THE DECEMBER EDITION



THE EXCHANGE JOURNAL

"Once the Dust has Settled"







CONTENTS

(CLICK TO VIEW)

LARA BRECH COPENHAGEN

LUCIA IMI AMSTERDAM

ANA ARITO PARIS

JOSEPHINE BOASE PERPIGNAN

SAMI WILLIAMS AMSTERDAM

SCARLETT PATON MISSISSIPI

SASKIA FRASER ADELAIDE

SARAH CHALLAN FLYNN CAIRO

BELLA HENRY COPENHAGEN



LIVING IN COPENHAGEN

BEFRIENDING THE WORLD (EXCEPT THE DANES)



I cannot believe how fast the last four months have been. It's shocking how the novelty of living in a new place quickly turns into habitual experience - and the monotony of the university exam period apparently doesn't change just because you are abroad! As our first semester comes to an end, I cannot help thinking just how lucky I am to be here for a whole year.

This is particularly poignant as many of the friends that I have made - actually all - except my friends from English Universities, are not going to be there when I return.

Yesterday, I said goodbye to one of my closest friends - and, unlike ever before, we were unsure if we will meet again. Of course plans are in the works for me to "fly to LA" or meet in Paris - but at the moment they feel like words to fill the angst of parting.

I'm not sure whether perhaps I'm being slightly dramatic - but there are little experiences in life where you spend a semester abroad meeting new people and finding new friendships. Then four months later they return to their side of the world; and you are left wondering whether you will ever see them again. This part of exchange hadn't really dawned on me, as naturally I didn't even realise that I would make friends with Americans or Australians or Jamaicans. I thought naively, I would only be friends with the Danish. And five months later I can safely say I don't even have five danish friends.

Naturally this came as a bit of a shock. And in a classic British manner my friends and I started to conspiracize that they just must not like the English. When, in reality, that is certainly not the case. I started to think that in Edinburgh when do I ever encounter exchange students ? I realised I don't think I ever have.

There are of course plenty of logical reasons for this: Most Danish students share apartments with their friends (like we do Edinburgh).
Therefore in the main halls, or the ones offered to exchange students there tend to be minimal to none of actual Danish citizens living there …

I also do strictly exchange courses so obviously no Danes are in my classes - and believe it or not - if people aren't in your halls or classes, where are you to meet them ?

When I say I still haven't got five Danish friends, I am slightly exaggerating. A month ago I started working at a Coffee shop and my co-workers are all Danish. Unsurprisingly, they do like the Danish and were as eager to have a "London friend" as I was to have "Danish friends"

Wherever you end up, try not to focus solely on activities designed for exchange students. The chances are you're unlikely to meet many locals from the country you're in—just as, for example, how often do you meet them in Edinburgh?

By Lara Brech

come rain or shine...







The first month in Amsterdam lured us into a false sense of security as we wandered around the city in the sunshine, wearing t-shirts and skirts. We were then hit with the reality of Autumn in the Netherlands which consists of relentless bad weather, swiftly bringing us out of our sunny delusion. You definitely do not feel as if you are 'living your best life abroad' when you are wearing waterproofs from head to toe as you begin your 9am cycle to campus. I have even brought my waterproof trousers to the club...on multiple occasions (not very glamourous). However, being prepared for hail, snow, rain, sleet or wind at all times, is something very particular about living in The Netherlands. The Dutch will at all times have a waterproof Rains backpack, an Albert Heijn bag on them ready to place over their bike seat and some variation of jacket or poncho. Although some of more hardcore Dutch will simply wear a cap to protect themselves from the elements. Due to the cycling culture, and surprisingly rubbish public transport system, whatever the weather there will still be bikes out everywhere. I felt particularly like a true Amsterdammer when I persevered on my bike through a snow storm for 20 minutes after having had a few too many Dark and Stormies. Not fun. All this being said, there is something rather brilliant about the fact that the Dutch will let absolutely nothing stop them from going about their day. Plans will never be cancelled due to a bit of drizzle, or even severe weather warnings. Having lived in England and gone to university in Edinburgh this is a mentality I am used to, but I have to hand it to the Dutch, they even more stubborn and determined than we Brits are.

