



THE EMPTY LANDS PROJECT

Empty Lands

Stories of life in the countryside

of recommendations about places to visit, street food stalls, etc. By absorbing all this knowledge about the place, you will begin to feel like a resident before you know it.

Have them visit you. Invite your new friends to study or drink at home. With this you

will not feel alone at home, it will increase trust with your new friends and hopefully

they will invite you to their homes another day where you may meet new people.

David Sousa, Spain



Adapting in the city

It's not uncommon to feel alone, confused and even a little scared when you start living alone in a city. It takes a while to know the routines, rhythms and peculiarities of your adoptive home. I have lived all this in first person when I moved to Seville to begin my university studies and that is the reason why I write this article and then I will present the tips that I would have liked to hear when I arrived in the city to feel at home.

Take some things with you that remind you of home. Put some things in your suitcase that remind your home from the moment you unpack your luggage. Even simple things, like your bedding or curtains, will make your new house seem more cozy. What helped me most was to place photos of my family and friends on the walls, so it will seem to you that you are not so far away.

Explore and be a tourist. Don't forget to tour the city as a visitor. When you arrive, visit the tourist attractions as it will help guide you. If you spend a day or two watching parks, museums, commercial areas, etc., you will get a good idea of what your new city is like.

Do what the locals do. For example, do you see that everyone rides a bicycle in your new city? Get a bike! Is the subway the most used form of transport? Get your transport card as soon as possible, so you can easily explore and tour the city with the rest of the city's residents. In Seville, for example, teenagers tend to travel by bicycle and that's how I met one of my best friends, since we were doing the same route to go to university.

Make local friends. It's likely that your neighbors or the people you meet in the gym or in class have lived in this city throughout their lives. If you strive to meet local people, you will feel more comfortable in your new city and they will also help you a lot. They will offer you plenty of good advice, they will tell you where the best bars and restaurants are and they will give you all kinds

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Empty Lands is a solidarity project of Cherry International Foundation.

A solidarity project is parts of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), a programme of the European Commission. The aim of this kind of projects is supporting youngster in doing *something for their town/neighbourhood*. More information about ESC can be found on their website:

www.europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

Goal of "Empty Lands" is to give youngster from mainly rural communities another view on their environment. An often heard complain is *there is here nothing to do*. With stories of other youngster, both from the Netherlands and from abroad, we want to give them another view on things.

Empty Lands started 1st May 2019 and lasted for a year. Every week someone wrote his/her story about his/her experiences with living on the countryside. In this little book a selection of stories can be found. Look for more on our website:

www.cherryinternationalfoundation.com/blog

Next to this solidarity project we are mainly active in the field of youth exchanges. Together with youngsters of the same age (16-23) you live together for a 10 to 15 days and do all kind of activities. Due to Corona our plans changed, but we usually organise 3 exchanges a year. On our website and Facebook page we will keep you updated about upcoming projects! If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to contact us.

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We are the same, aren't we?

Living on the country-side is living in a segregated and calm shell, which seems like a way different world. In this world the boss is not the head of the city, the prime minister or somebody who was chosen by the people or the law. Here the nature rules the roots.

In my country, living on the countryside means that the income is mostly provided by the nature, almost everybody is working in the agriculture, just as most of my relatives. It means a lot. We wake up with the nature, our morning alarm is the sunrise. We spend their time outside, with our plants and animals on our venue. We up to it. For big city citizens, it is kind of unimaginable, that we do not schedule our time. We can not decide when do we want to do our job, we are not working from Monday until Friday just between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. We work, when the nature lets us or needs us. It is not our decision when our cow gives a birth. It is not our decision when the hard storm comes. It is not in their dairy to collect grapes on 17th of September- we do it, when the nature allows us to do it.

But as I got it, it was never ever a suffer. It is like a symbiosis. It is being grateful for every single crop, drop of rain, shine of the Sun. This what is harmony for us, can be frightening for townsmen. Up to the nature, and accept always what it gives. And if someone moves to a town or a city, it is hard to be understood and understand the differences. We speak the same language, we have similar roots, we all know our culture-but somehow do not understand each other.

We do not have cutie pets, hamsters and dogs at home, who we carry in our bags. We have our German shepherd to bark when someone unexpected enters our property. We feel weird in shopping malls, where trees are inside, instead of outside. We feel weird in the crowd, on the metro, or on the tram, because unknown people were never so close for us unwantedly. We do not need thousand kind of milk in the shop with the exact fat percent on it, we have it from our neighbours, and we have never asked whether it is half-fat or fat milk. We have never eaten

Allow me to elaborate more on the last two categories.

What separates prominently those two, is on the one hand the good management and on the other the mismanagement of information. What I mean is that our era is considered to be an era of equal opportunities, most of those don't need to be right next door, since you are probably already holding them in your hand. Yes! I'm referring to the Internet which if used properly, could help you realize some of your wildest dreams, inform you about the alternatives you have and prevent you from following a lifestyle which you don't desire. Internships, job openings, national or European programs and volunteer opportunities domestic or abroad are just some of them.

The village mindset, the most likely close-minded community where I grew up and many people do, will incite you to aim low and come after the trodden path, the expected one. But what really distinguish the desperate-to-go-big and the desperate-to-leave ones is that the former use this desperation in their own interests and treat a crisis as a challenge, or rather, as an invitation to open a new window, which they know will not lead them anywhere just because it's open, unless they are ready to observe the view.

So, the Norm of Success is usually identified with money, fame or power. In my opinion though, success closely associates with emotional balance, internal fulfillment, the power of giving back. And it always comes as an outcome of failure, which to experience also means to experience the desire and realize that sometimes is more powerful than any opposition.

So what's your most profound desire?

Your personal definition of success?

Konstantina Litsa, Greece

The mindset of the seemingly restraint youth

It is common knowledge that we live in a society driven by the constant pursuit of individuality, a society divided into multiple socially enforced norms, whether they encourage positive, or negative behavior. In my view however, there is one in particular that stands out. And that is the Norm of Success. According to this perception, it is the human nature, the natural evolution that propel human beings to succeed, or rather, condemn them to do so.

As a young girl, who grew up and lived in a small village somewhere in the Greek coastline for the first 18 years of my life, I had the time to observe and assimilate the key characteristics that are incorporated into a villager's mindset. The latter, I find, is mostly shaped by the way he/she was raised within his/her family and the prevailing values that are representative within the community. According to those differences, I hold the impression that are mainly 3 patterns that characterize young people who live in villages, concerning the way they perceive their hometown.

Firstly, the "minimalist" ones. Those are the ones who actually like this simple lifestyle, the routine they have and opt for a peaceful, yet fulfilling future within the village borders. They are not planning on becoming the next business-suit-owners walking down Wall Street, but they are pleased with this decision anyway.

Secondly, you have the desperate-to-go-big ones. Those youngsters are determined to follow their dreams and aspirations. They may not have the means, or the support to do so, but their resourcefulness and optimistic attitude allows them to achieve everything they set their mind to. A vibrant city is most likely to be the perfect place for them.

Lastly, we have the desperate-to-leave ones. The ones who hopelessly want to move out of their village and see the life beyond. The difference here is that they don't know how to achieve that, and they usually tend to keep a pessimistic attitude about this "unrealistic" ability of theirs. It is possible that they will compromise for their family home.

fruits and vegetables when it is not their season, and it people look at us on a weird way, when we say: "excuse me, but I have never ever tasted mango before". It is something what for townsmen easy to get, but we have not even seen those in the small shop before, and surprisingly, we personally neither produce it in our garden. We prefer comfortable and well-functioning clothes, and we mostly do not care what is in the new Vouge. It is not because we consider being trendy as redundant, we have simply no possibility for that, and it can seem weird for others.

We can look weird at each other although we are living in the same countries and the difference is just 10, 100 or 1000 kilometre. But the gap is not in those kilometres. The gap is in the minds, the way we consider each other. This is why people from the country-side rather stay there without leaving it. It works like a beautiful green trap, from where just few can get out.

