The Exchange Journal

Beginning Again



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From the Editors

Hello and welcome back to The Exchange Journal!

Thank you to everyone who submitted to our first edition of the year: 'Beginning Again'. We've loved hearing from so many different students abroad, and we can't wait to see more as the year goes on.

It feels funny to be publishing an edition called 'Beginning Again' when a lot of us have been away for a month or two now, some for even longer than that. But if I had written this in early September, I'd have told you that I had no idea where I was or what I was doing — in all honesty, I had only signed my lease two days before moving to France.

And since we all met online in July, the journal has been beginning again, too. We've revamped our website, designed a new logo, and even purchased Canva Pro (a very grown up feeling, might I add). In only two years, *The Exchange Journal* has become a great platform for Edinburgh students to share their exchange experiences, and we're so excited to be continuing the work of so many passionate contributors — 56 so far to be exact.

Here's to many more, and enjoy reading!

Hugh Shilson
Editor-in-Chief



Nobody Knows Me Here

In a city where almost everything has come from somewhere else, what does it mean to arrive as a stranger?



Rio de Janeiro, along with most of Brazil, boasts a culturally rich and varied heritage. It is shaped by indigenous history, the cultural impact of European colonisation, and the indelible mark of centuries of slavery. Famously in 1976, a national survey asked an open-ended question: “What colour are you?” Brazilians offered 136 distinct terms in response. The result was clear: cultural and ethnic identity in Brazil is fluid.

In Rio, the cultural evolution is as visible in the architecture as it is in the food and the geographical layout. The city is like layered earth, harbouring artefacts from different stages of its life. The indigenous history is marked in the languages; the locals use the Tupi word *carioda* to identify themselves. Afro-Brazilian roots are evident in neighbourhoods like Peguena África and Valongo that once harboured fugitive slaves. The Paço Imperial and Biblioteca Nacional are reminders of the late colonial period, when Rio served as Capital of the Portuguese Empire under Dom João.

And so, as I arrived for my exchange, I realised that perhaps Rio is a particularly fitting place for new beginnings and reinvention. My Portuguese is imperfect, my routine unestablished, and my plans uncertain, but perhaps my experience reflects the natural and gradual growth of this metropolitan hub. In a place built from people arriving, mixing, adapting and beginning again, being unknown doesn't necessarily mean being lost. Rather, it's the start of a metamorphic and transformative process.



Mary Dowling

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Beginning Again?

