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Living in Korea As an Exchange Student

1. Studying Abroad

Living abroad will help you to have a deeper understanding of the world we live in. People who have never left their native surroundings frequently have a distorted perception of the world. People are becoming more mobile, either out of necessity or desire, as the world is changing constantly. Even those who have lived in the same place their entire life might notice changes in the social cultural environment around them. Throughout my last year of elementary school, my whole high school life and to my university life Asian cultures and languages have been my interest. In particular, South Korea, which is why I had decided to plan and save up for my exchange in this country. Up until last year, I lived in those secure bounds that everyone believed to be the most secure. This decision was not impulsively taken, I look throughout the different student exchange programs at the start of 2020. This type of program is a regular event hosted by University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), where I attend. ULPGC maintains exchange programs for students with universities in Australia, Asia, America and Europe. Therefore, throughout this paper I will share different aspects of my life in Korea as an exchange student, how this experience changed my life and how I considered it has changed my life.

2. Selection process and flight to Korea.

My determination of going to South Korea was clear since the beginning of my university degree. The information given was not too explicit at the beginning, so it made me feel anxious and insecure. Since going to Asia is not the same as going to Europe, there were many papers and application periods that I had to be aware of. It was not until February 2022 that the path where I could finally walk seemed to appear, until that time I tried to contact other students from higher years that had gone previously to South Korea. Thanks to some of them, I could feel at ease as their personal experiences helped me to realise that I was not the only one who felt this way and that it was completely normal. Along this process some doubts raised and family members were continuously asking if I was really sure about going so far away. However, I decided to stay with this plan I have desired my whole life. The pre-leaving period was more or less smooth. The paperwork made things a little messy, but I think that is just part of moving abroad. It is just something you have to accept as being part of the experience. I was stressed primarily about paperwork and getting the visa along with medical documents on time. But other from that, I believe things went rather smoothly. I had spent so much time organising this, therefore, I could take my time and complete everything on time.

Regarding the flight, I took a plane from Las Palmas to Barcelona on August 20 of 2022. I waited in Barcelona's airport for seven hours, and then the direct flight to Seoul departed. I was able to share this whole process with another degree peer, but what made it meaningful was how we shared same interests and aspirations. When we landed in Incheon International Airport, a Korean exchange student who came the



previous year was so kind to welcome us and help us get to the hotel that we had booked for the first few days. The hotel was located in *Myeongdong* area, which is perfect especially if you are visiting Seoul for the first time or prefer to stay in the city's center with convenient access to facilities.

3. Myongji University

This university was not my initial choice, however, it did not disappointed me. It has one of the smallest campus in Seoul and few foreign students come here. Since most of its students are Korean, I could integrate completely into the culture and have first-hand information of how Korean society and culture actually worked. The International Office of Affairs always reply quickly and are aware of the difficulties of exchange students. There is a student's club named Oulami which aims to promote Myongji University both internally and externally based on the activities of the International Exchange Center as a global ambassador representing Myongji University, as well as supporting international events on campus, the academic life and studying abroad life of foreign students enrolling in Myongji University. Through all these activities I got the opportunity to socialise not only with Korean students but also with exchange students from all over the world.

The subject election system is completely different from the one in ULPGC. You were given a student ID and password, with which you had to enter a specific website to select the subjects you wanted to study during the semester. There are only a number of spots available in each class, and students can only enrol during a specified period of time. The truth is that there will not be many lessons left after 30 seconds. You must therefore have access to fast internet and be fully prepared for the class selection. One major downside of this is that there are not many English-taught courses which made it quite difficult for me to choose related to my degree in Spain. I had a good experience in Myongji, however

there are some aspects which it can improve. For instance, there were several announcements made through the dormitory's megaphones daily but none of them were translated to English for international students.



4. Language

As a tourist there is no problem when getting around the country as the majority of streets are also in English, making it relatively easy to navigate the country even though Korean is the main language of daily life. Nevertheless, as an exchange student you will be living in the country for a long period of time so it is essential that you know at least the basics. A lot of people wonder how much Korean they should learn and if it is difficult to get by without being fluent. Most Koreans in a public setting, even if they see that you are a foreigner, will communicate most of the times to you in Korean. It is not required to be fluent in Korean, but I would highly recommend to learn the writing system which is named *Hangul*. Once you know how to read, it will make getting by around the city easier and more convenient.

In my case, the language was not a huge issue. I have been learning Korean for years now, even though I am not fluent, it was easier for me to understand what locals asked me or what employees in restaurants said to me. Compared to when I arrived, my Korean

has improve a lot. In daily life you hear a lot of common words used my locals so, in the end, I was also using them. My recommendation is to not be shy and talk in Korean.

5. Where Did I Stay?

Throughout both semesters I stayed in the university's dormitory, however there are different options. Other exchange students either stayed at the dormitory as me or looked for Airbnbs. Nevertheless, if you do not want to look for Airbnbs there is an alternative: StayForU. It is an international student housing, which has allegiance with universities and hospitals; provides a convenient



one stop service that includes SIM card, bedding and residence certificate needed for ARC (Residence Card); and, staff members are fluent in English and Korean. In my case, I did not choose this place because for me it was more comfortable to stay inside the campus. However, the options that are available in Seoul are infinite, so I recommend to investigate and to weight your options.

During winter break, I decided to stay at a Airbnb which one of my German classmates recommended. The reason for this was that the dormitory only let me stayed inside the dorm for another 8 weeks after the semester ended which was not sufficient. This Airbnb was close to one of the most famous and prestigious universities: Ehwa University. Around universities there are always good and convenient places to hang out or to buy necessary stuff. I shared this Airbnb with 5 more people, one of them being the owner. It was an interesting experience, but if it would have been possible I would had rather stayed at the dorm.