Enikő Gosztom, Hungary



Dancing connects

Ever since I was a child I remember myself loving two things with my whole heart; my grandparents and dancing. Because I get too emotional talking about my grandparents I will instead dedicate this text to talk about my love for dancing. I began dancing when I was 5 years old, in kindergarten. I still remember the dress I was wearing and the people that came to see us during the performance for the end of the school year. Something in me definitely sparked that day. I was also lucky enough to have dancing as one of the activities we had in elementary school. As if this wasn't enough I wanted to spend as much time as I could dancing so I would beg my parents to enroll me in dance classes as an after school activity as well. However, they would insist I played basketball or took swimming lessons. In the end though, I would always end up in a room full of mirrors and loud music and somehow like that my love for dancing blossomed.

My relationship with this type of art is a relationship of love and expression because when music hits me I don't feel any pain. One of the most amazing experiences I lived because of dancing is when I traveled with my dance crew to Berlin for the "World of Dance" which is one of the most prominent competitions in street dance culture. Coming from a small province in Greece that dancing as an art is not appreciated enough and taking part into this event became the highlight of my dance journey so far.

When we are arrived at the location the competition was taking place the cultural shock hit me. First of all, it was in the most central part of Berlin and the organization was impeccable; from the warm welcoming of the contestants to even the dj that was entertaining the crowd when we were taking breaks. One of the things that shocked me the most though was the advanced level of the dancers. Where I come from in Greece, the dance competitions are very small and not that reputable. The shows and performances I got to see that night, I would have never had the chance to see where I live in Greece. Moreover, the audience was

Well yeah, boredom... I go happily and willingly to my village also because there is where my ninety years grand grandmother lives. There is not much to do but you can have fun with small things, like for example like playing soccer, or playing with cards, making jokes, enjoying the local events, spending the evenings outside eating and singing, everything goes well for a month but then I miss the city again.

I really enjoy my grand grandmother's food, I can even recognise the perfumes of the food without seeing them, for so pure and genuine they are. The meat is delicious there, it is bought at local butchers who take their herds to graze in the fields or in the mountains; the chicken and the rabbit meat are very tender; fruits are seasonal, and I say seasonal because else you don't find anything else. The perfume of these fruits fills up the whole house, which often blends with the smell of jams which my grandmother makes every summer; I can eat fresh eggs every morning, the home-made bread prepared in the wood oven stays longer preserved, and even when it finally becomes hard and old it is never thrown away, rather it is fed to the animals like pigs or chickens. But yeah, you don't eat canned food there!

Beyond the culinary aspect, the other advantage is that the air is clean, not polluted, but in any way, for me, living in a village is a bit too tight. It's ok for a month, but not to live as a fixed place. Let's also not talk about the aggressive summer storms which make the electricity go away and you have no clue when it will return, so you turn on the candles and wait until electricity comes back; maybe you were watching a nice soccer match game from your favourite team and now you cannot watch it anymore... no no, the life of a village is not for me!

Now I think like that, when I will be older I don't know if I will still want to live in a city or not. There might be a reason for older people to move to villages if they have the opportunity to do so? Maybe because then they wish a calmer lifestyle and a purer air? I don't know. And I don't know if in a future I would like to keep farm animals and walk in the forests perhaps finding a nice mushroom to cook. Or preparing nice meals to my grandchildren the same delicacies that my mother passed on to me... I really don't know. For now I love my city, my Rome, with all its pros and cons.

Long live the city!

Federico Gigli, Italy

Long live the city

Rome is a city of culture, architecture, sculpture, art, Italian history, and the place where the Pope resides. It is not a simple city but an Italian capital and in my point of view, other European capitals are incomparable to it.

Who lives in the city never gets bored, every day there are chances to do different things: going to parties, pubs, discos, bowling, movie theatre, gym, going for shopping like crazy.... because you can find anything, and you can do anything at any time. You can go by car, train, bus or metro, you can visit and admire the monuments like Piazza di Spagna, Fontana di Trevi, Coliseum or Piazza San Pietro. The streets are always crowded with tourists in every season of the year. Since it is a very busy and chaotic city, with a lot of traffic jams, I use my motorbike to transit passing the cars by kilometric lines, managing to park in those few free parking spots, in fact sometimes you might park in a Limited Traffic Zone, in which you may drive or park just in possession of an Ecopass, and then you can get a really expensive ticket.

Due to the high amount of smog concentration, the government prohibits the use of cars in some times of the year, which leads to an overcrowding of public transportation, which is clearly not enough for everyone in the city. Which is why again I ride on my motorbike trying to compensate, using an anti-smog masker which is not always efficient, unfortunately.

Pollution is a big issue in my city, in my opinion it is actually the only disadvantage of living in a city. Acoustic pollution and olfactive pollution are heavily felt in Rome and it has a big impact on its citizen's health, even if Rome has public health system and several hospitals, they are always full.

In the matter of friendships, you can make a lot in a city, every day you can make new friends. However, the old ones always remain. The ones from childhood, with whom you used to play soccer in the courtyard, or in the field behind the house (the only place left free where nothing is built on like parking lots or buildings); those with whom you went out on Saturday afternoons to make shopping or to take an ice cream, well, also those with whom you made some crazy things for which was better if our mother didn't see us or they would get us!

Many believe that a city makes people stressed, but I am not, maybe due to my young age, in which I do not have problems to think about, differently than those of my friends who live in a village (the village to where I go in summer), who get easily bored the whole year long until those from the city come visit them, also to get some fresh, clean air, and to regenerate in every point of view.

so very warm and encouraging and everybody was dancing with each other; clicks and bad vibes had no place there.

Moments before we got up the stage and while the presenter was giving our crew an introduction, reality hit me and I just couldn't believe that I was about to step on the stage of "World of Dance". During the last seconds of our choreography I was trying my best to hold back my tears as I had been waiting for that moment for years and was immensely grateful to finally be living it.

Dancing has been my outlet as it gets me through the good and bad days. The main reason I love it though is because of the people that it has connected me to that come from all over the world. The dance community, or at least the one I'm in, feels like a warm hug. It is an incredible feeling to be dancing alongside people you love and can call your family. I also feel extremely lucky because the people I have met not only have helped me improve my dance skills but they have also helped me become a better person.

Dancing is sharing and when you share with one another you connect!

Eirini Bakoula, Greece



Hectic city life or calm countryside?

Both these options have something to offer. It depends on how we sense it and how we are. No everyone is able to live in a big city, perhaps somebody looking for that constant noise and 24/7 life.

When people hear “countryside”, many think about poor and a slow life, but is it really like that? When you ask someone from the countryside how is it for him to live there, he will say that he is happy there and he has everything he needs. There is no rush, no stress, though they also face difficult situations.

I am living in a small town, called Detva (Slovakia), surrounded by hills and near an extinct volcano. to live here is like living in the countryside, and there are many differences compared to a big city. I am 18 years old, and during these years I visited a lot of countries and big cities as Amsterdam, Valencia, Bratislava, München and so on. In these cities I noticed so much noise, rushing people or danger in night. But also I saw a lot of things concentrated in one space. And when I compared them to my little town I am so thankful for where I am living. However, every time I was abroad I met great people; for example during a youth exchange in Ommen, in The Netherlands, which opened my eyes, and made me realise that I have to work on my language skills. But the feeling of coming back home, to my little town, is the best I can feel.

In my little town in the heart of Slovakia I always feel safe. I like that people know, help and support each other. The most beautiful thing is when the whole town meets at the hockey ice stadium and everybody holds hands together. I always get goose bumps in my whole body when I see that. In my town there is always a family atmosphere, on the contrary to big cities where there are so many people. But on the other hand, work options in my town are not that vast, people don't earn so much money

“I feel alive” I thought to myself. “I am home”.

And just like that, everything I thought I knew changed forever... As youngsters, we often have all these unique opportunities which have the potential to bring great joy and fulfilment in our lives. They might seem small at times, but their impact is always inversely proportional to their seemingly insignificant size. Those are the times when we must have confidence. Confidence in ourselves, our mental and physical abilities. Confidence in others. The ones who will trust and selflessly show us the right path. And more significantly, confidence in life itself. That everything and everyone will, sooner or later, be exactly where they're supposed to be.

And the word ‘everyone’, includes YOU too!