Compromising between you and your past self in a new country

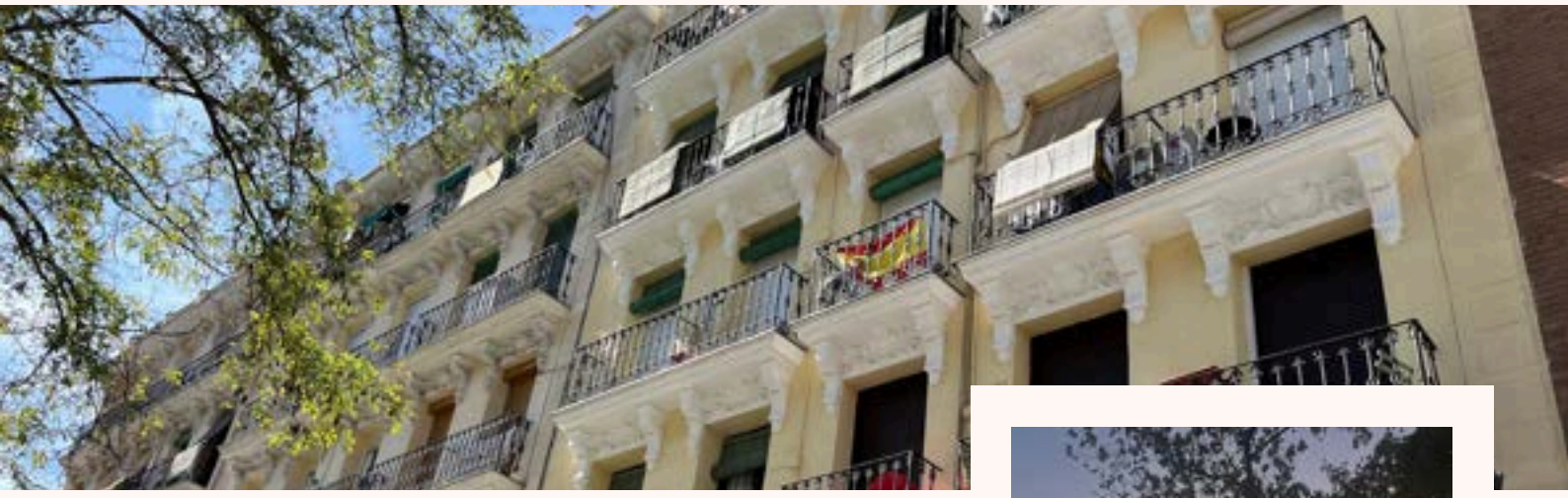


Despite the theme of this edition of the journal, a month ago I found it impossible to understand that my year abroad was going to be a form of *beginning again*. I could only focus on the things ending in my life — plagued by an irrational fear that I was completely starting anew and cutting all ties with the world I knew around me. Yes, I admit I was feeling pretty extreme before I came to Madrid this year, and if you talk to anyone I saw over the summer I think they would all agree they didn't know if I was going to make it on the plane.

There are of course plenty of differences that I have been trying to adapt to over the last month. Despite the minor 1-hour time difference, Spain runs on a completely different clock, with an afternoon siesta around 5pm, dinner at 10pm, and staying out until six in the morning (compared to Edinburgh's modest 3am). As someone who isn't a natural napper, this seemed like a really daunting schedule.

Likewise, freshers' week was an entirely different concept; indeed much more relaxed (and less relentlessly overwhelming) to the one we all experienced in first year. With everyone on Erasmus being in their third or final year, there seems to be a lot of stability provided by the base of people that we leave behind at home, and in that way, much less of an urgency to find the perfect group for you in the first week. Everyone seems brave enough to experiment a little more and, in both a relieving yet sad way, we're all aware that we will likely only be in this same city for this one, precious year, but still find there are many valuable things to take from our fleeting friendships.

I've found that the people I've met here are open and excited to be in this particular place that they've travelled the globe to come to, which differs from my experience at Edinburgh. There I still don't make the most of the city and probably spend far too many days making it only as far as Sainsbury's because of a brutal hangover (I am determined to come back next year and appreciate Edinburgh to its fullest). However, it is the continuation of constants that I have been able to find here through the cracks of all this radical change which has helped me feel like my old self again in this adjustment period.





Dance used to be a fundamental part of my life, and despite its limited presence in my routine nowadays, I will try to pick up a class here and there in Edinburgh. Here, I've found dance to be a remedy for homesickness, imposter syndrome, and as a form of exercise, scientifically providing a natural release of endorphins, and happiness.

Almost as if it were a sign from the universe, two doors down from my apartment is a dance school, where toddlers and people in their 70s spill out onto the street, talking and laughing rapidly and melodically in Spanish. On a particularly homesick and demotivated day, where I was finding learning in Spanish so difficult that I'd hit a wall, I knew it was time to try to understand it in a different format.

It has since then become my sanctuary where I can absorb the language through a new medium, and I'm not straining my ears to hear every word and translate it back desperately, but through visual learning, and through the body. It is a universal language, and a place where I can feel part of a really diverse

community, which has soothed my feelings of isolation. Although there are often times where I find myself sprawled on the floor while everyone is turning and jumping in the air, I keep reminding myself that if this year is not for making embarrassing mistakes, what is it for?

I could not count the amount of language and cultural mishaps that I've made in these last few weeks, but a year abroad really teaches you the value of how huge the world is, and how small a mistake like finding myself on the motorway out of Madrid on my second day of class – because I was too scared to ask the bus to stop – is in the grand scheme of things.

My year abroad so far has been about maintaining these continuities and applying them to a new context to feel grounded and reassured. Therefore, it isn't *beginning again* altogether; it is instead *beginning* with the new you, while finding elements of the old you *again* to reach a compromise of the new person created in this in-between.



Beginning Again, Again

Beginning again in a new place, just like I did in my first year at Edinburgh as an international student, has already taught me that making a new home has never been about the place you're in but the people you share it with.

Moving alone as the only student to my destination, I knew I had to take initiative to create the life that I wanted for myself here.





