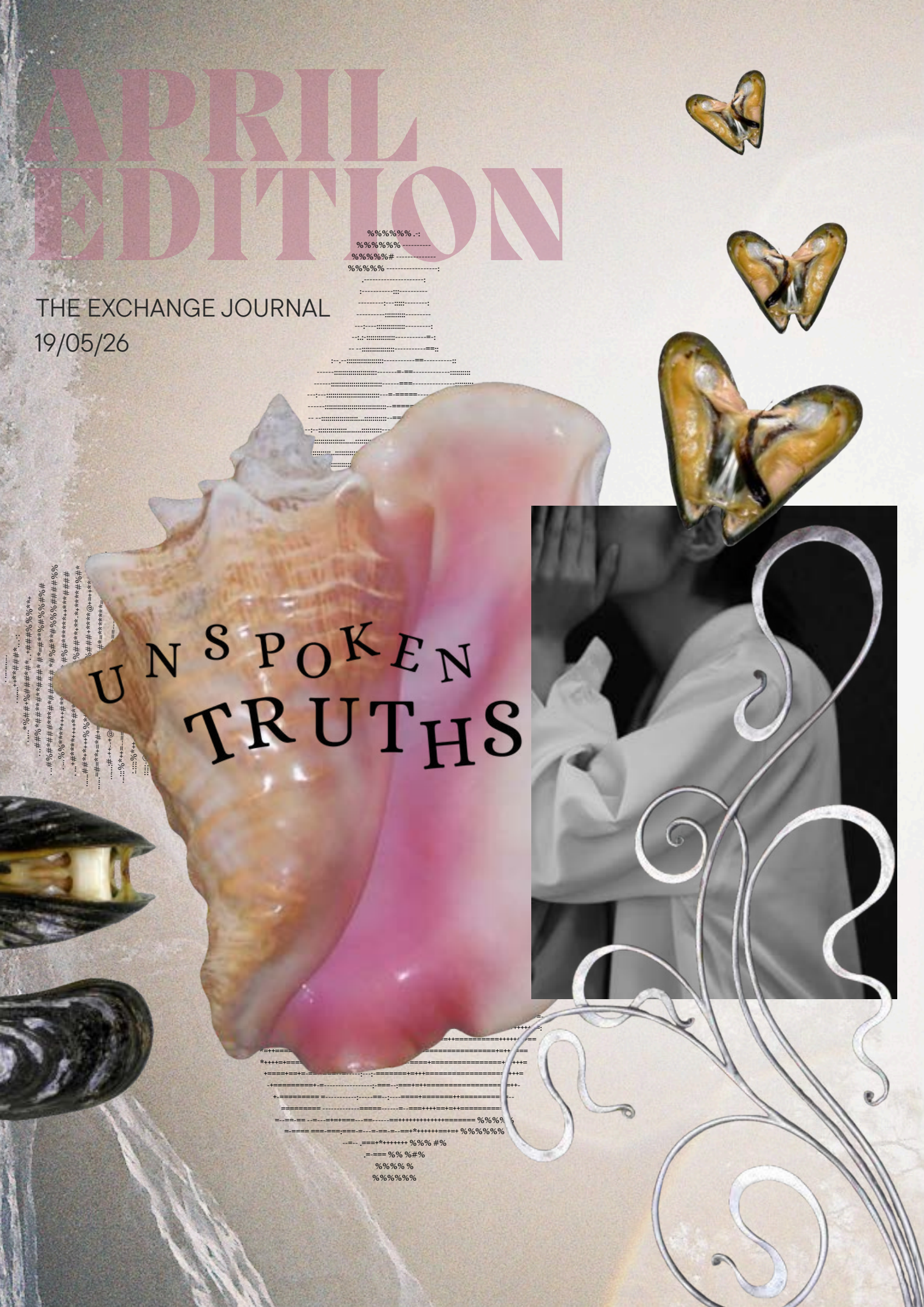
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A Note from the Editors

Through our work on this journal, it has become such privilege and joy to be granted a first insight into all of the tales and trials of your Year Abroad experiences.