Konstantina Litsa, Greece



A few days had passed, when I finally got this highly anticipated confirmation email. "Dear Konstantina, Congratulations! You have been accepted to participate in this 9-day Youth Exchange in Naples, Italy taking place in September." I felt thrilled! This was everything I wanted, until cruel reality hit me. I was about to travel abroad to go somewhere I had never heard before, with people I had never met, to participate on a project I didn't know existed a few days ago. My initial excitement was now converted into fear, doubt, uncertainty. From that day forward, everything happened so fast. We formed a Greek-team Facebook group where I got to meet my soon-to-be fellow travellers. I also met this girl with who I would travel with, so as not to be alone. Iphigenie, as she is called, had participated in multiple similar projects before, so she answered every question, eliminated every hesitation and most importantly, she reassured me that these 9 days would change my life forever. So I spontaneously neglected every negative thought and put my trust on her. I was going to Italy and nothing or no one would stop me!

I now find myself in Roma Termini station after a short flight and a quick bus ride. It's early in the afternoon and the busy streets of Rome are lighten up by the bright sunbeams. The discomfort of my big, heavy backpack is stressing my shoulders which adds to my confusion. "What am I doing here?". I can't help but ask myself the same question over and over in my head. "This is not where I'm supposed to be, I need to go home". But then, I briefly look at Iphigenie. These sparkling eyes and big smile of hers leave me speechless. She seems happy! So I act cool and I follow her, unable to say a word. It was shortly after my arrival and a few days before my departure that I actually managed to answer the question above. We, along with my newly found European friends, spent one of the last days of the project hiking the worldwide known Mount Vesuvius. I reached the top a few steps in front of the others. The gentle breeze was softly touching my skin while my eyes were striving to memorize every little detail. The irregular shape and size of the various clouds made the sky appear rough, yet the calmness of the tiny well-shaped recurrent waves made the sea look pure. An illusion of great contradiction, yet a reality of perfect harmony.

so they have to travel far away from home for a better life. For this reason, one day I want to leave to some big city for study and work possibilities.

Nowadays, a lot of young people leave their homes and look for better life in a bigger city or even abroad. And so do I. Because we want to feel how it is to have so many options available in one place. For example free time activities, studies and night life.

In conclusion I just want to say that it's not possible to say where is better to live. It is important that we are happy where we are. If we feel safe and satisfied that's really an answer to a happy life.

Some people love a hectic life and being surrounded by noises and stimulus, others instead, love a silence and a calm environment. So don't compare it, just live where your heart wants to and enjoy life.

Táňa Debnárová, Slovakia



A disgustingly delicious experience

Sleeping with the horses in a meadow filled with grass, a disgustingly delicious experience. If you live on a farm with horses, you probably know what I'm talking about. Those magnificent, huge animals with their snotty, soft nose. You sit next to them, but they're more interested in the grass. So you lie down and you doze off.

Until you wake up with a start because that huge animal - with the snotty, soft nose - snorts on you. You open your eyes with a face full of snot. And there she is, with her big snotty nose and her ears turned to you in a curious way. One more snort and she walks away. Away to the delicious grass. You call out for her, she ignores you. You call again, and another horse walks towards you. She becomes jealous and starts walking to you. Chasing away the other horse. You reach out to pet her. She turns away and walks to the delicious grass. The lovely arrogance of this magnificent animal, that is part of the magic of living on a farm.

Florien Deelstra, the Netherlands



The art of boldness

It's the summer of 2017. I am 17 years old living in my beloved now, but most-hated back then, village, somewhere in the Greek coastline. This summer, I knew wouldn't be like the ones before. Sunbathing on the peaceful beach all day long, staying out late with friends while drinking beer and observing the bright moon, or just chilling at home reading a romantic novel, like the ones I am often too embarrassed to admit I obsess over. No! This summer would be different in a way I wished I could just escape from. Or at least, that's what I thought before everything happened...

But let me provide a little bit of context there! As a high school student who would soon start my final and therefore most crucial year of secondary education, I had to not only put in the work needed so as to get the grade results that would secure my place at a prestigious university within this 12-month period, but also to decide what was my passion that would determine the course of my entire professional future. And the latter, let me tell you, was not an easy decision! I oftentimes found myself in situations where my dreams and aspirations would strongly contradict the path I was expected to follow. This trodden path which was primarily associated with financial success and independence. Well for me, it was a bit more complicated than that. I so desperately wanted to travel, explore the world and its unique people. The different cultures, beliefs and languages. My eyes would be filled with enthusiasm every time I made that thought. And yet, here I was lying on the floor of my small, noisy room looking from my window, analysing every single alternative and detail.

I needed to escape from everything. I needed to find myself first. So that's what I did. I grabbed my phone boldly, opened a browser and started searching. Volunteer opportunities, youth projects, student exchanges. Literally anything that could allow a broke 17-year-old, like myself, to travel and 'live the dream'. It sounded quite tricky at first, I know! But then... YES! I came across these short-term Erasmus opportunities. I did some more research on social media and I immediately started writing my first application. Then my second, then my third...

Elderly people want to go to bed early, waking up at dawn, but all the others meet each other in their own houses spending the evening together, sharing homemade food, singing local songs, or meeting at a local pub or venue.

In Rome, despite its beauty, history and splendorous architecture, people do not know each other, is always rushing, is always using their cars, don't enjoy walks or staying with the family. Everything becomes almost mechanic and very much based on a fixed routine.

Of course, when speaking about opportunities and leisure there are countless options, however, when coming down to affectivity or relationships, it is almost non-existent.

If I would have to choose, I would live in a village, in my village.

Marzia Gigli, Italy



Moving to the city!

Easy, I thought. Leaving my village in the countryside and start moving to Leiden, areal student city. Expecting that new friends would come to me, everything would come to me in due time! For at least a year before I started studying at university I was already daydreaming. How much better everything would be once I would finally start studying in Leiden. These pink glasses I that I had put on were very much to my liking. In my village it is so easy, you send a message to a friend and in 10 minutes you are at their doorstep. You have probably already known your friends for years and the good mood when you are around each other is to be expected. You always see the same people, and even though you don't really talk with them, they are familiar faces.

Nothing exciting or really surprising usually happens. I hadn't taken my time to really taken into account how much of a difference it would be once I finally moved to the city. I did make friends in university, friends who all lived in different cities. And this was the same for about half of my whole class. It appeared it wouldn't all come to me on its own. This certainly doesn't have to be a problem, I had ten times as much possibilities to meet people with the same interests as me to have a fun night with. The thing is, it would have been with people I didn't know at all, whose faces I had never seen before. This, again, doesn't have to be a problem, as long as you can set yourself straight on what needs to be done and know what to do.

I by no means set myself straight or did what had to be done all the time. As a result I was lonely at times when no one that I knew was in the city or wanted to exercise with me. While I hadn't needed to feel lonely at other times, only if I had take more

initiative, like I ultimately did. So by all means, be excited that you are finally going

college, just don't forget to put off the pink glasses and leave them in the drawer.

Piotr Kooij, Poland

My experience living abroad

I was 19 when, even though I was already in a relationship, one of those that fills your heart, makes you feel butterflies in your stomach, one of those that overwhelms you and makes you dream, I met someone who caught my attention.

I don't know how it is possible, I don't know what exactly happened, I swear the love I felt and that I still feel is something that I can't explain. A love of the great ones, of those who can make immense turns but then they always return from where you left them, a love to which you know you belong and you know that it belongs to you.

We have grown together, he has been always present, in the most beautiful and the most worst moments of my life. Chaotic and a bit crazy but also wise and thoughtful, even after years together he always managed to surprise me and he never left me alone.

But one day in February, the universe made me meet his eyes. Those gray eyes kidnapped me. I used to look and lose myself in the blue soul of those who had always been beside me but this time not, for a moment my heart had no one else in it but him. Like the law of physics, opposites attracted.

Serious, straight to the point but also very kind, he overwhelmed my madness, my being always in a hurry, my tendency to neglect myself.

So after a few months I decided to leave my first love and to throw myself into this new experience, in what seemed to be the beginning of something big, something important, something for life.

And so on September 1st, 2018 I decided to leave my first love, Rome and I moved to Ommen, in the Netherlands.

And here I am, after a year telling you what it was, what it is and what I hope will be my life in a country that has now become home. A year ago, for the first time in my life I took a plane alone, two and a half hours of travel, I left Rome crying, with the knowledge that I would be far away, far from what was my reality, my safe place, my friends and my family, with some packets of pasta and my ever-present coffee in my suitcase. It was not easy, I strongly believe that it takes courage to leave every-

We always say that the only regret could be the sea (is far away from Poggio).