Navigating languages and cross-cultural communication was a newer aspect this time around, but it made it all the more exciting.

Making new friends who I clicked with right away was something I hoped for, but had to put myself out there to find, and it has been the best part about beginning again.



Fiona Pazari
Università di Padova,
Italy

Guadeloupe / Gwadloup / Karukera / Not-Quite-France

Explaining that my year abroad involves a Caribbean island, a riot of preschoolers, PE lessons on a white-sand beach, an education in Montessori teaching, and a side of babysitting often invites more questions than it resolves. To name just a few: where exactly Guadeloupe is; whether it's easy to integrate into the 'local' community (I use quotation marks because I've yet to see evidence of any other community); whether it's what I expected; how hard it is to speak French from dawn till dusk; whether people here feel French, on this butterfly-shaped island some 6,770 kilometres from Paris; how prevalent Creole is; whether the aforementioned preschoolers can understand my accent.

The answer to almost all of these questions is two words: not quite. Having once set out to find a corporate internship in maybe Marseille or Bordeaux, I certainly hadn't expected to find myself in a Guadeloupean preschool, explaining to an otherwise adorable three-year-old, for perhaps the tenth time, not to eat her own hair at lunchtime. To my delight, however, these students are remarkably accepting of my French, even as I grapple with the jump from literary analysis at university to everyday classroom vocabulary.

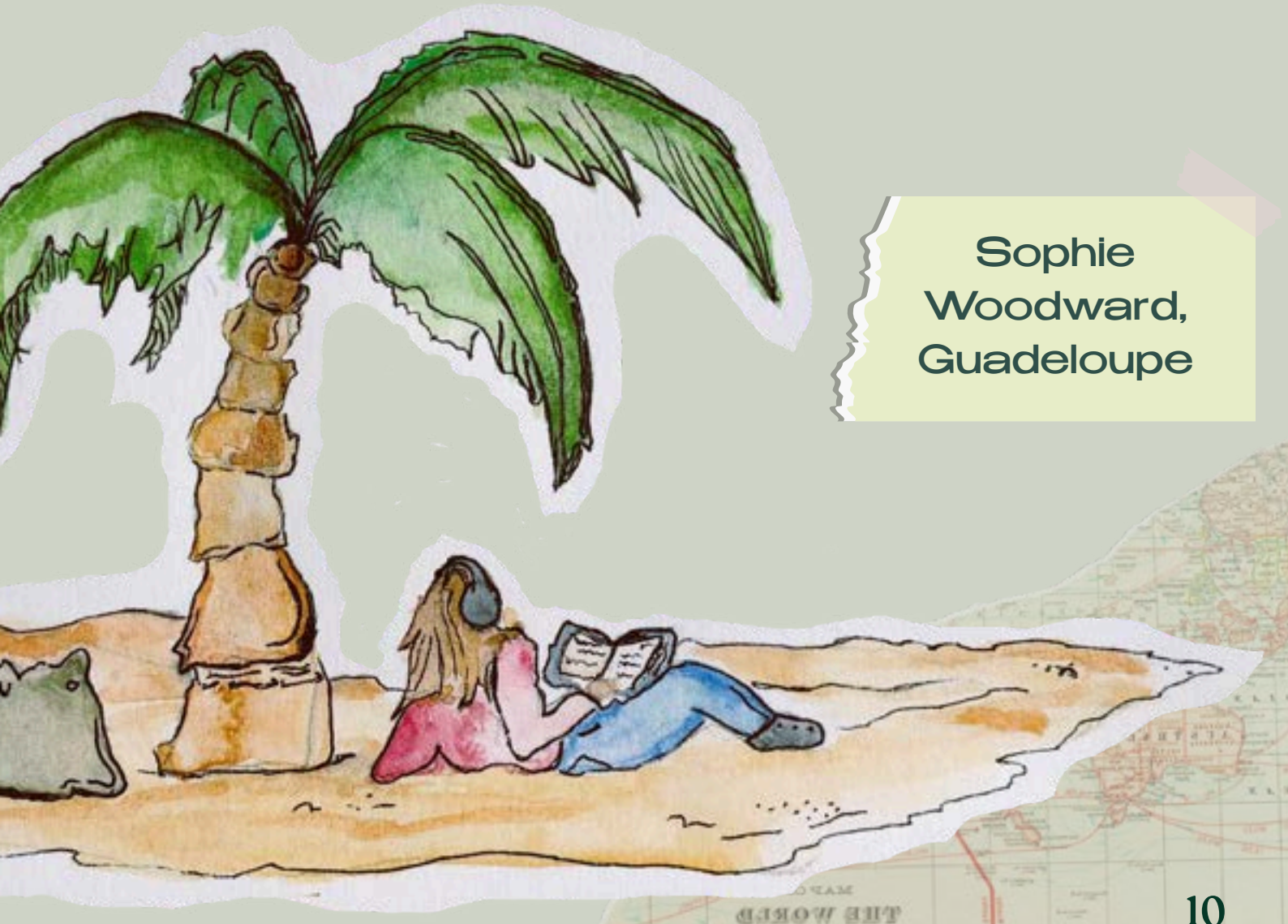
It's true, too, that with the status of a *département et région d'outre-mer* in the Lesser Antilles, Guadeloupe is not quite France; alike in patisseries, street signs and language, yet wildly different in culture, energy and pace. As my boss explained to me on my first night, driving through palm trees in the dark, the Creole language is often seen as a form of rebellion against the decades of slavery implicit in the island's history.