Our May Edition has been no different. Pulling back the curtain on Unspoken Truths, we have learnt from our contributors all the things impossible to have learnt without their living of it. This edition involves tales of isolation, assimilation, fake news and forced fritters; Unspoken Truths is a particularly useful edition for the soon-come exchange-goers of 2026/27, who may be interested in gleaning early lessons of the unavoidable truths tied to moving far from home.

This is our penultimate edition as the 2025/26 editorial team, and we are so grateful to all the creative contributions we have seen across the year, as well as our faithful readership. Thank you for making our work worthwhile (it would be very difficult to do what we do without you).

Second years: keep an eye out for up-coming applications to join the new Exchange Journal team as we (sadly) all begin our plans of returning home and handing over responsibilities.

In the meantime, thank you, and enjoy all the lessons taught in this months edition: Unspoken Truths.



Sticky

Eloise Longstaff | Brisbane, Australia

I am sitting on a bench on a campus that finally feels familiar. The sun feels warm on my skin, but now that Australia has entered autumn, a cool, morning breeze mediates the temperature. I am finally comfortable after months of feeling sticky.



Brisbane, Queensland

'Sticky' is how I would describe my process of settling in here. Last August, all I wanted was to go home. I would wake up most mornings with a slightly sick feeling, as the reality washed over me that I was here and not there, wondering deep down if I made the right choice leaving Edinburgh. But the decision was already made, and coming home wasn't an option. And for that, I am grateful.

As time has passed, my homesickness has subsided. I have come to love this new environment, these new routines and this new way of life. I have met people who I will never forget, people who I became incredibly close to in two weeks and people who I couldn't figure out after months of knowing them. I love the Australian inflection and their lingo. The way they shorten everything. I love the way they take advantage of every "arvo" and every weekend. At my bar job, I love pouring customers a schooner instead of a half pint. I love ginger beer on tap.



North Stradbroke Island, Queensland

I am sitting at a table with a friend in a pub, ordering a drink which you can't get at home. I paid too much, but with a doubled currency conversion rate, everything here is half price anyway. We talk, but we don't address the thing we've both been thinking about. The clock is ticking, my flight home is booked. I think we'll let it sit on our chests for a little while longer, until it becomes a little too suffocating. For now, we are dizzy, and we drive to the beach and we run into the sea and we laugh as the waves knock us over.

"Make the most of your time away". This advice, this command, has arisen consistently over the year. An important reminder. It carries more weight now. How many more weekends do I have left here? It almost makes me panic, which is funny because the date that my exchange ends isn't a surprise, and I always knew it was coming. But it has come around so quickly.



Sydney, New South Wales

News, Malvinas, 50 years

Jessica Fairweather | Buenos Aires, Argentina

It is not news to you or me that our news is not reliable. A comfortable, well-worn cynicism has come to drape itself over most media consumption - something more necessary today than ever. I remember first encountering the phrase “fake news” and thinking of nothing more sinister than a BBC April Fools segment about the discovery of a spaghetti tree. Charming, obviously absurd.

Then came the US elections: less charming, equally absurd, considerably higher stakes. The spaghetti-seed was planted. An awareness crept in that reading something somewhere did not render it a truth. You are likely doing the maths here and realising that having this realisation at 13 would make me what they call a late developer - I was not a teenage believer in Santa, nor a celestial believer in every cereal box claim, but for the first time, I understood that news, media, textbooks and teachers can lie. Not necessarily dramatically. Sometimes just by deciding what is and isn't worth mentioning.

Despite this awareness, arriving in Argentina was, I think, the first occasion upon which I was confronted with a genuinely foreign version of truth. A completely parallel account held, with complete sincerity, by an entire nation.



On April 2nd, Argentina had a national holiday in commemoration of the 44th anniversary of the beginning of the Falklands War - known on this side of the Atlantic as “Las Malvinas”. My prior understanding of this conflict was embarrassingly thin. It appeared in my education, when it appeared at all, as a footnote to a larger chapter, a Thatcher anecdote. Presented as - without intending to sound overwhelmingly dismissive and naïve - not that big of a deal.

44 years on, and on the other side of the conflict, I am yet to board a bus that does not carry a sticker reading “Las Islas Malvinas son Argentinas” (The Falklands are Argentine). Every pack of cigarettes arrives sealed with an image of the islands and the same insistence. Tattoos of the islands wrap around the calves, biceps, and forearms of strangers on the subway. School books centre it. Road signs in certain towns point toward the islands with a distance in kilometres. Politicians invoke it – as a campaign tactic, yes, but also as something that predates and outlasts any individual campaign.