By Lucia Imi









Paris, France

A quick bonjour, and a speedier adieu!

With the temperatures dropping and no snow to justify it, living in Paris remains remarkably warm. Even with all my initial excitements and anticipations slowly replaced by the reality of exams and deadlines, the city's appeal remains present in other ways, even whilst settled and fully immersed in a fixed schedule. The September anxiety of needing to do absolutely everything at once no longer exists. Life abroad (thankfully) has slowed down and I recognise that, as I'm here for a whole year, what's the need to rush? Whilst September was characterised by first meets, semi-broken French and a lot of headaches after gruelling three-hour lectures, my brain and my body seem finally synergic; routine has taken over and Parisian life feels instinctive.

Having said that, this first semester has completely flown past me! The slow apparition of the twinkling Christmas lights is an oddly sobering reality of how I've already been here for three whole months. I remember the day before my flight here being terrified of moving to a city which appeared so foreign. How crazy to look back on those feelings now! It's almost comical when I think of how nervous I was. With the holidays right around the corner, suddenly home doesn't seem so far (not that it ever really was). Initially, I thought I'd miss Edinburgh a lot more, but the reality is far from this. In fact, the idea that I'm only here for a year is incredibly bittersweet; on the one hand, I miss my old flatmates and the culture of UK uni with its pubs, witty familiar humour and all the independent and quaint coffee shops, yet, I can't imagine not having gone on exchange and meeting the people I have been so lucky to have encountered. It's crazy to think that at the end of this year, we'll all return to our home universities leaving Paris behind as a fond shared memory. In other words, the idea of living far from home just doesn't exist when you *feel* at home. That slightly cringy line, "Home is a feeling, not a place' has never felt more true.

Therefore, whilst my life is currently grounded by fixed routines and familiarity, I wouldn't have it any other way. There is no better feeling than that of ease and comfort. FOMO no longer haunts me, and I embrace the early nights in, knowing that I have the rest of the year to indulge in this culturally rich city with the wonderful new and old faces that surround me. Bring on the new year!

By Ana Arito

THE PEOPLE MAKE THE PLACE:

cliché or reality?

As the end of my semester studying in Perpignan rapidly draws to a close, it feels as if the dust has only just begun to settle. I am suddenly in my last week of living here before I go home for Christmas and find myself still discovering new things about the university and the town which make me wish I had more time here.

I knew that only one semester was always going to feel short, but I can't quite believe how quickly the Christmas holidays have crept up on us. I think there is a collective feeling of slight bewilderment among the Erasmus students here at the prospect of Christmas being less than two weeks away, as despite the sparkling centre-ville which has been adorned head to toe in lights, trees and market stalls, it still doesn't really feel like it's wintertime. We spent October on the beach, sunbathing after our classes, and were greeted on the first of November by 25 degree sun and not a cloud in the sky; we didn't really have an autumn.

However, despite the four months flying by, and it still feeling as if I arrived yesterday, what doesn't feel quite so fleeting is the friends that I've made here. I think I owe this partially to the intensity of the Erasmus experience. It seems much more common in Europe to go on an exchange (or lots) whenever you fancy it but usually always for one semester at a time - the UK concept of the structured 'year abroad' in your third year seems to be a less familiar one on the continent. In a way, this instigated a mad rush of socialising in which we made friends at a much faster pace than you would in a normal university experience: as most of us were only going to be here for one semester, there was an energetic 'make the most' mindset in the air.

Another contributing factor to the wonderful friends that I've made here is the fact that Perpignan is perhaps not the most glamorous of destinations. It is an interesting thing, the kind of people who choose a certain place, with the allure of being surrounded by the mountains, the beautiful coastline and sweet little beach towns drawing in a fun and adventurous group of people. It is a tiny group - a tenth of the Erasmus population of neighbouring French cities - which I think helped solidify our camaraderie.

