Experience Report – Study Abroad Stay
European Master in Renewable Energy
Destination: University of Zaragoza (Spain)

1. Preparation:
The preparation for my time in Spain started in October last year. As a semester abroad is a mandatory requirement for EUREC’s European Master in Renewable Energy students, I had to decide the specialization I would take during the second semester, and where would I go depending on my choice. My professional interests led me to decide to specialize in Renewable Energy Grid Integration, a course that takes place during the summer semester at the University of Zaragoza. I applied and I was promptly accepted, and when the first semester was finishing, I made plans to travel together with one of my classmates who was also going to Spain, and we booked our plane, train and bus tickets and sent some of our luggage by mail, in order to travel more comfortably during the long trip to Zaragoza.

2. Travel and Arrival:
My classmate and I left Oldenburg together on February 6th, 2020 and traveled by train to Köln, where we spent some hours visiting the city and waiting for our evening flight to Barcelona. We spent the night in the airport and took the first bus in the morning with destination Zaragoza, our final destination. In total our trip lasted more than 24 hours, as we arrived in Zaragoza around 11h on February 7th, 2020.
On my first day in Zaragoza I had the chance to explore the city for a few hours, while the friend who would host me on my first days finished her work day. After I left my luggage at her place, we went for a walk next to the Ebro river, that divides the city and is one of the most important waterways in Spain. The picture on the left was taken during my first day in Zaragoza, and the Cathedral-Basilica of our Lady of El Pilar, maybe the most symbolic building in the city, can be appreciated. During the weekend I had the opportunity to visit some of the touristic attractions and explore the city, before classes started on Monday.
3. Accommodation:
During the planning stage I had been in touch with several people in Zaragoza, including some of the EUREC students who were doing their core semester there. They gave me different recommendations regarding where to live and told me that, since in Zaragoza it’s not too difficult to find shared accommodation, I could wait until I got to see a bit of the city before deciding for an area. I followed their advice and stayed for some time with a friend who lived in a very convenient location, between the city center and the campus where I would be studying.
I also had heard about a city housing program for university students called “Estudiantes Solidarios” where, in exchange for volunteering with immigrant families, you could rent a room for a lower price in a shared apartment with other students. I applied and I got assigned to an apartment with a Spanish flatmate and I did volunteer work for 4 hours a week helping children with their English, math and science homework. The apartments were very good, located in the Actur neighborhood, a safe, nice and clean area close not only to the campus but also to parks, supermarkets and malls, and well connected to the public transportation. The flats were completely furnished and had everything you could need, and the rooms are spacious and comfortable. I wholeheartedly would recommend this program to any Erasmus students going to Zaragoza.

4. Studying at the Host University:
The course would consist of six modules, each one with their own exam and deliverables. The first month at the university we had presential classes, with one or two 2-hour lectures every day. It was a reduced and diverse group of 12 people from different countries and different core universities. For almost each class there were different lecturers who were very competent in their respective fields. Unfortunately, in some cases their English level didn’t allow them to express their knowledge in a proper way.
The planned syllabus was very interesting and well developed, but also very extensive and demanding. It included several technical visits that I was particularly interested in. Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 pandemic all plans changed.
Our confinement started on the same week we returned from a failed excursion to the installations of Red Eléctrica de España, where we had planned to visit the control center for the electrical grid of the country. That visit was canceled due to the coronavirus situation, that was starting to get complicated, and on our return we were informed that the exam corresponding to the second module would be presented online. On Monday, March 16, the confinement started in Spain and we had to continue taking our lectures via internet. While the structure of the semester didn’t change radically, there were changes in the gradings of each module and the amount of homework increased significantly. Lectures were given via Google Meet and recorded for easy access. All the information regarding the modules, homework, gradings, lecture schedule was available through an online tool called Moodle.
Given the short notice, it is remarkable that the semester could continue with interruptions and get to its conclusion without any major issues. All this was achieved by the commitment of all the people involved, but I feel that two people deserve special recognition for their efforts: the diploma coordinator, Ms. Maria Paz Comech, and the administrative secretary, Mr. Nicolás Arnal. Without their hard work it would have been impossible to have a successful semester under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.
5. **Everyday Life and Leisure:**

Although the pandemic didn’t allow me to enjoy the city as much as I would have liked, I can talk about what I saw during my time in Zaragoza when I arrived and before I left, when the situation was getting more stable and places had reopened. Zaragoza is a beautiful, modern city, very conveniently located between Madrid and Barcelona, and not too far from the sea and from the Pyrenees. Some people call it “the 15-minutes city”, because of how convenient it is in terms of mobility and how quickly you can go anywhere. Public transportation in Zaragoza is very efficient, with buses and a modern tramway that connects different areas of the city. Bike lanes are also available almost everywhere, so it’s very easy and safe to cycle. There are many touristic attractions, like the Aquarium, built for the Expo 2008; the Aljafería, an old Moorish palace built centuries ago; the Cathedral-Basilica of El Pilar, maybe the most important symbol of the city, among others. Food is amazing, and cultural life very active. There are always concerts, theaters, exhibitions, and other activities all week.

The *pinchos* (called tapas in other regions of Spain) culture is very present in the city, and it’s easy to see people gathered outside, sitting around tables for a beer, a small snack and some conversation. People are in general very open, friendly and helpful. In terms of commerce and shopping, you can easily find everything.

Finally, Zaragoza is also a very green city; there are many parks and places to do sports, and the river, the backbone of the city, invites people for a stroll next to its margin.

6. **General Experience, Conclusions, Tips:**

While my experience in Zaragoza was very limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, I still learned to love the city and its people. I will always think of my time in Zaragoza as a positive experience even under the difficult circumstances of the confinement in Spain, leaving behind good friends and memories, and will regret not being able to enjoy it as much as I would have liked. The fact that many of my classmates decided to search for an internship in order to stay in Zaragoza is a good testimony of the quality of life in the city and how attractive it is for living, and I would definitely recommend it to students doing their semester abroad. I will definitely return whenever and as soon possible.

**DO’s:**

- Get a public transportation card or a bike. If you don’t want to buy a bike, you can rent easily rent one.
- Learn some basic Spanish. In general, Spanish people, many young included, either don’t speak English or have a very basic level, so some knowledge of the language will make your life way easier.
- There are many nice cafes around the San Francisco campus. For local food, try the Spanish tortilla and the chorizo at El Circo. Nice place and good food.
- To check info about music events in the city, try a website/app called “Mosica”.

**DON’Ts**

- Don’t live too far from your campus. Even if Zaragoza is not too big, there are areas that are far if you want to go out at night. If you are at campus Río Ebro, the Actur area is good and well connected in case you want to go to the mail nightlife area, and if your campus is San Francisco, you will find all kind of fun things to do around the university.