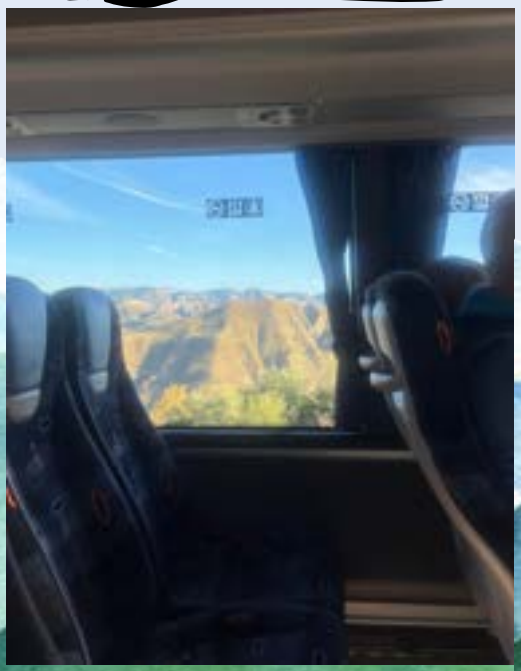
I will spare the Exchange Journal Readership my own half-formed political opinions on the sovereignty question itself of whether the bus sticker and cigarette-box statements are “truths” - I arrived too ignorant to have earned one. What I will say is that I was struck by the unspoken nature of it all back home. The disparity between a pub quiz answer and the single most unifying topic in an entire country cannot be a coincidence but a choice. A nationwide editorial decision, made at the level of curriculum, news cycle and national self-image. In a year during which entire conflicts are renamed, reframed and re-uploaded depending on who controls the feed, the differing narratives on the Malvinas honestly shocked me. The spaghetti-seed tree didn’t quite prepare me for this.

patience is a virtue

anya duhan | granada, spain

They say that patience is a virtue, but I don't feel very virtuous while sitting in Malaga Airport at 11pm waiting for the next bus to Granada due at five. Throughout the lead-up to moving to Spain, I had heard of the many lessons in patience that I would receive. I had adjusted my expectations to the prospects of making new friends, existing in a second language, and the ghoulish visa application, fully anticipating the 'patience' that inevitably follows these lengthy processes; but what I didn't consider was the patience required to physically reach my exchange destination!





Granada's geographic location is, above all, the most recurrently excruciating feature of my exchange. A city slightly north, quite east, and much higher than Malaga, Granada takes two and a half hours to reach by bus from the closest international airport. When I was new to the city, this distance added a sense of unnerving isolation. The domineering altitude of the surrounding mountains, as grand as they are, can take a monopoly on the horizon that makes it hard to see beyond Granada. Reminding visiting friends that they must factor in the bus (that not only doubles the length of their journey but sometimes costs more than the flight itself) irrationally worries me that they will call off their trip. Not to mention leaving the airport, inevitably feeling slightly dishevelled after a flight, and still having another wait for the bus – and then the tram home – isn't the freshest experience



But, of course, I realise that this is a trivial thing to complain about. The very allure of Granada is rooted in its difficulty to reach. The magnificent palace of the *Alhambra* and neighbourhood of *Albaicín* characterise the city with their winding streets, hidden viewpoints, and hilltop monuments. The nearby *Sierra Nevada* is a mountain range reaching nearly 4,000m and somehow still just one hour from the beach. My university campus could probably be rented on Airbnb for its views of the surrounding landscape. I'm working on my perspective surrounding the dreaded bus rides; instead of seeing them as just another leg of a draining journey, I'm trying to appreciate my time on them as a chance to reflect, digest, and transition, because one day I will be taking the trip to the airport for the last time and swapping it back for the train to Edinburgh. And everyone knows CrossCountry service through the Midlands doesn't rival the Andalusian olive fields.



MENSA MISTAKES

POPPY TWORT

The Mensa is an affordable university canteen designed to offer hearty meals to hungry students and staff alike, and a staple of German university life. While mensa food may not rival the lure of devouring a döner kebab, it more than suffices when a filling meal costs only 3€.