We youngsters have a lot to do, we organize our activities the whole day long therefore our friendship becomes very strong, it is one for all and all for one. I do have to admit that going to school (like high school) is a bit complicated. My friends need to take public transport; therefore, they need to wake up at dawn and during winter, with ice and snow, is not very inviting to go out.

Their parents work in Rome (the capital), because around here there are not many working opportunities, also because houses here in Poggio are much cheaper compared to a decent apartment in the city. This going up and down between village and city can be very stressful and requires sacrifices, for example most of the times only the father works, while the mother stays home taking care of the children and of the house.

In my village, the local dialect is spoken, even amongst us youngsters, it is just fun to speak like that and we all have a good laugh.

There is no crime around there, which is so good. One protects the other, defending each other like one big family against the "foreigners" (people who don't live in the village). Foreigners always arouse suspicion and curiosity.



Life in my little village

I have the luck to be able to see advantages and disadvantages of living in a village or in a city large as Rome because my parents have a house located in Poggio Cinolfo (approximately 480 inhabitants, at Abruzzo, Aquila) near one of the most beautiful mountain chains of Gran Sasso.

The first advantage is clean air and tranquility, the absence of traffic, the absence of stress and acoustic chaos. Breathing fresh air, smelling all the perfumes that nature in spring gives us or in winter that characteristic perfume of the fireplaces turned on; of chestnuts on the fire; of that odor of the fermenting grapes after the harvest during autumn. In summer, the village is in holidays and it becomes a large family, and with the rich harvesting, preserves are preserved for the long winter, like tomatoes, vegetables in oil or pickled, and much more delicacies.

It's beautiful to open the window and to greet the passers in pajamas, we know everyone, we help each other, we exchange harvested products and homemade desserts.

Of course, living in a village has its sacrifices because you must always cultivate the ground and feed animals such as pigs, hens, calves, rabbits and sheep, both in winter and in the summer, but it is done with pleasure and everyone in the family helps, even if a little bit. In the villages you mainly purchase small things like detergents, you eat what you have and what you produce.

The clean roads, green areas, invite you to make long walks, being immersed in the deepest thoughts.

From spring until the arrival of winter we organize many folkloristic and typical parties, all prepared by a group of volunteers who do it all with lots of passion, while the inhabitants of the village decorate streets and houses for the party. During Christmas it seems to be in of Saint Nichola's village. It is so beautiful during events (even like weddings, religious happenings or funerals), because the streets become crowded, we all reunite, it almost looks like Rome.

thing, to go to a place you don't know, where you know you won't speak your language, there won't be the people you're used to, that warmth and that Italian love where you grew up between mom and the Colosseum.

There is an Italian saying which reads: "whoever leaves the old road for the new one knows what he loses but does not know what he finds".

And I have to admit it: I found myself.

I spent the first two weeks crying, on a mattress that didn't have my shape, which wasn't mine. Afraid to be alone, and not being able to communicate and make others understand what kind of person I was. I spent the first few nights in my house, with guys from countries all over Europe, countries of which I didn't even know existed.

I spent a year in which for the first time in my life I cooked for myself, I washed my clothes, sometimes with the risk of make my loved hoodies of colours and sizes that didn't belong to me. For the first time in my life I took walks in the forests and instead of complaining about how tired I was, I only enjoy myself and the wonderful nature I found here. I went from a big city like Rome to a small town in the middle of nowhere, three supermarkets, a place to play billiards, and few restaurants, that's all. It will have been magic, the case or maybe simply the fact that here it is completely different from where I come from and that here you can connect with your soul and the person that you really are, that I would never go away from this place.

It's unbelievable how, from feeling like a foreigner now for me this is home, this is where I'm building a future and where I want to create my life and have my successes. I feel that in the future this country will give me a lot, that all the kindness, goodness of spirit and beauty that is here will support my growing personally and professionally.

And even if sometimes I will send a kiss in the wind to my first love, it will be the same wind that will make the mills of my new love turn.

Clarissa Peletoni - Italy

Awake

Wake up to a rooster crowing? It's impossible for me. I'm used to it so much that I don't even notice it. A brook behind the garden with a wild-duck pair coming back every spring, and the smell of fertilizer. They are all part of village life. We build a snowman with my brother every winter, on my birthday I always have a grill party in the garden. I just have to go out the door to enjoy the sunshine and some fresh air.

When I was younger I planned to write a novel about our adventures behind the garden. We always played next to the brook, or – inadvertently – we also played in the brook. Once we saved a chicken with my brother. It was behind our back door so we thought it escaped from our neighbour who has a dozen chickens. My brother grasped it and threw it into the neighbour's garden. It turned out a few minutes later that an old lady who lived a bit further let her chickens out so they could eat some fresh grass. We've never told about it anyone and our neighbour never complained about having too much chickens.

But slowly I grew up. It wasn't interesting anymore to play in the backyard. I wanted to go to the cinema and go shopping with friends or just having a chat in a cafe. I started to think about how much more comfortable it is to live in a town. Be at a party without the thought that I have to go home with the last bus at 9 pm. or wait for the first bus in the morning. I could save hours every day without traveling between my village and my school. The only store here closes at 1 pm on weekdays and it is closed all weekend. Did I forget to buy something? It's almost a daylong program to get it from the closest town.

ment I though, the world is really big and beautiful. After this trip I decided to travel a lot.

When you are on the trip you discover differences between big and small, loudness and silence and the most important thing is the experience for yourself and the others.

The road is the best teacher!

Suzana Stjepanovic, Croatia



Travel is the best teacher

Every little step you take is great opportunity to experience how the world is breathing. So, I decided to walk around the world. My first stop was the great city of Munich. This huge city is set in Bavaria, Germany. My connection to this city is my aunt, so she invited my family to visit her and her daughter. But, this trip was really much more than just a visit.

When I was little I heard about the most interesting festival in Bavaria- the Oktoberfest. I had a wish once in my life to visit this great festival. This festival is not only interesting for adults, also there is a lot of fun for kids. So, we all together started from the morning to discover the new city. When we were close to the centre, I felt surprised turning around like a little bird took from the birdcage. It was a little big shock for me. I liked the Munich city because the buildings were so huge and powerful. I felt like a little ant in front of this beautiful architecture. In the buildings there were also a lot of people. In one city so much different culture- just amazing! And the most greatest thing I discovered in the City of Munich was the English garden, the huge park in the middle of the city. I was so happy that you can also find the nature between buildings.

In the English garden you can walk, sit on the grass, swim in the river Isar, play and enjoy. At some places in the Garden I discovered also Chinese wooden tower and Monopteros, the greek temple. The view from the Monopteros is really great. I saw almost all the city and the rest of this beautiful Garden. And about the Munich weather- I also felt it on this day. During the entrance in the Garden it was really sunny. After 20 minutes it starts to rain. In a half hour the snowflakes started to dance.

And then after I took my jacket again, of course- it was so sunny like in summer. I think every person should one in the life visit the English garden in Munich. It is simple magical. At this mo-

And there is the big question: Can I live in a village all my life? Can I get a job here? Young people move to town. Old people die. And in the end there's no one.

And yet, I will stay here as long as possible. I'm still a girl who loves snowmen, chickens and never wakes up because of crow.

Fanni Balázs, Hungary



Kicked out of the comfort-zone

I was 7 years old; at that time I was used to scream my friend's name from the balcony, and we would have met to play soccer on the street. We played so much, all together in front of the house. I still live in a very small town in northern Italy and till a few years ago, that was my safe place, the town were I was born, grown, and were I have my own identity, where I am Federico.

When I was 18 I took part in my first Erasmus exchange in Spain. I still remember how anxious I was about the plane: I had no idea how take one. Just during this year I took 11 flights. What has changed then? Well, I simply got to know the world a bit more, but let's start from the beginning.

I was born in Andezeno, a little town on the hills of Turin (Italy), I studied here until high school, which I did in a town nearby. Then, when university time came, I had to move to the city, to Turin. In the meantime I started to travel thanks to the Erasmus+ projects, and it quite changed my perspective of life: airports, train stations, metropolis, undergrounds, different languages, different cultures, nightlife and much more. The world is alive, I learnt so many things, I met hundreds of people, but I suddenly became "one of the many".

In Andezeno, where I still live, I know everybody and everybody knows me, I always find someone to talk to when I walk the dog, I have a house and I have neighbours, I know all the streets, all the spots with the best view, I know where all my ex-classmates live. I am a person with an identity. I am Federico.

