
STUDY ABROAD – SOUTH KOREA



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Preface

It is the year 2021. Right ahead of me is lying one of the biggest cultural experiences of my life. I am a person who has travelled to plenty of parts of the wide world, but I was always conducted by my family. This time it is different, I am going on an adventure to the other side of our planet. For my destination, I have picked South Korea. This country sparked my curiosity back in 2017 through their so-called Hallyu Wave. I was so intrigued by the unusual and the unknown that I wanted to experience cultural enrichment in this country. Constantly, my head was bombarded with questions like 'How to go there?', 'Should I study there?', 'Maybe just a trip?'. Thankfully, through the Study Abroad Program of PLUS, I was able to enjoy this whole adventure for a whole year. Far from beyond is to say that I was prepared for the upcoming events.

How did it start?

The adventure started with my preparations for departure. I wanted to be sure that I know even a minimalistic amount of the Korean language. It was known that not all Korean people know English and that if I want to appreciate their culture I have to learn not only the language but also their etiquette and manners. I was about to resign in a country in which the nation is obeying its traditional principles, and that made me beyond excited.

Learning the language itself was an interesting process that needed my whole attention and dedication. Koreans are using the so-called alphabet or alphabetic

system Hangeul (한글). Not only the writing and reading were completely new for me, but also the way they position their letters in a squared box form to create a syllable, the syllables created a word and the word created a sentence. It was like building a LEGO construction sets, catchy and fun.

Before my departure, the only thing I knew about their cultural manners is greeting and bowing whenever I go in and out of a place, but in the beginning, it is quite an important thing to know.

13th of August

Driving to the capital city of Bulgaria, Sofia with my mom and sister. Classes were starting in September, however, at that time South Korea had a mandatory two weeks COVID-19 pandemic. Back then, I believe, Bulgarians weren't even forced to wear masks, no matter where. On the contrary, Koreans not only had to wear masks everywhere but newcomers are obligated to stay in a quarantine facility for 14 days. The way Koreans handled this pandemic, was showing vividly how different it is compared to my country.

There were no direct flights from Bulgaria to Seoul, so I took two flights and my transfer was to Istanbul. At the gate in Istanbul, I could see nothing apart from foreign probably exchange students and Korean citizens. Regardless of the amount of the number of people that were standing there and waiting for their flight, it was so peaceful and silent.

Arriving at the airport was linked with tons of documentation regarding the visa and quarantine facility. The staff wanted to know everything in the tiniest bit of detail. I

was exhausted but relieved that all those documents were valid. On the way to my Airbnb, I had to take a taxi cab specially prepared for new arrivals, who haven't taken the COVID-19 test at the airport. In this case, I had to take one the next day. Full of calmness that I will be negative I spent the first day of my quarantine scrolling on social media and entertaining myself. Until, a message from the hospital rang on my phone informing me that I am COVID positive and that they have to evacuate me from my apartment and drive me to a facility, specially designed for COVID patients. I was panicking. Being alone in this country, far away from my parents, and having nobody on whom I can rely.

The quarantine itself wasn't scary, but it was something I haven't experienced before, hence, not meeting a single person face to face for more than a week. Three times a day I had to measure my oxygen levels, pulse, and body temperature. The staff cared about their patients and whenever I haven't submitted something, they called me and asked about my symptoms. Ten days in total and they informed me that I was ready to leave the facility. Freedom.

New Beginning

In my first semester, I completely immersed myself in the culture-enriching experience and language learning. Apart from those mandatory lectures, I decided to enroll in an intensive Korean language course. It was extremely beneficial, as I could practice what I have learned by talking with locals and my classmates. It was entirely funded by the University of Salzburg due to the partnership relations between the institutions. Continued for about three months and I enjoyed every single moment of

it. In the beginning, it was online conducted, but in the last month COVID restrictions were lifted and I could attend the class personally.

Something I regret not doing is attending clubs and doing extracurricular activities. To be frank, those clubs weren't available for exchange students, but also they were non-active due to COVID. Many Korean universities are providing volunteer services or various programs so students can come closer together and enjoy their university years. I wish one day, to go back there and to be able to experience university life without those restrictions.

Continue

I fell so in love with the country, the food, and the people that I met there so I decided to stay for one more semester. I felt how well I could blend into Korean society regardless of my background. Hard work pays off. From the screen that shows when the bus is coming, whether the bus is full, the outside temperature, the humidity, and the fine dust levels till the 3 am convenience store noodles for \$1, I love it all.

At Salzburg University I am majoring in Law and Economics, however, I couldn't participate in classes for this matter, because they were strictly for local students. Nevertheless, I was able to take part in other courses, which could broaden my worldview and enrich my cultural knowledge. Such courses were International Studies Theory, Korean law and economics, Financial and Managerial accounting, and many more.

During those classes, I could experience the high-quality education, with which Korea is globally known. Even though the classes were online, I didn't have the moment in which I can say, 'Hold on, what is going on now?'. Those classes were interactive and

attention-grabbing. I could feel how the professors are genuinely interested in the students, rather than just going through their lectures. We had assignments, team projects, and presentations. By studying at HUFS, I could enhance my cognitive, research skills, and analytical thinking. Korean universities are working way of preparing students for the workload of society, everything that is needed for a future business company employee. Korea has developed itself into a well-established country within a half-century, which is truly astounding. This was caused by the culture of hard work, which makes Koreans highly competitive. This characteristic may emit negativity, but I see it as a positive as it makes you work harder to reach your goals.

Experiences

I can surely say that this exchange year, deepened my interest in the South- East Asian country even more. Studying in South Korea was a time of growth. It was a time when I got important qualities such as responsibility and independence. Living abroad, not even on the same continent as my parents made me face obstacles, which on the bright side created my strong mental health. In those moments, the person I felt the closest to was the Bulgarian counsel in Seoul. I am so thankful to her to this day.

The visa expired way later than my graduation, so I decided to stay for the summer season. During this time, I could freely roam around the country like a free electron. I did stuff I have never done before such as paintball and water sports. I am glad the people I have met there and the time I have spent with them were more than unforgettable. We did trips to different parts of Korea, dressed up in Hanbok, which is

a traditional Korean costume, partying, and having meals together. We became one big international family.

The end

As all good stuff is coming to an end, this Korean exchange adventure also ended. I want to thank the PLUS Study Abroad Program and Scholarship for becoming a development tool on a personal and academic level and for allowing me to experience all mentioned above - open my perspectives and broaden my worldview.