



IFMSA EXCHANGE TO PORTUGAL

Over my 2018 summer, I went to Portugal for a placement in ophthalmology for 4 weeks. I did this as I wanted to experience what medicine was like in a country outside of the UK, learn about the health systems and the difficulties that they faced with their population. I also saw it as an opportunity to learn about this speciality as so little time is devoted to it in the medical school. In addition, as there would be many medical students from other medical schools around the world, it would also be great to learn about their educational structure and about the healthcare systems that they have in their countries



Though I was excited, I also had my worries. It was the first time of travelling 'alone', especially for such a prolonged period. I was worried about how much would lose out on by not knowing the Portuguese. However, my biggest worry was not getting along with the other students on exchange, which would render my 4-week placement quite dull and lonely. However, I am very happy to say that within days my hesitations had dissipated, and I had the best summer of my life. I took away many things from the trip.



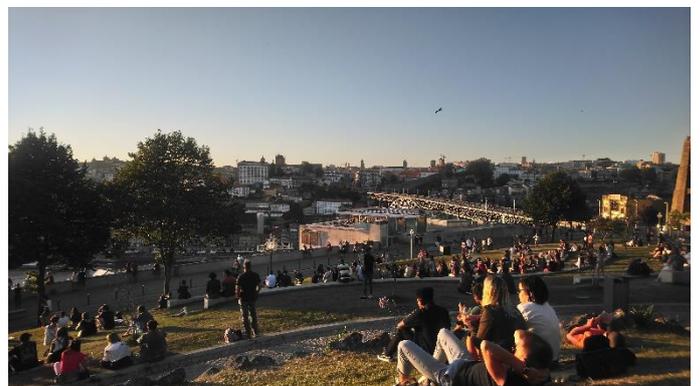
From a medical perspective Portugal has similarities and differences to the UK. With the very rural and elderly population, this presented the first barrier to receiving reasonable treatment. Like what is progressively being done in the UK, health services are centralised. People had to travel very far to have their appointment. I could even say that healthcare is even more centralised than that in the UK, instead of utilising nurses and opticians to do screening, vision acuity checks and routine check-ups, the doctors did it. One big problem that is not often found in the UK is illiteracy. Many of the older patients were illiterate and had little medical knowledge, which even meant they couldn't read their prescription. It was always asked that they bring family members to help.

This trip also enlightened me to how much I enjoyed ophthalmology. Prior to travelling, when I told others I was going to do ophthalmology they often showed expressions of confusion and disgust. 'But its such a small area'.... 'it's only the eyes' are the kind of comments I was given. This made me apprehensive about the placement, but I was surprised to find how much I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the intricacy of ophthalmology as the eye is so small, so every procedure is so precise. Also, though it is a specialty about the eyes, many systemic diseases can affect the eye. The diverse range of causes of eye disease encourages lateral thinking, which is something that appealed to me in the speciality.

Through this trip, I also realised how amazing Portugal is. I really valued being able to travel around the country and visit different towns and cities, learning about the richness and history of Portuguese culture. I visited various castles, historical and religious monuments. Below are some images of the places I got to visit.



Cable car in Guimarões going to the top of Penha mountain



The city of Porto at sunset

Praia Fluvial, Braga. This is a river side beach we went to during the public holiday





Castle of Guimarães, Guimarães



Sintra Palace, Lisbon

I was also able to try some weird and wonderful food, but what I loved most was the deserts, especially Pateis de Nata.



Eating a strawberry layer cake (front) and bola de berlim (back) in Braga with another exchange student from sweden

Though I went there primarily to learn about medicine, I learnt so much about the country of Portugal too.



Port wine tasting in the Offley warehouses in Porto

Francesinha in Taberna Belga, Braga.



Finally, I truly loved the group of people I met on exchange. This included people from Lebanon, Jordan, Kurdistan, Morocco, Sweden, Finland, Mexico, Poland, Spain and South Korea just to name a few. I was great to compare our lives as medical students and we all pretty much concluded that we all have the same struggles and liked to party as hard as we worked. I was also great to learn about their cultures, dances, the music they liked and was given the opportunity to try the food from their countries. These are the people that I spent most of my time with and they made my exchange into an amazing, unforgettable experience.



To conclude, I left Portugal not only learning about ophthalmology, but about the country of Portugal and about the cultures of the people I was able to enjoy the exchange with. It was such an amazing opportunity to share knowledge and compare our different lives across the globe, but it was also a fantastic opportunity to meet new people in which I believe we all formed deep bonds.