Yet, having spoken to the kids at school, my coworkers, and finally a grandfather in a bakery about Creole, I established that few communities spoke it regularly, or even at all. French linguistic prevalence is alive and well over here.



What else? I'm not quite as prepared for this as I thought I was; I silently celebrate every time I understand one of my coworkers' jokes, and being totally solo, without an Erasmus network or the comfort of European proximity, feels liberating and blissful at times, and totally insane at others. I'm not quite operating in an island mentality just yet; my coworkers' default state is one of intense, monk-like calm, even when our bus breaks down on the way to PE lessons in the sea, or when you can hear three different children crying simultaneously.

This entire experience, filled with solo trips to the beach, quiet nights journaling, and family gatherings and dinners with my hosts, couldn't be further from my life in Edinburgh. But I think there's a whole lot that Guadeloupe, or Gwadloup (Creole), or Karukera (its Arawak and Caribbean Indian name), has to teach me over the next eight weeks. If your year abroad also feels like a bit of a wildcard, I encourage you not to lose heart; reframe it in your mind as solo travel, as linguistic immersion, as a challenge to your comfort zone, or as a gift of a new perspective. Take your headphones, watch the setting sun; it is in those moments that I truly realise, no, this is not quite France. This is a different adventure entirely.



Sophie Woodward, Guadeloupe

Home, 7,000 Miles Away

From the moment I submitted my application in Edinburgh until the moment I arrived in Chile, studying abroad existed as a scary and stressful concept, with a never-ending to do list and a rolling stream of deadlines. After months of deciphering Chilean visa applications and searching for a place to live 7,000 miles away, the day finally came when my parents waved goodbye to me and two suitcases in Heathrow Airport. By the time I sat on the plane, facing the 14-hour journey ahead, I wasn't feeling adventurous; I was feeling exhausted.

I landed in a rainy Santiago at 7am and pasted a completely unfamiliar address into Uber, hoping the place actually existed...

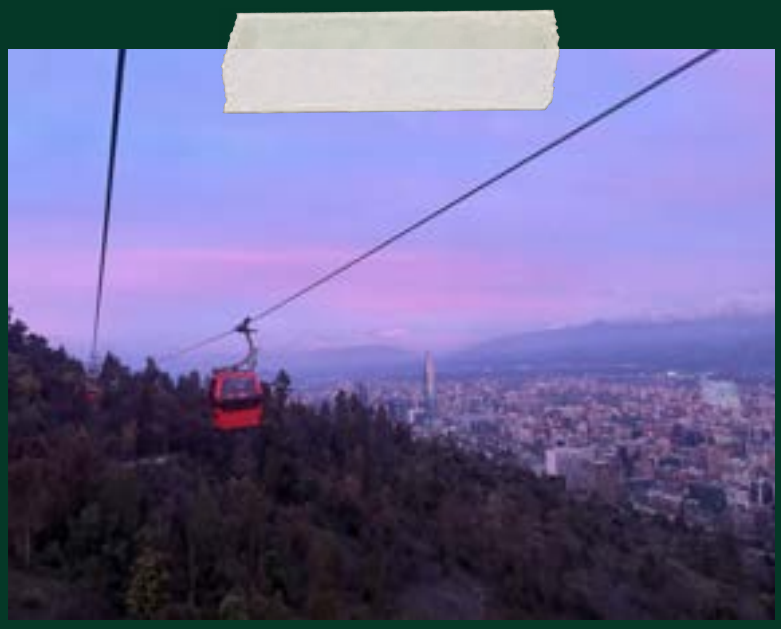
The first week felt like Edinburgh freshers all over again, just two years older and entirely in Spanish. However, the initial panic disappeared surprisingly fast: I met my flat mates, unpacked, went to welcome events, and started my classes. I achieved everything that had once seemed impossible without even realising it!

