

A Norwegian Adventure, with Erasmus in Bergen -

I have never considered myself a 'home-bird' but sitting in Dublin airport on my way to Oslo, Norway I realised that I have decided to do something new. Having grown up in a town 30 mins from Belfast and deciding to study for a further 6 years in Queen's Medical school in Belfast, I have never spent a significant time outside of my small country. Little did I know while boarding my SAS flight, delayed of course, that I was embarking on one of the most exciting experiences of my medical career to date.

I was travelling as part of the Erasmus programme to Bergen, Norway. I undertook my Paediatric, Obstetrics and Gynaecology placements in the university hospital in Bergen alongside a colleague from Belfast and many other Norwegian and Erasmus students. I spent 3 months in the city and enjoyed many aspects of Bergen life.



My motivation to complete a placement outside of Northern Ireland was, in part, to experience a different healthcare system. There were naturally practical differences – the white scrubs perfectly dispensed every morning, calling your professors by their first name (a cardinal sin in UK hospitals) and cycling through the underground tunnels to travel between different departments in the Haukeland hospital. However, I do think the differences extended beyond the day to day working of the hospital. I grew to appreciate the teamwork in the obstetric and paediatric departments where there genuinely is no hierarchy. I saw the advantages of feeling confident to ask questions to a more experienced doctor and in practice how this leads to effective communication. This was a great learning experience which I will carry into my future medical practice. Another difference was the emphasis of healthy lifestyle in Norwegian medicine. I found many patients were very active, enjoying skiing, swimming, and hiking. I saw first-hand the health benefits of spending time outdoors on the beautiful Bergen mountains.

I enjoyed learning about the different topics and conditions by talking to patients – whose language skills never ceased to amaze me. I particularly enjoyed the paediatric placement, and this is something I am now considering as a possible future career choice.



While in Bergen I also got to sample the Norwegian outdoor lifestyle. Whilst on a cabin trip organised by the university, I tried skiing for the first time! I was very nervous as I felt I would be the only 'first timer' – however those fears were quickly allayed as I hit the slopes. There were many other Erasmus students (and even some Norwegians) who had never skied before, and we were all hopeless together. This was a wonderful experience and I hope to have the chance to go skiing again.

I have always been interested in hiking, which was also part of the appeal of spending 3 months in Bergen, the home of the seven mountains. In fact, on our first morning in Bergen we attended a group hike organised by Sammen, the university's student union, to Ulriken, the highest mountain surrounding Bergen. Hiking became

part of life in Bergen and at least once a week a group of students would pick one of the 7 mountains that surrounds the city to tackle. I particularly enjoyed the fact that all the mountains were so close to the city – Ulriken being practically on my doorstep. This is in contrast to home where I have to drive over an hour to go hiking and this is an aspect I missed on returning home.

The more time I spent hiking I found I was able to complete mountains quicker and more comfortably. As a result, I nervously signed up for the Bergen 7 mountain challenge. It happened to fall on my last day in Bergen and I felt this was the best way to round off a memorable trip. And what an experience it was! Over 14 hours, I completed the 7 mountains with Sarah, my colleague from Belfast (we stopped at the Ulriken café for over an hour I must say). Some friends we had made over the course of our stay were there to welcome us over the finish line. I feel so fortunate to complete this challenge and I still proudly wear my 7 mountains T shirt when I go hiking in Northern Ireland.



Fortunately, I was in Norway over the 17th of May and had the pleasure of experiencing their National day. I attended a breakfast with friends from church and was amazed by the beautiful national costumes. We then went to the Bergen parade and watched many different organisations and bands walk through the city. I particularly enjoyed when Ukrainian refugees who had recently arrived walk through, waving flags with the Ukrainian flag on one side and the Norwegian on the other. The day also included a picnic, concert, and fireworks. Overall, it was one of my favourite days and I enjoyed celebrating with my new Norwegian friends and Erasmus students alike.

On completing my Erasmus experience, the programme requires participants to fill out a closing survey. One of the questions stuck out to me 'has the Erasmus experience made you feel more European?'. As I reflect on this question, I find myself feeling very different to how I felt prior to this experience. Spending time with Norwegian students and Erasmus students alike, made me realise we are all more similar than we are different. I think growing up on the small island can lead to feeling isolated and removed from the rest of Europe. However, I realise now that Norway is only a short flight away – catch me on Duolingo, I would love to move back!