At the same time, the town where I live is too tight-fitting for me right now. Whenever we want to do something different we need to move, I can't meet new people and new cultures. It's starting to get "boring". What should I do then? Keep living here, moving to the city, moving abroad? I have no answer for that right now. The truth is that there are pros and cons for all of

Every time I learn something new about myself that probably I would never know if wouldn't take this opportunities. I always try to take this changes in my small reality and to tell everyone about the opportunities that they have.

Living in a small town may stop you but you must be able to leave and come back so your town can grow up with you.

Monica Pischetola, Italy



Being different

Living in a small town doesn't make you conscious at all of other realities. You only know what surrounds you: same people, same places and same activities. Nothing new never happens in small towns. You are stuck in the same boring routine but probably you don't even realize it until you find out other realities. Everyone knows each other and no one is ever doing their own business.

People in small towns aren't used to changes: even dyed hair and different clothes may take time to be usual in this kind of environment. Small towns are also a "safe place" for the same reasons that make them boring and I've always felt safe here until I became 12 years old when I realised that I was "different" than the other girls because I didn't like boys at all. In a first moment it was a shock: I didn't want to tell anybody and I was so scared about what other people would think and say. Since that moment the castle where I was living was falling into pieces and I had to get out of it.

At 13 years old I joined my first Erasmus+ family exchange in the Netherlands. It was a shock but I was finally living something different. I was living a completely new reality: different weather, culture, food and a completely different mindset. I had to live with another family and in another house. I had to go to a different school and I also had to learn how to be in time! I've learned a lot and also for the first time I was living without caring what other people would think about me. In just one week I became more confident about my behaviour.

For the first time I was proud of who I am. This first experience was life-changing at all.

Since that moment I've started travelling around Italy and Europe, meeting people and visiting places trying to bring with me every positive aspect of any person and any place.

these situations, there's not a perfect one, but probably a best one for the different stages of life.

Surely, what happened is that the small reality, the small town gave me firm values, but the experiences out of it enriched me so much, they let me know the world a bit more and they kicked me out of my comfort zone, out of my safe place.

Federico Rubin, Italy



Something for something

Both in cities and villages we are surrounded by people, humans are such social creations in most cases. But does it mean that in both cases we are a part of a community?

Me, as a countryside girl from a small village could not imagine to not belong to somewhere, being anonymous, being not well known by my neighbours, but since I moved to a town, I realised, not everybody thinks like the way I did.

In the village there was a huge sense. We knew, which house is whose. Where did we have to go when we wanted to eat the best apple in the whole village. We knew which is the best door to knock on if I want to play soccer. We knew, we can easily go in without ringing the bell, just to surprise others. We knew about all the relationships, gossips. News were spreading around faster than it does now, in the time of the internet. Living there could be compared to a reality show, and it would be reasonable because of the mentioned aspects. But also we were really solidary. It seemed normal that we help the old people as youngsters, we visited each other in case of an illness, we went to the funeral of every person who used to be a part of our community. We talked to everyone with curiosity. We were there for each other because we were from the same village- and it was fundamental.

It all seems fairy tale, but here comes the question. Why do people leave these areas then? The answer is as simple as it is: The lack of possibilities. The lack of earning more money, to live on a higher life-standard. The lack of being in an impressive environment. The lack of following our passions, to do the sport we want to, to study what we are interested in.

I have to apologise if my writing seems to paint an intimidating picture of the countryside. Because despite all these bad things I very much like living there. You get so many impulses which you can't get anywhere else. You literally have to walk a couple feet to the closest tree and take the tastiest fruit from it, walk a little more to see and to pet various animals and you don't have to struggle with asthma and many other diseases because the only thing polluting the air are a few vehicles and fertilizer once in a while. Besides it the real estates are a lot cheaper so you can buy a house there for the price of the city-apartment. And how can you have a grill-party in an apartment?

To sum it up, I can say that living on the countryside is not better or worse compared to living in the city. It's different and everybody has to decide which life they want to choose.

Marton Szilágyi, Hungary



Cliches versus reality in the countryside?

The first picture that comes to the mind of a city-person when they hear about living on the countryside is this: The time is around 4 a.m., it's Saturday. As the roosters start crowing the first rays of the sun softly touch the fertile fields, houses, tractors and put a goldish glowing on the face of the people. The people who have just woken up making their ways to feed their animals, milk the cows, collect the eggs and then go along to their fields to make sure the plantations are doing well. They spend most of their time there, busily working to provide fresh vegetables and meat for themselves and for those in the jungle of honking cars, smogs, and skyscrapers. For the faceless mass of suits squeezing even the last penny out of their job so that one day they can afford the shiny cars and the spacious houses they always wanted. And maybe one day they will be able to quit their jobs, and move away from the constant mindless hustling. To the countryside!

People from the city tend to associate villages with peace, freedom, pollution-free air and health but the truth is not that simple. In the city you are used to an excellent public transportation system, which you will barely find in smaller settlements. It is really irritating missing the bus and then having to wait an hour for the next one. At least there isn't a heavy traffic on the streets, you can use your car to get around if you have one.

Another drawback of the village is the poor education system and the lack of offices. Which means, if you want your kids to have quality education, or if you have some administrative task to do, prepare to commute to the nearest city.

And here I am. I am living in a diversity just as social and cultural and religious. I earn much more money I ever could in the village. I study at university, I go to pubs, exhibitions and so on. But I have no clue, who are my neighbours, where to turn for the greatest apple of the city, and who are the ones who are opened to help, and on which door do I have knock if I want to play soccer with someone. And after leaving I realised what was the one, why it was worth living in a village for me:

Belonging to the community.

Enikő Gosztom, Hungary



My grandfather weekend visit

‘The weather is going to turn bad this afternoon, could you help me with the hay later?’ I was just visiting my grandfather who has a small farm and a few cows. His farmland is scattered around our small town in Slovenia, a couple of fields and some meadows surrounded by forests.

‘Of course.’ I said, sweeping away the looming thought of tomorrow’s exam. It was exam month and the weekend offered me a chance to catch my breath and relax my mind in our quiet town from the busy atmosphere of Ljubljana, my university city where I study electrical engineering.

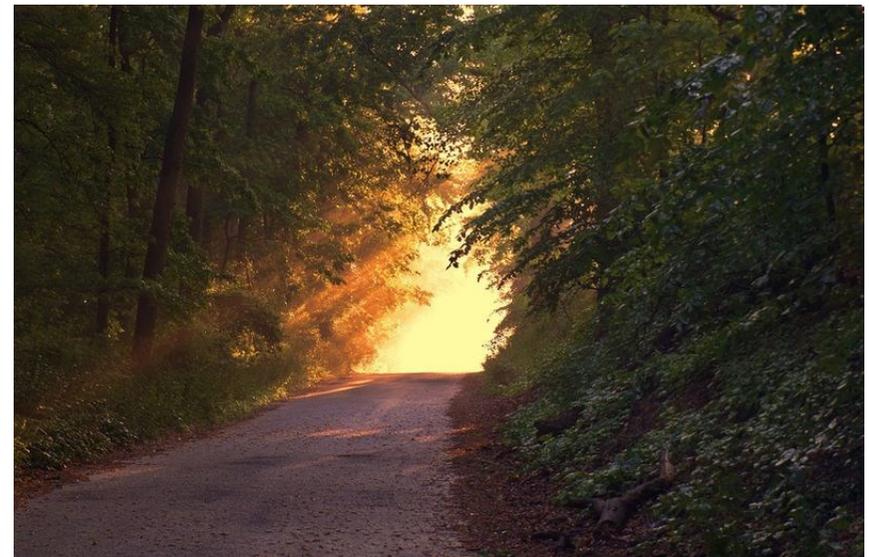
I quickly went home to have lunch and then jumped on my bike to ride to the meadow. There my grandfather was already working to put the hay in the haystack with his band of helpers - whoever of his friends had the time today when he called them. I was the youngest one by quite a margin, the other guys - including my grandfather - were all around 70 or 80 years old, which is not an unusual sight on small farms all around Slovenia. Bigger farms that work on large swathes of land, with plenty of livestock and modern farming equipment that can earn you a good living - even though a farmer’s life is not easy - usually stay in the family, but the smaller farms are struggling with a shortage of young people willing to run them. It’s just not profitable and the current lifestyle of youngsters is in stark contrast to that of a farmer. Waking up at five in the morning, cleaning cow feces, not being able to travel around because the livestock needs you every day and also the large amounts of physical work.