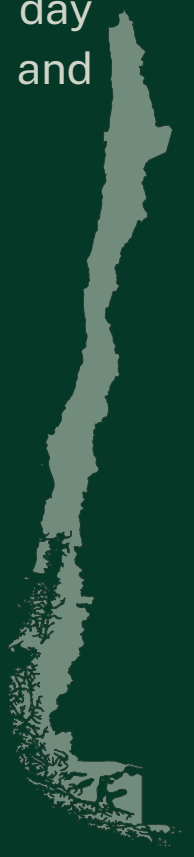




What nobody had told me about exchange is how willing everyone is to make friends. When everyone is dropped into a new country without their usual safety nets, their social guards come down instantly. No one is trying to impress anyone; everyone just wants to connect! Within weeks, the strangers I had met on induction day became the friends I now travel with every other weekend and navigate this whole experience alongside.







Looking back at those anxious months in the UK, it now seems funny how much energy I wasted trying to picture what life here would look like, overthinking every little detail. Fast forward a few weeks, and the unfamiliar address I pasted into Uber on that first morning is now saved as “Home”.





Around the world in 20 pictures









Anna Claire Breuss-Burgess – Hong Kong University, Hong Kong

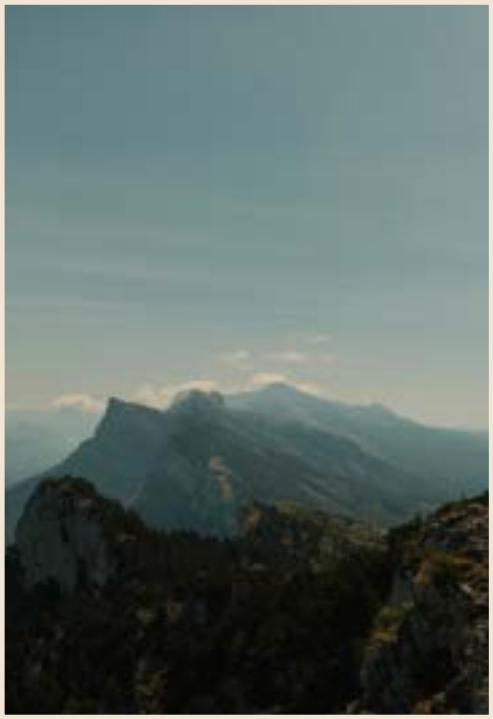








Daniel O'Connor – Aarhus University, Denmark







Hugh Shilson – Sciences Po Grenoble, France









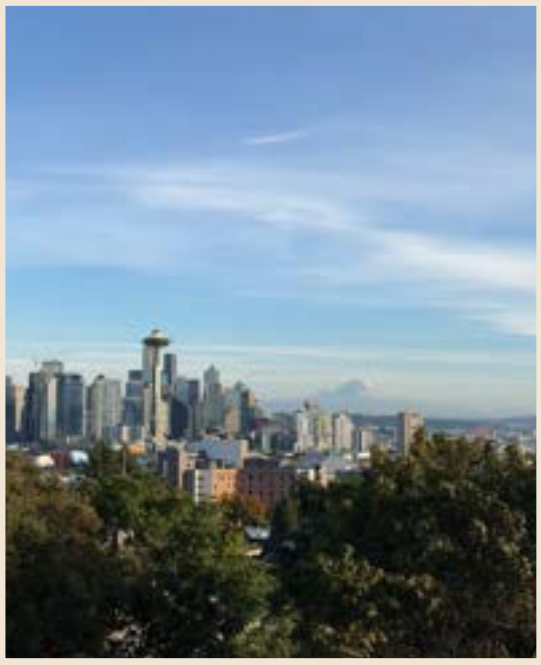


Amani Stefan – Luiss University, Rome









Rufus Gordon-Smith – University of Washington, Seattle

A WORTHWHILE LEAP OF FAITH



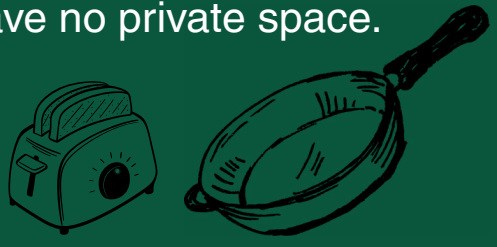
Before embarking on my year abroad, I had been warned of the trajectory of the culture shock students typically experience. Apparently, the stages cycle through from honeymoon to frustration, to adjustment, to acceptance, and you are told that it takes several weeks to progress through them. It is not until putting yourself through an experience like this that you realise how quickly these phases hit you, and often simultaneously; the emotional toll of a new beginning like this does not follow a neat, predictable path.

I have been in Prague, Czechia, for two weeks now. It seems an impossibly short length of time considering how much I have already faced, learnt, and changed. Naively, I thought that Prague would feel like a repetition of my move to Edinburgh. I was certainly not expecting the culture shock to hit me so severely, considering I was simply moving to a European country.

Hattie Filmore
Charles University
Prague, Czechia



Czechia is a wonderful place, but different in many ways to home. My student accommodation is a fever dream of a dormitory, where my bed is close enough to my roommate's that we could hold hands while we sleep, and I share a tiny kitchen – without an oven, toaster, or freezer – with 17 other people. Although it has been wonderful for socialising, it has been exhausting to have no private space.







