



Milano: A Gentle Giant that needs to be discovered.

Before departure

I applied for Politecnico di Milano (Polimi) because I have always wanted to live in Italy for a while. The Italian culture, history, and way of life has always interested me and I wanted to take this Erasmus opportunity to fulfil my dream. I specifically chose Polimi because it is the best engineering school in Italy, and Milan is the second biggest city which also appealed to me. My other option was Torino which would have been a good alternative, but Milan is a more dynamic and “booming” city so it was good to experience that. In terms of preparation it was quite simple, the main concern with it is planning out your courses, which takes a lot of time since they tend to have conflicting schedules and different campuses.

Upon arrival

I arrived approximately 3 weeks before the start of the introduction week, which started in the middle of September. The reason I came earlier was because I did not find accommodation remotely and thus decided to go there earlier. This is something that I would have liked to avoid, because it is a stressful situation to go on exchange with no housing pre-planned. However, it did allow me to look at accommodation in person so there was no way to get scammed. Regardless I would advise to start looking soon, or hire agencies such as Spot-a-home and Dovevivo.

The introduction week is well organized and the social activities are fun, so definitely make sure you attend it. Arriving a little before that might be good to get settled and already explore Milano a little!

Financials

KTH, in combination with the Erasmus programme, supplied us with an Erasmus grant, totalling slightly less than 400 euros per month. This was a welcome boost for the student budget and is appreciated. In terms of cost, I would say Milan is not much cheaper than any other European city. The most expensive part of it is the rent, which I would say is comparable with the Stockholm private housing market. Generally, people payed between 580 – 700 euro’s a month for a single room. Between 300-400 for a shared room, which I discovered is something that happens a lot in Milan. After that I found the grocery shops to be almost as expensive as Stockholm, with the distinction that the cheaper supermarkets (Lidl, Eurospin) are really much less expensive than Sweden. However, these supermarkets tend to be outside of the centre, but due to their good value it could be worth making a weekly trip. Eating out was very cheap compared to Sweden, as one would expect. The same holds for bars and nightlife, especially good deals were available using the ESN Card that you can apply for (Erasmus Student Network). Therefore, if you enjoy eating out, it is not much more expensive than cooking and is something I did relatively often.

Accommodation

The university is no help in looking for housing, but the ESN office is. The ESN office (student run) have a database of possible accommodations and will help you speaking Italian to the landlords that offer them. If you are unable to find anything from Sweden, your first stop should be their office. Your second stop should be walking around the Leonardo campus hallways, since there are quite some housing opportunities posted on information boards, but this only holds if you are arriving well before the start of the semester.

Getting the help of an agency might be good, since there are quite some scammers out there on Facebook and other sites. These agencies should be checked for their legitimacy though, but some are active in the

whole of Europe and can be trusted. If you have the budget for it, it is not a bad idea. Personally, I did manage to find something through Facebook, but be careful and make sure you agree to something only when you have seen it in person. There are several websites for accommodation but these are mainly intended for Italians looking for rooms, so it will be difficult if you do not speak Italian.

University and studies

The university is very big, having approximately 40,000 students, but many of these are also residing in campuses in different cities (there are 7 campuses, which are not all in Milan). The university is known among Italians to be one, if not the best university in Italy. I definitely think it is a good university, with good professors and motivated people in general. However, the organisation of the exams and course load is not the best in every course.

I think the key difference with KTH is that there is little uniformity between courses. In KTH, the credits are roughly equivalent to the amount of work, in Polimi this is not the case. Some courses are 5 credits and are very difficult, whereas others are 8 or 10 credits and are easy / do not require a lot of work. Therefore, it is important to try and get in touch with some students from the program who know the ins and outs of the courses, otherwise you might end up with a) no challenging courses, or b) very challenging courses.