My grandfather often says that a farmer is even more industrious than God, because as it’s said in the Bible, God rested on the seventh day, but a farmer would work very hard if he knew that the eighth day would be rainy.

What I would like to tell to all of you who will read this article of mine is: "do not rush, do not demoralise yourself because life is also this and the difficulties allow you to grow in a better way".

Trust yourself and you will find the right path to happiness!

Gabriele Floris, Italy



Trust yourself and you will find the path to happiness

I have lived since I was a child in this village which is located on the sea, is called Santa Marinella. It is a very nice village that comes alive only in summer. It is more a village made for holidays than for living and for this reason I would like to tell you about my life experience.

The first years were carefree, I grew up without having any problems, certainly the city is well organized and nothing functional is missing but the most disadvantageous part has come out since I was 16 years old. It is in this period that you start to need a social life, to start going out and doing activities with your friends and it is from this moment that you start to realize that living in this small city would have penalized me with its disadvantages. In the summer, after all, you can find something to do because of the increase in activities that the city offers, but in winter it becomes a desert and after a while the days become monotonous and you start to get bored.

There are no activities for young people, there is nothing to do but only the same things like go to the bar for have the usual chat, the job opportunities are missing but also the possibilities to choose different Type of schools and to is difficult too find new friends because the people are always the same. All of this can make you feel depressed, lonely, bored and it seems to you that your life goes by without something that can make it better. In reality, however, it is up to us to find the way to change it and for this reason I believe that living with these difficulties allows you to grow stronger, allows you to make more intense friendships and allows you to give more attention to the small things that can be discounted for who already has it all.

I quickly climbed on the hayrack to take up the hardest part of today's work; stuffing the hayrack with hay. My grandfather was picking rows of hay with the tractor and dumping it in front of the hayrack, where two others were passing it up to me with the pitchforks. It was baking hot this day, but it was easy to work with the old people telling all kinds of jokes and stories which they probably learned when they were about my age. I couldn't help to think about what my town will look like when I am their age. Will be my grandchildren willing to help me at my home? Who will run my grandfathers' farm when he is gone? Where is all this knowledge that my grandfather and his friends have about the livestock, the seasons, weather forecasting and the farmwork going to go if nobody is prepared to listen to him? Our grandparents have so much to offer to us, but the truth is that young people have so much to do now. So many options, so many things to experience, so many opportunities in the cities and abroad, that a sedentary farmer's life is far from most youngsters' idea of the future.

I said goodbye to my grandfather, after waiting for him to milk the cows and jumped on the bike with a big bottle of warm fresh milk which I love so much. By the time I got home, half of it was already missing.

As Bob Dylan sings 'The times they are a-changin'' and they really are. What the future has for us is uncertain, but perhaps before the turn of the century, the lifestyle and vision of the youth will change again, as it has in the past. We mustn't worry too much, because Destiny has a funny way of sorting things out the way they should be, all we must do is follow our heart and do what fulfils us.

Gal Likar, Slovenia

Will my life be interesting enough to be told?

Back to 21st August 2019. I was on the moving stairs in Amsterdam Schiphol Airport.

On the left wall was: Travelling is the only thing you buy which makes you richer. I was surprised by that sentence. And this is why I remember that moment. But it's true. The memories created while travelling will always belong just to you. Nobody could never delete them. There is a question which makes me think every time: "will my life be interesting enough to be told?". And every time I promise myself it will be. And I chose Erasmus Plus as starting point.

I started this uncommon path because I couldn't believe that the world was just the view from my bedroom's window. I didn't trust all the humans didn't have any aspiration or vision in their lives. I wanted to move and meet people with my same values and desires. I wanted to create more out of this my live. Because I have just this one.

Probably the fact I grew up in a small village, nurtured even more my willing and passion for exploring. A lion can't be in a cage for all its life, at one point he wants to run free in the savanna. With Erasmus Plus I am having the possibility to travel and meet international people with my same thoughts, fears and unanswered questions about themselves. And with the deep desire to explore and discover more and more.

But it not all about travelling, are the people you meet there to make it unbelievable and priceless. Neither the most precise and clear words could describe fully these experiences. At the beginning you are nothing together, but then there is nothing without you .

Every time on the first day, everyone is looking to each others trying to figure out who are those faces there. Then someone starts

veller" in here. In Turin in would be perfectly normal and usual, so that's why it would be more arduous to become someone, to shine.

To conclude, I believe that neither the town, nor the city is the "best option" to be successful in life.

It is really up to you to catch the possibilities life can give you and make a good use of them,

regardless of where you come from. Moreover, you can't always decide where you will be living, it's life that brings you there, what you have to do is picking the best of it, and then going out of your comfort zone to explore the outside-world. In this way, you can be somehow successful.

Federico Rubin, Italy



Are people from the city more advantaged in life?

Something I really enjoy doing is reading biographies of successful people to find out how they did what they did, to find out the possibilities they have been given that brought them to success. An antithesis that often emerges is the life in big cities versus the life in small towns, both of them with pros and cons.

I have been living in a very small town for my whole life, therefore I might be biased, but at the same time, I now study in a relatively large city with about a million citizens and I travelled a lot, also abroad, then I kind of experienced both of them. Until I was a teenager in high school I never went to Turin alone or with my friends, I never went out there, I never really spent time in that city. Then, one day, my classmates organized a “trip” there with the bus and I still remember how fascinated I was by that. Lots of things to do, lots of things to visit, to experience, shops, museums, an amazing architecture, exhibitions, concerts and even more.

Now, just describing it like that, it seems I lived in the middle age and then I suddenly landed in the 21st century, but it's not entirely true. Life in a smaller town is just different. I once read an article that children living in huge American metropolis like NY believe that the shape of the Findus is the actual shape of the codfish. Thanks God I didn't grow up in NY then. There are advantages and disadvantages in both situations.

It is undoubtedly true that a city can offer you more possibilities, but it's up to you to choose whether to grab them or not, and which ones. Life in a city will surely give you a broader mind set, an open mind, but then it's you who have to decide how to use that, to make a good and fruitful use of it, otherwise it's pointless. We also have to consider that emerging in a small town it's much easier. I live in a town with 2000 people and since I travelled a bit thanks to Erasmus, I am known as “the tra-

to talk. Usually the loudest of the Italians. And hours later you are talking and laughing until crying with people who usually live thousands of kilometres far from you.

You start to share with them happy moments. But are the tough ones that make the group and the bonds stronger and stronger. In an indelible way.

And on the last day you all are a huge family. And it always emotionally harmful to say bye to them. You wish it will not be the last time you see those faces in your life. But I can say it's hard and challenging keeping the connections. After all my Erasmus I learnt it's not about the distance but the silent. It requires a lot of effort from both sides but it's possible. And when this happens you are amazed by what young people can create.

You are amazed by the person who are becoming and by your new way of thinking. You recognise no more yourself. Because these experiences change and make you grow. It's inevitable.

I am trying my best to keep being part of my Erasmus people's lives because they are special. They chose to live your same way. This makes them different and they always will be so.

I could lose everything, but I will never stop travelling and meeting people. They are the only things that defines me as a person.

Ester Caffa, Italy



Life in a village

I've been living in the city for several years, but I couldn't live here forever. It is known that cities possess distinct advantages, there are many remarkable things to do, every possible kind of service someone might need and the only sure thing is you'll never get bored. And — most importantly — it gives you anonymity, you do whatever you want without worrying about what others will say.

But in the city people do not maintain meaningful ties between them. Life in the village is serene. People are modest, sincere. Growing up in a village means that you learn to call things by their name, you call a spade a spade, even to the point of being blunt or rude.

My childhood years were carefree without the routine, and the stress people from the fast-paced cities have to deal with. All the kids, young and old, were gathering in the central square of the village and playing in vacant and big places, ball, basketball and hide and seek, or even take our bicycles and visit youngsters in neighbouring villages until evening. We weren't scared like the kids from the city. And our parents left us free. They knew that if something bad happened, someone would come to help, because everyone knew everyone and they all cared for each other. The criminality was low because of the people's mentality.