As an organised person, I have found the lack of communication from my faculty frustrating. We have been advised not to speak to reception in buildings, as they likely will not speak English (and Czech is a notoriously difficult language to learn, despite Duolingo's best efforts). It is easy to feel lost, isolated, and confused. There are times when everything feels difficult, and it seems no one is there to guide you.

This is where the friendships you make completely alter your experience. The nature of an Erasmus+ exchange attracts open, friendly, and adventurous people. It has amazed me how close I feel to people after one quick conversation, and how there is always someone happy to do whatever activity you suggest. Every conversation is an opportunity for a cross-cultural exchange. I was previously unaware of just how English I come across, but apparently people can guess my nationality before I even open my mouth. There is much to bond over, laugh about, and teach one another.

Everybody I meet gasps in awe when I tell them I study at Edinburgh. It is a city that has a real, lasting impact on people. That said, I know that by the end of the year, I will love Prague just as much as I love Edinburgh. The move feels like a huge leap of faith but I know it is one for the better, and I have no doubt that this will be an amazing year filled with new experiences, new places, and new friends.



Moving to Prague has been a far bigger challenge than I expected – emotionally, culturally, and even physically. But challenging yourself is always worthwhile and in just two weeks, I have met so many incredible people who I am so grateful are part of my life now.

moving to SINGAPORE

NUS is, in layman's terms, massive. For context, the university shuttle bus takes 25 minutes to go from one end of campus to another. Spread across it are 15 faculty campuses and the homes of 50,000 students. I originally struggled to set a routine for various reasons such as not being able to sleep at night due to having no AC – crazy, I know. Also, they do not provide kitchens. As someone who loves to cook, this is an issue as I must eat out three times a day. "How unhealthy?" you are probably saying to yourself. Yes, but when you have a plethora of different Asian cuisines right at your doorstep, it is a minor inconvenience. There are nine food courts located around NUS, some seating up to 1,000 people. My personal favourite is the science campus canteen 'Frontier' where you can find some delicious, steamed chicken and rice. I would say I have found a good routine where I can maximise productivity and still make time for new friends and experiences.



There is a very large international exchange community here, with over 1,000 exchange students from across the globe, predominantly the US, Canada, and literally all of Europe. I have met some truly interesting people, and it has broadened my perspective in the short time I have been here.