The people truly have made the place in Perpignan, and I think Perpignan might just have made lifelong friends of us. There is something very unionising about living in a gritty little city in the south of France, somewhere slightly rough around the edges.

by Josephine Boase



Challenging Mental Health Assumptions surrounding the Year Abroad

"IF YOU AREN'T WELL ENOUGH TO GO- YOU DON'T HAVE TO..."

Risk assessments, family, friends and especially our own perceptions can make it feel like a year abroad is only for those with an 'ideal' mental state. As someone who suffers with OCD, depression and anxiety I can speak to this firsthand. The judgemental tone of the risk assessment, probing into your current stability, can make you question: Can I really manage this? There is often a romanticisation of the challenges associated with a year abroad - the upheaval of routines, time away from friends and family, new academic systems - all in pursuit of the ultimate goal of becoming a more 'well-rounded', mature person. To us with mental health challenges, this narrative can feel especially alienating. If it's already acknowledged as difficult for people without these struggles, and it's natural to wonder: How could I possibly handle it? If my mind feels like a battlefield on a normal day, how can I cope with the demands of living alone in an entirely new country? I would like to challenge this narrative for those who have similar struggles.

Don't get me wrong, I've had my battles (and they continue to come). Changing environments meant new triggers, new treatments, new diagnoses and new financial struggles. My health insurance did not cover the care I was receiving back home, so my year abroad meant starting over again with a new therapist and no access to a psychiatrist for regular check-ins. This change was scary; it meant opening up to someone new, rebuilding trust, and facing my OCD, anxiety and depression alone in a one-person flat in Amsterdam, far from the comfort of friends and family. It also meant losing spaces where I could go to clear my head when things were too overwhelming, or that familiar study spot where I knew I could focus without the fear of seeming "off" if I happened to run into someone when my OCD spiralled. Ultimately, it has meant tearing up all the health coping mechanisms and relationships I had developed, the ones I knew I could rely on day-to-day or during weekly treatment. Instead, I felt like I was starting from scratch, stepping off a path that was slowly but surely getting me better. This was terrifying and, at times, really demotivating.

But it also meant change for the better. What I thought would be loneliness looks more like independence and resilience now. I've learned to manage triggers and navigate difficult situations without seeking reassurance from others - an essential step in OCD recovery, as it means learning to let go of a safety mechanism that keeps the cycle of obsessions, triggers and compulsions and rituals alive. And beyond addressing the root mechanism of much of my struggles, I've more importantly enjoyed myself - met great people, pushed myself out of my comfort zone and done things that are enjoyable enough to quiet the noise in my head. For many of us with mental health struggles and brains shaped by a focus on stress, survival and trauma, it's often difficult to look forward to things or enjoy the now. But going abroad, only dealing with the pressure of pass-fail grades and experiencing new things, I've been able to genuinely be happy.

Now, a year abroad is no magic bullet - the cliche of going abroad and "finding yourself" remains trite and sappy to me. But if you're someone who struggles similarly to me, give it a chance. Don't sabotage yourself and your own potential happiness - mental illness has tried to do that enough for you. Be open to an opportunity with a focus on just enjoying it, regardless of all that bullshit you wrote on your statement about the personal growth you are aiming to achieve.

by Sami Williams



A LIBERAL IN MISSISSIPPI

A liberal in Mississippi? Could I be more fish out of water? Maybe not, and the recent election week proved to be one of the weirdest ones of my life as Donald Trump was elected for his second, and let's hope last, term as President of the United States.



You may ask why I am studying abroad in a deep red state during an election year, and candidly it was not my first, second, or probably 40th choice, but when I was offered it, there was a sense of fun and intrigue that came about going somewhere I would probably never visit on my own accord. Well, that and my dad telling me it was "the place that guy from The Blind Side went" - Great film for anyone who hasn't watched.

So what is life like as one of the few liberal viewing students at Ole Miss? Well, contrary to what you'd think, I have had the best four, almost five, months here. Southern hospitality is very much a thing, and my god do they love an English accent. American Football games and their tailgates are a spectacle everyone should witness. And frat parties are something… they are no American Pie or Animal House but still have their charms.

