

# Erasmus during quarantine in Bilbao, Spain

*Written by Krisztina Varga*



*Day before lockdown*

I am not lying when I say, this was not what I imagined what my Erasmus would be like. Of course, I knew it would be challenging and unexpected... but not this level of unexpected. When I arrived in the country, just a few days later the first COVID-19 infected patient was registered. There was no question that there would be an outbreak here as well.

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, the Spanish Government announced state of alarm, which meant that classes were taught online and many people were not allowed to go to work. Since then an extension of this was announced. This also meant that all our plans for the next few weeks were off, I had to cancel three trips as well.

So, when I found out about the quarantine, what made me stay? It is simple. I only had a few weeks of travelling and learning about the culture here, instead of the months I came here for. For now I do not know what will happen, how long it will take the Spanish health care system to adapt to this, or how long until they find a safe way for people to meet. I hope that this insane situation will end soon, and we can go out again... until then, this is how we spend our days.

I live with 2 people in a 6-room shared apartment. In the beginning, there was 6 of us, but the rest had to leave due to the coronavirus. Some were ordered home by their universities; some were asked to go home by their families.

The best way to describe it would be: our days are like endless Sundays, except we have classes every now and then. We all know the feeling of a Sunday when there's really nothing to do, so we kind of just wander around doing random things? This is exactly what it's like, except we have no clue when the Monday is coming.

We spend a lot of time together, watch movies, cook, and clean together. We watch entire seasons of tv shows in one sitting, and I even learned how to crochet. What is really good is that home deliveries are still working so if we decide to try something we don't have the materials for, we can always order what we need. When we go to the store together, it is usually pretty funny, because we are not allowed to walk next to each other, only 1 meter apart. I see many people doing this, almost shouting while having conversations while walking down the street.

Every single day in the morning, we open the browser and check to see how much the numbers of the infected have grown. It is scary to see that the numbers grow by thousands daily without and decrease. Even though we don't know anyone personally who was infected, we still feel for the people who have. It is difficult to feel this kind of darkness and feeling of chaos fall on the Spanish people, they are usually so vibrant and smiling. I pretty much lost track of the days, all of them seem to be the same. Since there is nothing to do, we do the same things all the time.

I usually choose the furthest store, so I have more time to walk. I never thought I would lose this kind of freedom, or that my only activity would be walking to get groceries. Going to the store is usually very stressful, there are security guards right outside the door, and inside as well. I used to go to the store right when it opened (which here is around 9 or 10 am, not 6 or 7 am like in Hungary), and finished with my shopping rather quickly. Now, even if I go there when or before it opens, there is already a line of people waiting outside, usually about 30 people. We have to stand behind each other, 1 meter apart, and we can enter the store one by one. Before entering, we must use hand sanitizer, and put on disposable plastic gloves (both of these are provided at the entrance for free). Of course, everybody must wear a mask as well.



*Public park in Bilbao center*

It is forbidden to stay in public areas such as parks and playgrounds, all of them are closed with police tapes. I see many police patrol cars everywhere to make sure people follow these rules.

There is one great upside to this whole situation – I have all the time in the world to talk to my family. I didn't really have that before, since I was always going somewhere with my friends here or going to class. It makes it a lot easier to be able to talk to them whenever I want for hours.

My mother asked me the other day: "If you knew this would happen, you wouldn't have left, right?" My answer is, *yes, I would have*. Because even like this, it was worth it. If I have to spend the remaining months here, stuck in this apartment it was still worth it. It is so easy to make friends here, the people who go on Erasmus are a special kind of people, we are all the same and all seeking for the same thing.

We are all in the same situation, so we understand each other perfectly. We are all stuck in a foreign country, far away from our families, not knowing if choosing to stay here was a good idea. It's difficult for sure, but very memorable. This is what Erasmus is all about, right? Learning to adapt but still enjoy what is given as much as possible.