My worst mensa mistakes are made in the realm of my meal choices. After a tiresome class I was pulled in by the lure of fresh waffles with raspberry jam and ushered over to the counter by the long line of students sharing the thrill. However, once I sat down, my excitement was met by the texture of corrugated cardboard as I attempted to shred the tough dough between my teeth.

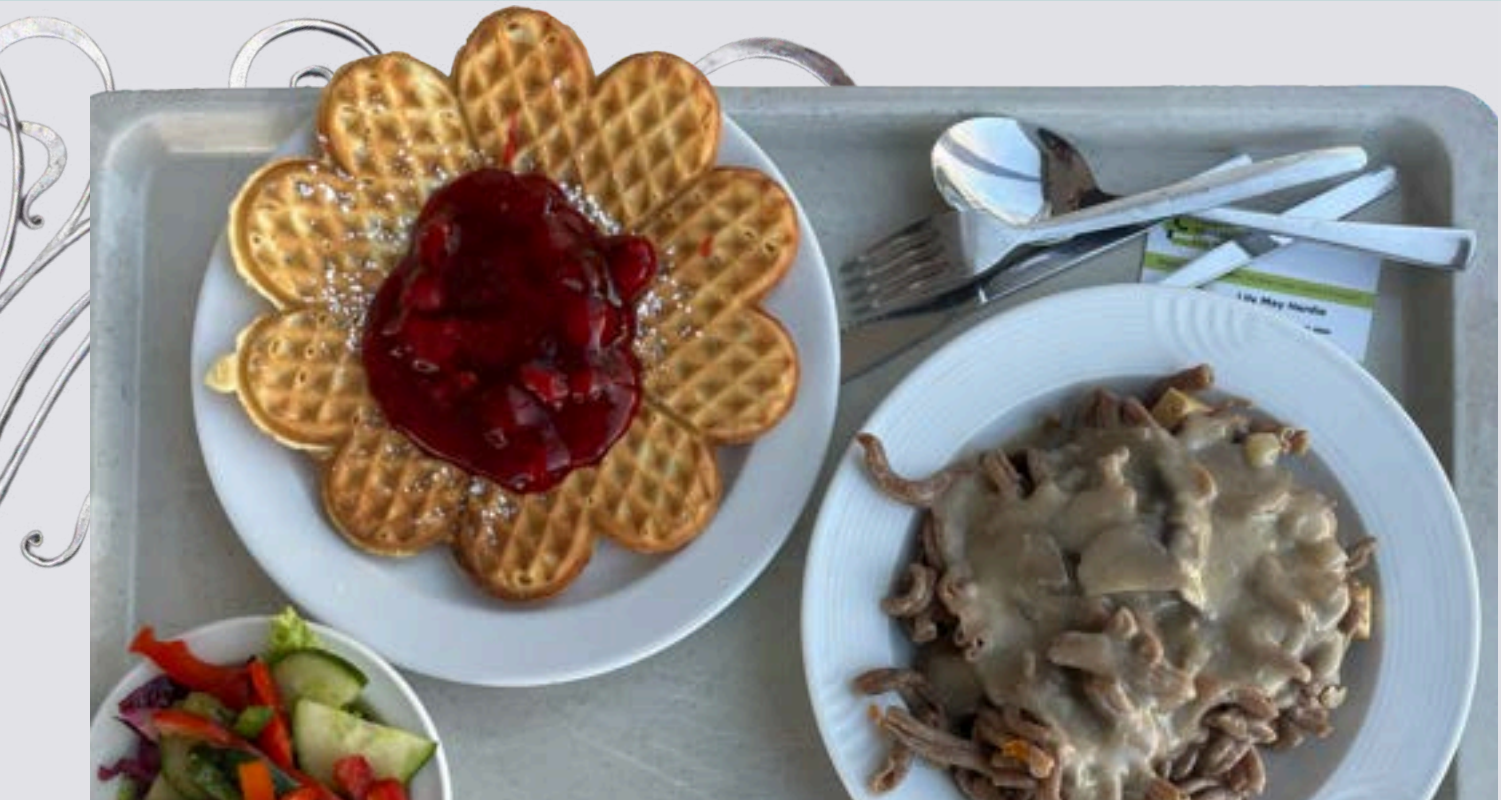


Another disappointment was the pictured quark balls with miso butter that whilst sounding enticing were alarmingly bland and soggy. The overwhelming experience of the mensa often leads me to what appears a safe choice – the pasta bar. Even here, a portion of abnormally brown pasta adorned with a mysterious translucent sauce that always tastes slightly off makes me feel a little queasy. At least they offer herbs, to garnish the grains with some green. My poor German translations of the contents before my eyes often leave me unsure what exactly I have just consumed.