Despite all the amazing experiences here, in what people refer to as a 'Hallmark movie' town, there is the fundamental difference in political beliefs which can and has created tensions. Being a fairly open-minded person, I've tried to understand why people, and often my friends here, have decided to vote for a man with such a disturbing character, who, if I had any power, would be locked up. But time and time again, I fail to see any reasoning behind their opinions. Some are open about their lack of interest in politics and tell me that's who their parents are voting for; a touch ignorant if you ask me. Some claim it's the economy; he won't help, but okay. But the worst, the absolute worst, are the staunch conservatives who really do want to see immigrants deported, women stripped of bodily autonomy, and the LGBTQ community lose their rights - I mean can you see why I take issue with this? That opinion is by no means the majority here, but it is scary this viewpoint has not been a one off.

Going back to election week, political conversations were everywhere, my media was inundated, and MAGA hats were rife. There was a strangeness of being the losing party in a town where the majority were winners; everyone was ecstatic while I couldn't stop thinking about the world we will soon enter; one I hoped we would never have to re-visit. To some extent, it made me feel slightly ashamed of my presence here, coming to a place which doesn't align with any sort of progressive movements which I so strongly believe in.

So what does this mean? Well, if I'm honest I don't know. Election week was tough, I heard things come out of people's mouths which make me feel like I'd been transported back to the 1940s. However, at the same time, it was inspiring to see the Democrats here speak up about the result, showing how there is resilience across the party who still hope for a democratic and fair future.

Overall, I won't deny the challenges of studying in a place which doesn't share your views, especially during an election year. But I want to stress how the positives in this situation far outweigh the negatives, it really is a once in a lifetime experience and I will no doubt miss it once I'm back in gloomy, cold Edinburgh.

So, if you are reading this as a potential exchange student, I would say don't be afraid to go somewhere out of your comfort zone; listen and learn from others, but also value your opinions and don't be ashamed of voicing them - the worst that happens is you get a dodgy stare, so what's to lose!

By Scarlett Paton



Abroad in Adelaide

ONCE THE DUST HAS SETTLED

There is something that feels incredibly ‘grown up’ about getting to know the nooks and crannies of a new city on one’s own. I’ve found that little moments in day-to-day life – the baristas at your favourite coffee shop knowing your naming and order, or the regulars at work asking what you’ve been up – are helping me no longer feel like a deer (or kangaroo rather) in the headlights.

As the dust finally settled in Adelaide, it was time to head off for ‘Christmas’ holidays; by that I mean four months of scorching summer sun only to return for my final semester in March. This is a rather disjointed pattern from those back home – and as some will soon be returning home for the holidays from their first semester abroad, I will be among the few that have decided to stay abroad over this festive season. This will be my first Christmas abroad and first ‘hot’ Christmas at that. Though it is a wonderfully novel experience to enjoy, I still find it bizarre to be sunbathing in December or setting up the Christmas tree in 30° heat; as a Brit abroad, I catch myself occasionally craving the dark, cold wintry nights paired with mulled wine and singing carols with friends and family.

As this year rolls on, I have found it tricky to keep up contact with those on the other side of the world. Being time zones apart (sometimes 16 hours difference!) has been an element to living so far away that I still need to work on; finding a time that works best for both you and the person you are trying to reach whilst also trying to make the most out of the place you are in is a tricky balance. It’s quite a change from running into friends on the way to the main library or having a quick catch up at a party. But it’s all part of the study exchange package; what’s so great about an Edinburgh exchange is the comfort knowing that everyone will be returning for their fourth year and upon that reunion will be able to share all the good (and bad) that came along with their time abroad. Choosing to be abroad for a whole year is an incredible (and scary) opportunity to learn about yourself as an independent adult, be it through work, meeting new people or just having the time and space to travel around and explore the part of the world you are in. With this freedom, regardless of whether you choose to stay, travel or head home, it’s up to each of us to figure out what works best for ourselves, crossing each bridge as we come to it.

By Saskia Fraser

The Dust Never Settles in CAIRO

The dust never really settles in Cairo. There may be a thin layer of dust on just about everything thanks to the desert and air pollution, but in a city of 20 million, stagnation has no chance to flourish, and boredom struggles to keep afloat in the ever moving currents.