Another big difference is that Polimi has a massive amount of different programs and courses, meaning that you might be overwhelmed with choosing courses, as I was. Therefore, I would recommend you to choose from only your program, or at the very least check the prerequisites and location of some of the courses. Otherwise you might find yourself underqualified for this course and travelling from campus to campus for 8 hours a week. Moreover, when you initially make your course plan, please take into account that you have to take 12 credits within your equivalent program at Polimi. Finally, do not underestimate the amount of math knowledge Polimi expects you have and choose your courses according to your level / expectations.

Courses

I chose five courses in total at Polimi. Three of these courses were within my program (Environmental Engineering) namely Ecosystem Conservation, Global Climate Change and Sustainable Development, and Water and Food Security. Two of them were electives, namely De-manufacturing and Industrial Eco-Efficiency. In my case two of the courses were quite difficult, and the rest was highly doable. Unfortunately I underestimated the influence of having courses in two different campuses, meaning I had to sometimes travel 4 times between them on a single day. Therefore, I urge you to make a careful selection.

City and country

The Italian culture is interesting and beautiful in my opinion. The way the Italians communicate with each other and the way they passionately discuss food and drink are both great and strange to witness. The culture is different from more northern European ones in the sense that it is quite slow moving (sense of time is not the same), being a little late for certain things is not a big deal. Similarly, if something is not working like it is supposed to, i.e. public transport, people simply shrug and look for a different solution. Finally, a large difference is that talking to strangers is very open and friendly, as one would expect of more southern European cultures. Italians are therefore easy to talk to and connect with (if they speak some English), which is very nice for exchange students. I definitely recommend trying to befriend some Italians, because they are usually quite open to that.

The main culture shock for me was that you should not be surprised if Italians invade your personal space a little, since their perception of that is very different. Similarly, I would advise you to watch your belongings carefully, since there are many stories of exchange students getting pickpocketed. However, besides these smaller things it is an easy country to live in and socialize in. Try Duo Lingo before departure to get the basics of Italian, such that you will at least be able to say some basic things. In order

to make your stay better, I would also recommend you to follow the Italian classes at Polimi (100 euro for four months of classes). If you can, try and go to a class that is higher than your actual level, this will speed up the process significantly.

Other than that, enjoy the Italian lifestyle, settle into their rhythm, and discover a new range of Italian ingredients and dishes to cook and enjoy!

Leisure and social activities

The social activities through the ESN office at Polimi are very nice and I would highly recommend to attend those. The university itself does not really organize any social activities, so there is not much to say there. Concerning sports and such, there is a football / sports field in the main campus you can use if you decide to join a team sport, but that there are no facilities such as a gym. If you would like to go to a gym, you will have to become a member, which will be an expensive ordeal. Since working out outside of organised sports is quite a new thing in Italy, it is not unheard of to pay between 70 and 100 euro's per month in membership fees for a gym. Therefore, make sure you look for a cheaper one, but do not expect to find one for less than 45 euro's a month.

What is very fun in Milano is to go for a so-called Aperitivo, which is basically a time between 18.00 and 21.00 where Milanese go for a drink (usually only one) and an included buffet of appetizers is enjoyed with the drink. This is something fun and cheap to do with your friends. Similarly, cinemas are very cheap and good in Milan as well, but you do have to look for one that shows non-dubbed movies in English. Besides that there is a large amount of fun bars/restaurants in Milan to choose from to socialize, and there are many good quality museums to enjoy as well. Milan's proximity to the mountains is also very useful if you enjoy skiing, and Milan is also in a perfect location to visit Genua, Venice, Torino, Florence, and Bologna, so if you enjoy weekend trips definitely take the train and see Italy!

Other recommendations and observations

If you want to go on Erasmus and have a lot of free time then Polimi is probably not the place for you, there are a lot of classes and the workload is real. Additionally, Milan is a really big city, so if you're looking for a stress free environment, it might also not be the place for you. However, Politecnico di Milano is a good university, the city has a lot to offer, and is the (financial) capital of Italy and therefore exciting, so if you are looking for a true Italian experience I would definitely recommend it.