Another big problem in the cities is the so-called "Dead hours", those times when you have to wait without any other alternative, such as taking the bus to go to work/university or get stuck in a traffic jam forever. It takes me almost two hours to go from my house to the university and come back. That's not the case in the countryside, where most things are close to each other and due to the low population you almost never get stuck in traffic jams.

Of course in small villages, there are stereotypes and prejudices, especially in older people. Some simple things can really blow

working. But he would not listen. One time my mom was away and so my grandpa wanted to work. I told him to please be careful. He looked at me and there was a moment of silence. He listened.

After my grandfather died, everything on the farm reminded us of him. It was painful, it hurt, but it brought so many beautiful memories. And that is one of the wonderful things of living on a farm. Everything that he had done, everything that he had fixed, it all carries memories of him. The house is one big memory of him. Once my parents can't live there, my sister wants to take over the farm. After that, I just hope it will stay in the family as long as I live. It's a place where I will take my kids and tell them about the most strong and amazing man I have ever known.

Florien Deelstra, Nederland



Tribute

When I was 8 years old, me, my sisters and my parents, moved to a farm in the middle of nowhere. Wessingtange, near the German border. This farm was quite old and had a lot of land, which we needed for our horses and dogs, and so a lot had to be done. My grandparents would stay with us every summer, in a caravan behind the house. Every summer I would just sit with my grandfather. He was a silent man, but he loved teasing us. When I sat with him, he would just look at me, put a little smile on his face, or pull on my ponytail, and I felt like I could take on the world.

My grandpa used to be a carpenter, so every summer he wanted to work on the farm. After a few years of living on the farm, though, we found out that he had cancer. We had no idea how long he had left. Yet, still every summer, when we got back from vacation, he would have fixed something on the farm. He would paint the doors, make a path of stones into the yards, or he would fix the fences for the horses. He would get tired after the day, lay on the couch, with our Flatcoated Retriever in his arms, and he would say nothing. He never admitted he was tired, but we could see it. He didn't want to send us away. I think this was his way of enjoying the company of his family. And that dog, that dog was his biggest love.

My grandfather was a man who did not easily give compliments or say his pride. Yet, as the years passed he would get more and more emotional. He would tell me how proud he was of everyone. One time he got in the hospital, we all thought he was going to die, but he kept holding my hand and I prayed for him to make it, even though I am not that religious, he was. And guess what? He made it.

After that he still wanted to fix the farm. My mother always worries, she would tell him to stop

out of proportion from time to time. And accepting diversity remains a delicate affair. But I reasonably believe that our modern generation is more informed, more aware, and more open-minded than our parents' generation.

The rural lifestyle can be wonderfully refreshing. If you love nature, quiet activities such as reading, or very full-time hobbies that would be difficult to pursue in a more distracting atmosphere, the rural lifestyle might be just the ticket for you!

Yiannis Mouratidis, Greece



After exchanges

I am from a beautiful balkan country Bulgaria. I have always been energetic, ready for adventures and open. And if you find the right people and the right place you can use these skills you would be the happiest person in the world like I am when i went for the first time on exchange in Ommen. And then again and again. Exchange. One word and thousands of meanings.

In this kind of exchanges you meet so many different people from different countries, different cultures, with different mind-set and knowledge. They are all strangers to you, but there is one common thing - the passion of traveling and exploring the unknown.

In my small city in the middle of Bulgaria called Stara Zagora not all of the people are open to everyone. They prefer to stay in their comfort zone with their close friends and family and to live their life as usual. Of course not everyone likes the changes. That is why i decided to try and feel the experience of the exchange. To feel the difference between people who are not speaking the same native language and i find out that it does not matter the language, but the way you are expressing yourself and the opinion you have. When you are living together you have to work with each other, not against. That is how the team work is going to be successful and with good influence. However you have to get out of your comfort zone and if it is hard for you and you have never did that, Olde Vechte is the right place to learn.

Speaking in front of a big audience is hard, you are feeling weak, without confidence and scared of other people's reaction. But isn't that the point of everything in life? You have tonface the fear and be stronger than it!

And from that on, I was on a roll and no one could stop me. I applied to all the exchanges I could an all were something new, something totally different but they all had one thing in common. They changed my life. They changed me. I got experinces I never even dreamt of having and made friendships for life and learnt things I'll never forget.

My advice to everyone is, that if there is something, anything that you want to do, or change just go for it. If you really feel it in your guts, that you need to do that then, just do it. And make sure you're having fun while doing it.

Bianka Kuti, Hungary



The urge for change

When I was little I thought my neighborhood was my whole world. After that my town, and then Hungary. Soon I started to realize there were other countries, nationalities and languages and when that happened I knew instantly I wanted to experience it all.

I learned to read at a very young age and I was always bored in school until I started learning English in first grade. I loved it. It was something new, a change from my every day routine. Geography was my other favorite subject, because I could learn about other countries.

I remember when I first went abroad, to Croatia I think, I didn't even want to come home, it was so exciting. Whenever my parents would ask me where I wanted to go for the summer I always told them: I don't really care as long as we leave Hungary.

I'm really grateful to my parents for taking me to such nice countries as Spain or Italy or just paying for school trips to England or France. Both of my parents use other languages on a daily basis at work, so they have always been supportive of my constant need to travel and learn.

That's how I got into participating in youth exchanges. One day my mum sent me an infopack to a youth exchange in the Netherlands called Back 2 Basics because she thought it would be interesting for me and that changed my life. I didn't know that it would have such an impact, but I applied because I thought it was a great opportunity and I've never been to the Netherlands anyway. I was really excited when I got accepted, and I didn't even know what was coming for me. It was so much more than I expected and one of the best experiences of my life.

When we are living in our countries we are used to contact with people who are completely different even when the language is the same. The exchanges taught me that you never have to cover your real self because of someone else. You have to do what makes you happy. Be with people who are making you feel comfortable with and help you to grow.

And you know what? After the time you spent living with these people, doing everything together you are getting attached to them and you all became one big family. You don't feel them anymore as strangers from different countries, speaking another language. The only thing you are feeling... is comfort and love.

In the end of the exchange you have good friends and open doors all over Europe, beautiful memories and new skills. These people are going to stay in your heart forever. You can't bring the memories back, but you can create new ones!

When I came back home from my first exchange after my first thought "OMG I have to go back there" I started bringing back all the memories and realize how for sixteen days my mind has changed a lot. I started thinking more about my actions and reactions. I was last year in High School and I had to make a lot of important decisions for my future and deal with the problems.

The exchange is an escape from reality. Living the dream, isn't that perfect? Yes, it is, but everything in life has its end and you have to go back to your reality in your country, use all the new things you have learned from this dream and make it real.

Meri Valcheva, Bulgaria

Going anywhere, anytime

Do you want to follow the people, or do you want to go at your own speed? If you choose for option A, you see yourself living in a city, rather than living in the countryside. Every time I walk in the city, I see people doing one thing: focussing to be as fast as possible at their destination. Time is money, a thought that got stuck in the heads of city dwellers. If there is a little bit time left in their agendas, it needs to be filled as fast as possible. Busy, usy, busy.

Going anywhere, anytime. From A to B. It seems like there is no end or escape of the daily routine. The pressure of performance is always looking behind the corners of the city streets.

I live on the countryside myself. There is no one looking behind my shoulders, saying what I have to do, or when to do it. 'Act normal, then you are already crazy enough', a common credo. Act normal, like the way you are. Not to please your boss or to make career. Changes will not be created, they will come with the wind. Everything comes with the wind. Live today, not tomorrow. Do you want to run your life or your life running you by?

Lars Neef, the Netherlands

Everyone has a place where he feels to belong to. Simply that one wasn't mine. Since I was really young, I craved to explore and cross as many other people's paths as possible. It was a deep willing inside me.

Some people are focused on Gucci website other on Skyscanner. I belong to the second one. I want to create an amazing picture of my life as a great painter. I want to have endless fascinating stories to tell my grandchildren one day, every time I experience an Erasmus project this goal is accomplished fully.

Every project gifted me with amazing people who inspired me and widened my perspectives and thoughts. They contributed to my growth as no one else. I have learn more abroad than at home and school.

By exploring I realized how small and insignificant we actually are in front of the magnificence of this world.

Travelling makes you more humble and appreciate more and more even the smallest things. As the umbrella when you are under the rain.

Through leaving you experience the joy to go into the unknown but also the happiness to come back at home. Whatever home is to you. For me home is that comfortable and warm place where I don't need to wear flip-flops while showering.