Unfortunately, it seems to be mostly UK students who do a full year here, so I will be saying goodbye to my new friends in December. I am missing my friends in Edinburgh, but not the facilities. I mean come on; I have an infinity pool above my room, which I use in between lectures. I would say if you feel homesick, it helps knowing that you have other friends going through the same experience as you in different universities around the world, and to just focus on enjoying making new friends here and travelling with them.



In terms of nightlife, there are an array of options which I was no doubt exhausting during the first couple of weeks. There is a club situated on a rooftop overlooking the Marina Bay skyline, perfect for those in need of some larp photos. The clubs here are grander than any found in Edinburgh, although your wallet ultimately pays the price for this. However, for those wanting some casual drinks, there is a multitude of pubs and bars you can go to across Singapore. Boat Quay has some cool pubs, and you can find the most student friendly prices, after a lot of negotiating of course – Hindi skills would be optimal here. My overall nightlife assessment would be that it is what you make of it. Many choose to go out twice a week but for me personally, after the initial 'freshers' period, I am prioritising travelling South-East Asia, and of course my actual studies.



I chose NUS because of its high global ranking; 8th at the time and moved to 10th since. My expectations of the academics have been exceeded, and I can say the academic environment here is rigorous and competitive. Tutorials here are small and more interactive, while assessment is more continuous with greater emphasis on midterms and lecture or tutorial attendance. Overall, I would say if you keep on top of everything and attend tutorials, you will be fine.



Karan Shah
National University of Singapore

Beginning again doesn't mean saying goodbye

For years, doing an exchange was always a non-negotiable in my mind; I was certain it would be a part of my student experience, even if it affected which university I went to or how many years I studied. I romanticised every aspect of living abroad, from learning the language to sitting in the sun with a coffee, to cycling home with a baguette in my bike's basket. While I had some destinations in mind, I knew I would love the experience no matter the country I ended up in.



Then I started at the University of Edinburgh

Everyone who goes to university tells you it's the best experience of your life, but at 18 years old, it's impossible to understand. The challenges of living alone, making new friends, and joining societies have pushed me to become more myself, to learn who I want to be and what life I want to lead. While the world obviously comes with its difficulties, overall, these last two years have been the happiest of my life and a huge part of that is my love for Edinburgh and the truly incredible people I have met there. So, while I once viewed my year abroad through rose-tinted glasses, the last year saw clouds gather and muddled thoughts about the journey ahead. I began to feel as if this new chapter of my life in Belgium would mark the end of my life with my favourite people in my favourite city.



Alice Locker, Leuven, Belgium

My final week in Edinburgh was full of doubt and sadness as I seriously questioned moving abroad for the first time. As someone who likes to push myself out of my comfort zone and take any travel opportunity, I was caught off guard.



Then I started at KU Leuven.

Only four weeks in, my outlook has changed, and my signature rose-tinted glasses are back on. I now see that I can move away from a place and people but still be so connected to them, with them continuing to add to my life here in Leuven. Talking to my friends from home about our days only enhances what I've experienced, while the pictures and postcards from Edinburgh make my room here more homely. Though I'm hundreds of miles away from my friends, family and home in Edinburgh, I've never felt more grateful that they're a part of my life and continue to be, even in another country. They will always be so engrained in who I am, it's as if we're never apart, from the music I listen to on my walk home to the bunting in my room, to the tea I drink before bed. While I have begun again in Leuven, that doesn't mean I've said goodbye to my life in Edinburgh or the people that came with it. Now it's time for Leuven to make its mark on me, something I can already feel beginning.

I Don't Miss Edinburgh.

Singapore is sunny – no grey skies or signs of rain. Singapore's temperature is warm and I have not worn a jacket in 2 months. Singapore's roads are not riddled with potholes, and I can sit comfortably on the buses. Singapore is alive past 6pm and I can always find something to do.

I meet my friends, who were strangers to me a few months ago, but now we laugh over our shared memories and the joys of being in a foreign country. I embrace the city lights from the buildings which are far too modern for my little city of Edinburgh. I join co-curricular activities and learn new skills. My days are filled with Singapore. Yet at night, when I return from my busy life, I think about the days on the Meadows, chasing temperatures which only seemed to appear during mid-exam stress. The breeze on top of Calton Hill that chilled through the bones. I always know where I am on buses even with my eyes closed, thanks to the potholes. And my friends, who I will not see again until we have reached the final year of our undergraduate days. Then suddenly, I miss Edinburgh a lot.