However, I've come to learn that the disconcerting disposition of many a mensa offering is a fine example of equivocation, ingraining in me the mantra to not judge a book by its cover. Some of the best meals I've ever had in the canteen have been disguised as indistinguishable mush. One meal that's beige appearance deceived me was deep-fried beetroot medallions coated in crispy wheat pieces and adorned with a nondescript mint (?) sauce. The pink of the beetroot was masked by its deep-fried journey, but its taste shone through as one of my all-time top three mensa meals in spite of its bland appearance.

An added easter egg to my university is the Shokodō Mensa, a Japanese fusion canteen. Here you can curate a tray complete with beetroot and carrot maki, teriyaki udon noodles with pak choi and a matcha rice pudding to finish – all for under a fiver. The Japanese experience is complete by the option to sit on a futon at an ankle height table known as a chabudai, where only socks are allowed.Other than my mouth often plagued by an incessant saltiness in my post-lunch classes, the variety of cuisine is a welcome treat.

Whilst I can critique the unappetising appearance of much of the mensa food, as well as the lack of vegetarian options, the mensa as a concept of affordable meals and a space for staff and students to dine together is hard to fault. Having spoken to my European friends, I found they were baffled that this concept hasn't made it to Edinburgh. I may poke fun at my fumbles on this foreign ground, but the mensa is certainly an institution that Edinburgh should adopt.



Warm City, Cold Shoulder

Maja Tym
Barcelona, Spain



To live in Barcelona as a *guiri*, a foreigner, you need to have thick skin. The city feels welcoming with its three hundred sunny days per year, frequent neighbourhood *fiestas*, and bars that spill out onto every pavement and plaza. But all over the city, and all over campus, you will catch glimpses of graffiti with slogans saying tourists go home, no *guiris* allowed, no tourists, no expats. These words are written on the tables you eat your lunch at on campus, spray painted on the train you take each morning, plastered on colourful stickers at your favourite bar. It's always in the background.

The truth is nuanced. For one, people here have dealt for years with overtourism and expats who hike up the cost of living and crowd their community spaces. For another, Catalan people are very protective of their culture and language. While as an exchange student you are neither tourist nor expat, you'll feel the sting of their contempt nonetheless. It depends on the person, but since I am doing a politics degree, the people I am surrounded by are those who are the most passionate about these things. The UAB, my university here, is notorious for being very 'woke', leftist and, of course, fiercely Catalan. While I wasn't aware of this reputation before, it was immediately obvious when I arrived.

As you exit the train station, there is a massive Catalan independence flag painted on the pavement, and further down in the main square there is also a huge Palestinian flag. The concrete walls of every building are decorated with graffiti, banners and murals painted by the students. Times and locations of protests are spray painted anywhere there's space. Many of the bathrooms have had the male and female signs scribbled on or torn off. The holy trinity of the UAB – being the Catalan flag, the Hammer & Sickle, and the Venus symbol – can be found etched onto every surface. It made every day at the beginning of my exchange feel like an anthropological investigation into the idiosyncrasies of the student culture at UAB.







At the same time though, I remember how isolating those first weeks were, at least with my Catalan classmates. I was surprised at how invisible I felt in my classes because no one seemed remotely interested to talk to me, not even to say hello when they sat down next to me. A few weeks into my exchange, someone turned around and asked me to plug in their laptop charger to the socket next to me. I was more excited than I should have been just to have had my existence acknowledged. Getting them to speak to you is only the first step, though, because some people refuse to speak Spanish with you. I remember how a classmate told me that if I couldn't speak Catalan with them, they'd prefer that I just spoke in English.



For a while, it can feel like you can't get through to them at all. I have debated this many times with the other Erasmus students, and all of us agree that it is tough to break the ice. What we differ on is whether it is worth it to continue trying.