6. Culture Life

Seoul has become in recent years a highly developed city with great technical advances. However, even today, you can enjoy the most traditional culture in the middle of such a global city. Ancient temples can be found right next to modern skyscrapers, and the vibrancy of the city contrasts with the peaceful, calming landscape around. It seems like the city never sleeps, everyday there is a new event or festival. Koreans love to spend quality time by eating and being outside. There a lot of places where groups of friends hang out, I usually go to karaokes at least once a week. One of the first nations in the world to make karaoke popular was South Korea, and the country's residents still see it as one of the most preferred ways to unwind and mingle. Seoul is filled with karaoke bars, some of which have themes to enhance the overall experience. Another way of socialising that I particularly enjoy in Korea are cafes, whether it is for studying, keeping up with friends, or just have a cup of tea. It is interesting to note that there are two different kind of cafes: quiet study cafes, some which are open 24 hours a day, and themed cafes, where friends meet up and take photos.

Regarding culture shocks, I did not have any major ones since I am familiarised with the common culture by consuming a lot of content from Korea. However, there is one interesting aspect that surprised me about the society here. Korean people love to get to places quickly, they want everything as soon as possible. There is even a term for this: *ppalli ppalli* culture. The word, which can be translated to quick or rush, is frequently used to pressure someone or something to finish as soon as possible. I can see this culture vividly in my daily life, from wanting to close the elevator's door as soon as they enter to the rush hour on the public transportation. After some courses I took in Myongji

University regarding Korea and globalisation along with social change, I have come to the theory that the 1950s' quick industrialisation and modernisation, which followed the catastrophic Korean War of 1950-1953, are the reasons for the nation's emphasis on immediacy. People frequently view a fast-paced environment as highly efficient and an essential component of society's growth. Nevertheless, when talking with young adults, they mention that they have also come to understand that the *ppalli ppalli* habit may lead to carelessness or the neglect of more significant values, such as mental health.



7. Advices

Actively looking for information on student exchange program opportunities from your university's foreign office if you are looking for a break from campus routines to better explore your potential is a must. Asking friends or adults who have participated in similar programs is also useful. For those who are considering South Korea as a potential candidate for their exchange experience I would like to give some advices that will make everything easier.

7.1 Transportation? T-Money

It is a contactless smart card that can be used to all buses, subways, and taxis. In addition, you can pay for goods and services at businesses that are linked with it. The basic T-Money Card is conveniently available in retail convenience stores like CU, GS25, and 7-Eleven. In my case, I bought it at an expending machine in Incheon's International Airport as I decided to get to my hotel by subway. The cost of the card is KRW 2,500. There are three ways to recharge your T-Money card: using a ticket vending machine that is located inside all subway and train station; newsstands near a bus stop with a display of the T-Money sign; or, in a convenience store. In order to board and depart buses as well as enter and exit subway stations, you must tap your card. Transfer savings are offered, however they can only be used four times each day, with a maximum transfer time of 30 minutes.

7.2 Getting Around

Using Google Maps in Korea is not helpful. The local Naver Map is much more dependable and accurate option while travelling throughout Korea and is used by the majority of Koreans. The software is available in Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese. There is also an option to download maps in advance for offline use.

7.3 Residence Card (ARC)

The Residence Card is a national identification card from Korea that serves as both a form of identification and social security for visitors. To enroll in services such as cell-phone plans, internet, banking, and health insurance, you will need it. As long as your visa is still valid after receiving your ARC, you are free to enter and exit Korea as often as you like. Myongji University let me know about the application process but in summary: you must book a date and time on the immigration website (make sure to know which

immigration office district you are in) ; the necessary documents are passport, colour passport photo with white background, application form (available at the immigration office), proof of residence and KRW 30,000.

8. Self growth

After spending a year abroad, many students claim that they ended up discovering more about themselves while attempting to fit in and understand the norms and culture of this new country. Going overseas means you are alone, on your own, more so than remaining in your home country. Obviously, the institution you attend will be there to assist you in adjusting to this new world. However, you will have to come to many conclusions on your own and make choices only you can. You can only learn about yourself by stepping outside of your comfort zone and confronting difficult events. Studying abroad essentially means developing maturity and self-assurance. I had the chance to learn Korean language at the social, academic, and even professional levels as I live here in full immersion. I got the opportunity to meet a large number of people, which at first I was afraid to lose contact with but realised that there was nothing wrong in that. Life is always changing, many people enter and exit our lives constantly.

Winter break was for me the moment when I felt an important self-development. As I got enough time to reflect on the first semester, I could see in what aspects I was lacking as a person as well as ways in which I could improve myself. I learned aspects of myself that I would had never discovered at home as I started to venture out on my own. Throwing myself into this brand-new situation was all it took for me to realise that.

9. Conclusion

About three weeks before the course was set to start, I was already in Korea. While attending Myongji University, I met a lot of friends, both Korean and foreign. I went to places, strolled along historic walls, ate more cuisine that I could have ever dreamed, and went to local outdoor markets. There was never a dull moment for me. South Korea exceeded my expectations, and I am glad I made this decision. I anticipated that it would be much more difficult to adjust to and become immersed in the new culture. Yet, the locals are quite encouraging despite the occasional communication barrier. To sum up my year as an exchange student, I would use these words: enjoyable discomfort. Going a course outside which I knew could postpone my graduation was a challenging decision. But even so, it was worthwhile. I will return home having grown more self-assured and having agreed to challenges more frequently. Having a comfort zone is altogether fine, but you must be aware, though, because it occasionally prevents you from gaining life experience. For some people, studying abroad can be terrifying. People frequently worry excessively about their ability to adapt to a new setting. Still, I consider it is one of the best ways for stepping outside of my comfort zone in order to gain more personal growth in the future.