Cynthia Chen
NUS, Singapore

Thanks for reading!

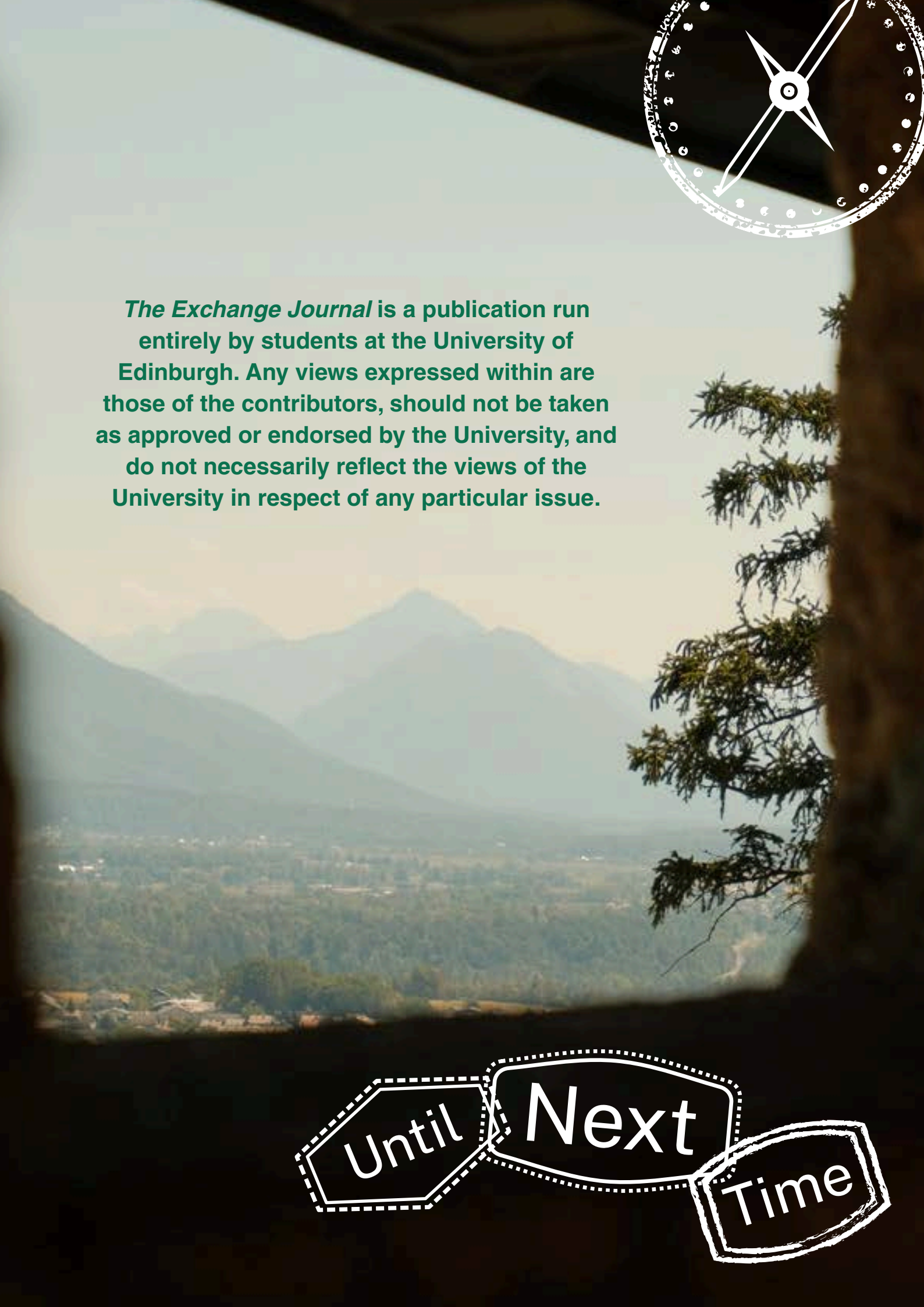
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