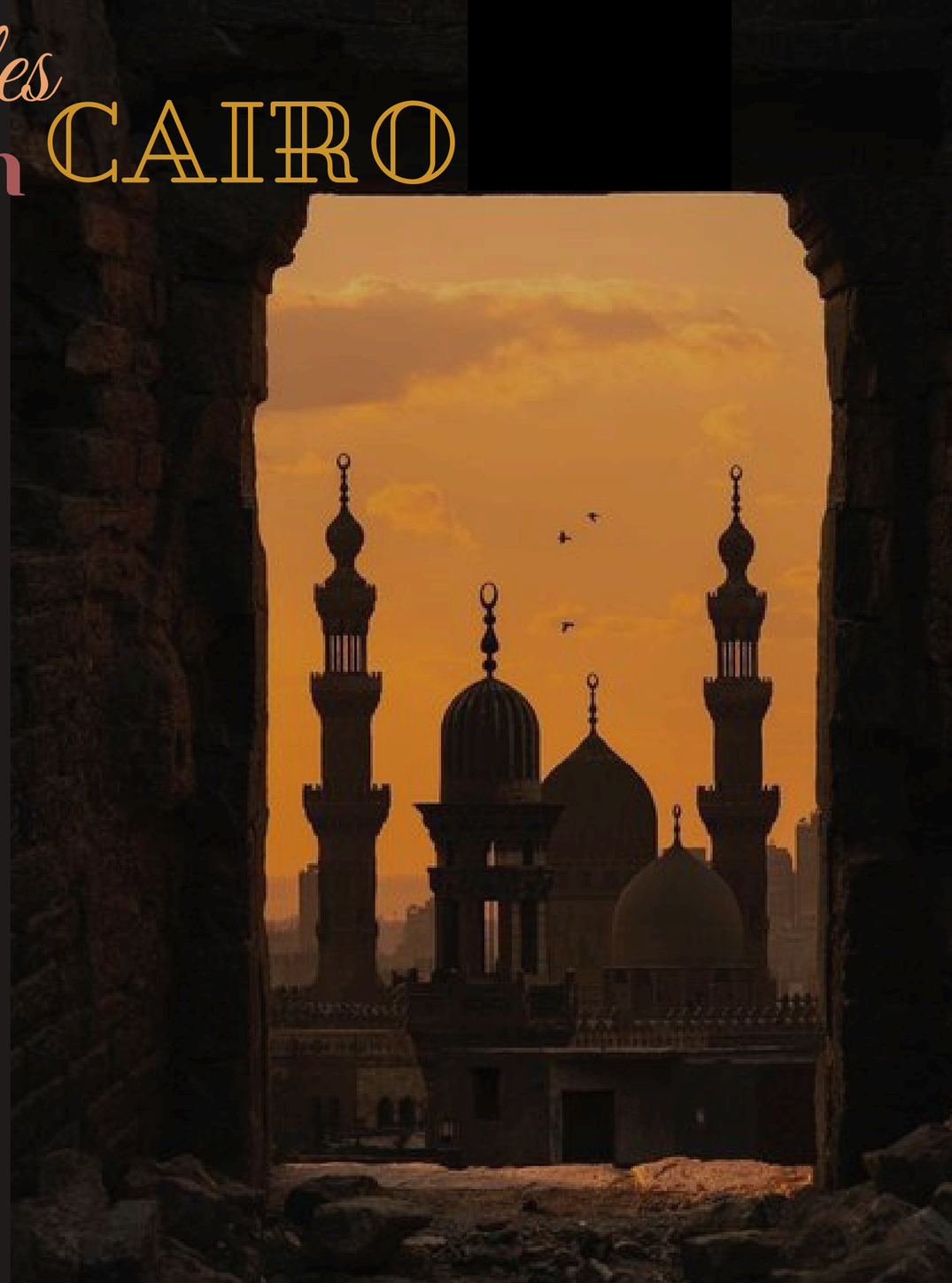
In my first month I admit I was overwhelmed by the constant noise and I was sleeping poorly thanks to the cacophonous pack of dogs living on my street. I struggled with the smallest of tasks like crossing a busy road or buying groceries due to the constant demands of language immersion. However, as my first term here nears its end, I think my life has reached a point of peace, or at least an acceptance of the chaos swirling around me. I appreciate the wealth of new experience and language and cultural immersion this opportunity brings me.