Even if after the first travelling, you will never be back home completely, because a part of you will always still be in that special place with those amazing people. This is the enriching price of travelling.

Because travelling is the only thing you buy which makes you richer.

Ester Caffa, Italy

Change

If I had to define my life with one word, it would be 'Change'.

Every single aspect of it has changed from the beginning. And it keeps on going: the place I call home, the number of people in my life, my memories and myself.

I have learnt that change is inevitable and priceless. Without it, there wouldn't be evolution and we would keep on being the ones we are now. But we are pushed to face new situations, live through them and learn. We have to do it even if we are alone or if our legs are shaking. Because everything that happens comes to teach us something, to make us wiser and give us more stories to tell. Every single challenge makes us richer on the inside.

As for me, I spent most of my childhood in a small village in the middle of some cereal fields. Back then, that was my whole world.

It was a really small reality to live in. Sometimes even too small and crushing. Even the most amazing beauty can become monotonous. Then Erasmus opened my horizons and prospectives as never before.

As I am writing, I am in Milan. I have been living here for less than two weeks. It's completely different parallel reality, here everything is controlled by time. Everyone is running from a place to another. This city is a peaceful chaos. Always awake and moving.

But thinking back to my childhood years, I realize how they shaped me: they taught me to enjoy every single new experience to the fullest, travelling and human being I met and lived.

It was peaceful and relaxing living immersed in nature but I had the feeling of missing out something. This is why I feel gratefulness and freedom every time I take off. Because I know it's the beginning of a new chapter I write. Every travel allow me to live and not just survive.

At the beginning of any trip, I am extremely content because I know I could still be there in the middle of nothing. I am not blaming that reality. At all. But I wasn't born for it.

Relaxing behind the wheel

At this moment I am doing an internship of ten months in Cape Town. A city with his iconic Table Mountain, de history of the apartheid, Robben Island, Nelson Mandela and many more. One thing can be added at the list as well: the traffic. The behaviour on the road can be compared with the one in Italy. At the very last moment, they insert or exit their car on the highway, the flashing light suddenly doesn't work and try to fit in every small spot that is possible. Cape Town has a beautiful nature and surroundings, but you simply don't have the time to enjoy this while driving a car.

Back in the Netherlands. On the countryside, where I live. Slowly the traffic is passing by, behind each other and with a normal speed. On the countryside, you have the time to enjoy the nature and surroundings. The green landscape and his endless fields makes you feel relaxed behind the wheel. Being exhausted every day when you come home from work, or coming home relaxed?

Lars Neef, the Netherlands



Leaving your hometown

Moving from your hometown is always a difficult choice. Leaving the place where you grew up, met your friends and lived for your entire lifetime requires a lot of willpower. Still, so many people face this problem in their life.

I'm from a small town in north-western Hungary. As a senior in high school, this question is more relevant for me than it ever was. In less than a year, I'll be a university student, most likely in the capital, Budapest. I always imagined myself as a townsman, even though I've been living in the rural areas of Hungary for almost 18 years.

My affection for Budapest started very early. This is partly because of my grandma who lives in the centre of the city and thanks to her, I fell in love with Budapest as a kid. To this day, I have vivid and fond memories from the times when we spent our whole day exploring the monuments, bridges, restaurants, playgrounds and other places of the capital. I've visited many beautiful and huge cities all across Europe and America but none of them ever came close. My dream was to move there one day. Soon it will be a reality.

Despite all of this, you'll soon realise that leaving so many things behind is not that easy. Things that meant so much for you. Things that you couldn't imagine living without. All your friends going to different cities, universities, the struggle to keep in touch with them and the fear that you might lose them. Saying goodbye to the place where you used to play football, the small bridge where you used to jump down into the river and the hill that was perfect for sledging in the winter. No other city could replace these things. This is home.

is called "Panigiria" which are traditional feast days that celebrate the Saint's name days and other religious holidays. People of all ages get together and celebrate like there is no tomorrow. There is live traditional music, plenty of Ikarian wine and food and of course dancing. Unlike in clubs where there is usually a dress code and if you are not meeting the standards you can't go in, in the Panigiria you can wear anything your soul desires as long as you bring a good mood and a lot of appetite for dancing.

When I say a lot, I mean you will definitely see the sunrise. It is considered very normal for a festival to end at 10 in the morning. By the last week of my stay in Ikaria I had fully immersed in the Ikarian living and I was so excited and hopeful about changing my habits once I was back in Athens. So much, that in my head it became the new normal and I believed that once I returned, I would be able to live even a little bit like the Ikarians. However, when I was back to reality it hit me pretty hard that it doesn't work like that with city life...

Eirini Bakoula, Greece



The island where people forget to die

For most Greeks, myself included, summer plays an important role in our lives. Every summer, there is always a new destination to be discovered and cherished. This past summer that destination for me was an island in the northeastern Aegean Sea called Ikaria. My best friend has roots from this island so it was part of the reason we visited it. This place is actually known as “the island where people forget to die”. Another strange characteristic of the island is that no one uses watches, because they simply don’t care about time. As a girl born and raised in a city it was very difficult for me to picture something like that in real life and it was until I stepped my foot on the island that it truly hit me.

I felt the energy of the island and its people right away. Everyone is so happy and enjoying life carefree, with minimum stress. Since I grew up in Athens where everyone runs like crazy with a watch in their hand, and stress about all the things they have to do in one day, it took me a while to get used to the daily rhythms of Ikaria. Another big contradiction from my city life, was the fact that there was almost no public transportation and that most roads were usually steep and next to cliffs making them very dangerous. We actually barely made it to the only one bus that took us from the boat to my friend’s village on the mountain. All my life I had been in and out of subways and buses, and in Ikaria my only two options were either walking or hitchhiking. Turns out that hitchhiking is actually one of the most common forms of transportation in Ikaria for tourists and especially younger people, like college students.

Hitchhiking our way around the island of Ikaria was definitely one of the highlights of that trip. We met so many interesting people through that and became friends with some of them. This whole situation actually felt familiar to me after having taken place in the Utopia project last year. Another very important observation worth mentioning is the social life and “nightlife” of the island. For most young people in Athens nightlife means clubs. There are no such places in Ikaria. Instead they have what

That is why no matter how far I’ll go, no matter how much time has passed, I’ll never forget my small town. I’ll come back and relive all those memories I couldn’t forget.

Máté Jeszenszky, Hungary



Exchanged

Small towns. Everyone knows everyone and they know everything about each other. Every day you go out with the same people on the same places and you do the same things because nothing new really happens there. There are no opportunities, no entertainment, no new people to meet and suddenly you are stuck with the same old boring routine. Then from a friend of a friend (because that is how you find out about everything in the small town) you hear about exchanges. And you think to yourself that finally something interesting is happening, you believe this is just like a trip outside your country. You know that this is an opportunity which rarely happens so you decide to go for it even without fully realising what you are getting yourself into.

Then you leave. You are excited, you wonder what to pack for this “weird” country where the weather is completely different each day.

You arrive there and you are in shock. Everything is totally different from what you imagined. You are in a house with sixty people from all around Europe. You don't speak the same language, you don't share the same values, you don't have the same habits. Suddenly you have to live with them, you have to cook with them, you have to spend your whole days with them. At the beginning it annoys you sometimes, it scares you but at the end they become like your family- you may not always get along but you love each other so much. But exchanges do not only reflect on how you communicate and act with other people. They also change you personally. You face your fear to speak in front of a crowd, to make a fool out of yourself, to approach strangers, to feel free to make mistakes and learn from them.

Then, for those two weeks as cliché as it may sound your life completely changes. You not only get attached to people from all around the world and you realise that everywhere in Europe you will always have a place to stay. You also change your mindset,

your thinking about the future and you start finding opportunities where you thought before that they were not any.

Out of nowhere, this amazing dream called an exchange is over. You know that if you can you will always come back there, to this place which you now call home. The harsh reality of the small towns hits you and then you realise that hoping for things to change by themselves is never gonna happen. The solution comes to your mind, that YOU are the one who is going to make a difference. YOU are the one who is going to change things. YOU are the one who is going to find opportunities not only for yourself but also help other people in need. Because that what exchanges do, they teach you how not only how to think about yourself but also about others.

Thank you exchanges for changing my life.

Dorina Dimitrova, Bulgaria