What I have found is that it takes time, curiosity, and making an effort to succeed in
integrating. Sometimes you have to make conversation with the people around you, even if you feel like a nuisance. Things like group projects are also a good way of getting to know some people better. Since Catalan people love talking about their traditions, festivals and culture, showing an interest and asking them questions about it usually strikes up a good conversation. Best of all, learning even a tiny bit of Catalan earns you a lot of respect and appreciation from the people here.



Of course, none of this erases the graffiti nor the disinterested attitude you'll sometimes come up against. Still, I have realised that you just need to take it with a pinch of salt because it's not personal. If you care about integrating and getting to know the people here, take the initiative to talk to them, to be curious, and chip away at the ice.



Living through a Berlin WINTER...

I had always pictured Berlin the way most people do — a concrete city full of leather-clad people who were a little too direct towards strangers and spent their weekends dancing to techno in clubs. I had mentally prepared myself for what everyone had told me would be a dark and deeply depressing winter. But was I just being too dramatic?

Certainly, Berlin has its coldness. But in winter — when the weather is icy enough to warrant balaclavas, and having to make the devastating switch between cool fingerless gloves and not-so-cool winter mittens — comfort can still be found in toasty cafes where the windows steam up and glass cabinets display gorgeously towering, cream-filled 'Torten'. Outside, the many lakes dotted around the outskirts of Berlin froze over, and despite the warnings —"Achtung, Lebensgefahr!" — many flocked to the water to brave the thin ice, whether they were practising their triple toe loops or just wanted to hit a puck around with their friends. Kreuzberg's Engelsbecken, the shallow, man-made water basin amidst the bustle of the 'Kiez', offered a lower-stakes way of enjoying these free public ice rinks. January in Berlin was rough though. I managed to live through the coldest Berlin winter in sixteen years, worsened further by a five-day blackout that left southwest Berlin stranded in total darkness, as the snow continued to fall in abundance across the city. Nevertheless, I managed to pull through — armed only with a staple puffer coat, some good winter boots, and faith that one day spring would eventually come. And it did. The first thing I did when met with an absurdly warm day in late February, was walk out to Tempelhoferfeld and soak up the sun. I didn't even have to wear a coat. Funnily enough, a quarter of the city's inhabitants had the same idea. But luckily, the former airfield is big enough to never really get crowded, although the Drachenfest back in September was a close call.



Hannah Germashewski

...and seeing SPRING on the other side

Berlin thrives in the sun; as soon as it gets a little warmer, a new form of social culture is born. Restaurants move their tables onto the streets, and bridges and street corners become wonderful third spaces to hang out and drink beer in the dimming evening light. The edges of the Spree become (albeit sometimes rat infested) places to soak up the sun and watch the world go by. A random Tuesday evening at 7pm is the perfect time to escape to the Monbijou park and enjoy a beer you bought at a Späti for two Euros — where someone nearby is playing German rap from a JBL speaker on their bike, and a street busker is playing the drums on the Friedrichsbrücke in the distance. Beneath the Museumsinsel, a crowd of people dance ballroom to a DJ set, in front of the rather makeshift-looking Monbijou theatre, where you can sit and enjoy a view of the ever omnipresent Fernsehturm and the slow, metallic rumbling of the mustard yellow U-Bahn, crossing the bridge at frequent intervals.

Living abroad isn't always easy. But with every obstacle comes a new lesson learnt. A couple of bad days doesn't have to dictate your whole experience. The ice that lay dangerously along the Berlin pavements for weeks on end eventually melted and made way for the first flowers of the year. So yes, it seems spring is just around the bend.





Photos by Marte Jørgensena



My feet on the ice tiles.
the skin on the back of my knees cracking and curling
scraped raw by the cold.

They ripple and split - a toe curling mosaic sea.
which ever way I step, bitterness lunges up my calves and eats away at what's left of me.

An expanse of desperate breakage and I freeze within it.

(A poem written while having no hot water in Hungary during December)

Lucy Quirk

To build a life and knock it down,
glass shattering.

I hope the shards remain in me,
nestled in my abdomen.

Memories absorbed and absolved with each pinch.

Every scratch accompanied by a grin,
and not just a flinch.



Lucy Quirk

Until Next Time



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