As the Egyptian cult classic film 'Assal Aswad' (black honey) perfectly articulates, living in Cairo is about finding the beauty in the chaos and a balance between the bitter and the sweet. Assal Aswad's protagonist is an Egyptian-American, returning to his country of birth after 20 years abroad, full of expectations and a rose tinted view of life in Cairo formed by childhood nostalgia. On arriving, he is shocked by the pollution, traffic, corruption, and daily inconveniences and difficulties life in Cairo poses - all of which ring true to the perspective of a first-time visitor to the country. However, as a wise friend of his consoles him as he reaches total disillusionment with the country, there is a component to Egyptian life that an American couldn't understand: 'here we have the concept of 'Alhamdulillah (thanks be to god)', a comical yet sentimental recognition that, whilst this city may indeed pose challenges to those not used to it, a sense of gratitude and positive outlook truly do bring out the sweetness.

Overcoming the initial anxieties of moving to a new city, I have developed my confidence in Arabic and met wonderful people and I continue to learn more each day about Egyptian history from ancient to contemporary, literature, music and tradition. I have mapped out my own network of quiet, restorative places throughout the city, whether they be calm cafes, art galleries, museums, mosques, churches, friend's apartments or the people within them, bookshops or the rare quiet street to walk along. I have learned that peace is out there, even in the most unseeming situations.

While the dust may never settle, I certainly have. Cairo, for all it's peculiarities, contradictions and challenges, and for all it's generosity, culture and kindness, really does feel like home now.

By Sarah Challen Flynn





Am i doing what i should be doing?

As the days shorten and the 4pm darkness encroaches, winter in Copenhagen has started to feel rather familiar. Despite, thankfully, this time round having a properly heated flat, as I've been wrestling through icy winds, fighting to keep my bike upright and thaw the numb feeling my fingers, I've found myself wondering on a couple of occasions if I made the best choice. Considering the literal global spread of options that were at my fingertips this time last year, how have I ended up here?

Given that my first months in Denmark were characterised by shining sun, daily swim trips and a plethora of new people, it's no surprise that the social scene has calmed down a bit as the months shift into a northern winter. While there is much joy to be found in cosy cafes overflowing with fairy lights and wintery hygge, I've had to accept that the fun, fast paced frenzy of nights out have lulled into a quieter routine, a shift in gear.

So, alongside a smidge of seasonal depression, I've found that winter has prompted a new phase of appreciation for the year abroad process, one that is rooted in self-reflection rather than external validation. After all, as I look at another instagram post of someone basking in southern hemisphere sun, comparison creeps in as the thief of joy, and I find myself creating false narratives of what a 'perfect' year abroad should look like.

It's easy to think, as we speed through airports, new cities, new people, that the process of travelling is going to be this miraculous thing, a magic wand for self improvement. The reality of this, shockingly, is a little more mellow, more akin to wandering through a large IKEA without any large yellow arrows on the floor telling you which way to go. Given that my year here isn't compulsory, and I'm not working towards the set goal of mastering a new language or assimilating into a culture wholly different from my own, I'm instead prompted to think about how I place value on my own time. When I think of a life spent in school or at Edinburgh, alongside whatever social chaos has ensued, there has always been a fixed notion of success to fall back on, the familiar pull towards academic validation to prop you up. Here, in Copenhagen, the university life is undoubtedly stimulating, yet not something that fully validates my whole reason for being here. Instead, I think I'm finding something in process of being somewhere new and settling into mundane yet satisfying routines. There is no great overarching reason for me being here, other than to have a good time and find my own measures of what a successful year abroad looks like; the only opinion that holds any weight is my own.

By Bella Henry