era um exercício intemporal e o levantar tinha que ser parte natural de



Figure 2. My favorite bench by lake Léman, near Morges

uma perda indispensável, não mais uma das obrigações da vida. Por isso mesmo ali fiquei, até ver sugado todo o amarelo e o vermelho e o azul cada vez mais escuro. O restolhar já era fome e os arrepios a única restea de esperança para a caça de emoções, apólices de seguro contra todos os riscos que conheço. De tanto que tirei fiquei sem nada, nem tempo, e galguei, pela noite fora sem uma ideia, para apanhar o último autocarro para casa. Foi por pouco, como de costume. E que bem sabe entrar com o meu ofegante sucesso pelo cansaço estampado no rosto de cada passageiro a dentro."

(...)

"Sentado num banco à beira lago, o cenário que também eu fiz parar espera calmamente que eu me retire. As mãos enchem-se do nada que tiro dos bolsos e deixam escorrer por entre os dedos certezas que só se consagrarão se boiarem neste pequeno mar. Sem me lembrar de ter aberto conta, deposito sem medo tudo o que amalei, num cofre para tempos, à prova de tempo, que deixo aberto mas improfanável. Anulei os seguros. Foram minutos que pareceram horas, imortalizaram dias, resumiram meses, prepararam anos e mudaram uma vida. "Já vais?" - perguntavam em coro os elementos mais ínfimos da paisagem. Com o sol por pôr e os sentidos ao rubro disse para mim: "Já vou". Mas disse-o para mim, com tanta pena quanto garra. E fui logo. E levava tudo sem saber."

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This reference is not cited anywhere

This document was supposed to be a "Report on Learnings" written in a more Technical or professional style.

Instead, it is more of a "Travel Guide" styled document, not even having a "CONCLUSION", just some "poetic" thoughts....