

From an SYA/IIC member: my experience in Bulgaria.

My journey to Bulgaria proceeded very quickly. I was looking for something different to do with my life; I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. That being said, my father suggested that I engaged in the EVS community. And so I did.

It didn't take long until I received the contact of IIC, an organization located in Razlog, a city situated in the country of Bulgaria. I had my Skype meeting with the majority of its members and felt very excited and ready to go, afterwards.

I immediately accepted their proposal, which consisted in a five-month's term, dedicating my time to children and disabled people. I was always very passionate about kids: I have two siblings, of whom I've been taking care of since they were babies, and I've worked in a Holiday Camp facility for a long time. My duties there were to assist children, to manage them in road trips, etc.

I felt more than prepared for the tasks that could possibly be given to me in the project. Speaking of it: I was going to be a part of the SYA team, which was already composed by two Spanish volunteers, Tina and Léo.

A few days after the confirmation of my departure, I was informed about another Portuguese volunteer joining the program. His name was Telmo and we were able to schedule our travel for the same day and hour. It was a little bit of a relief to know that I would have company in my first big travel, without my family.

I met Telmo at the airport, when we were doing the check-in. We were both accompanied by our families and we got acquainted with each other rather quickly. I had a good feeling about him, from the beginning. In the following months, that feeling was bound to remain correct.

We headed on the plane at 00:15h and landed at 4:00h in the morning (6:00h, Bulgarian time). Our first impression of the Bulgarian language was curious, given that we couldn't understand a single syllable from the flight attendant's speech.

The sky was open and the sun irradiated my window. Telmo slept during the whole flight and met me, very excited about the Bulgarian "voda" that he snatched out of the plane. I didn't recognize the different alphabet, until we found ourselves in the smallest airport I had ever seen. Also, the emptiest airport.

We walked like chickens, desperate to find someone who spoke in English. To add to the matter of the perimeter's emptiness, the Information Center was still closed. It didn't make it easier for us, but it was a good experience for me and my partner to bond and get to know each other.

We worked pretty well together, driven by the motivation to get out of there and arrive to the quarters of IIC.

Finally, the Information Center opened and a lady was kind enough to describe us the route until Sofia's Central Bus Station. We saw two lines, blue and red, in the Metro's pamphlet. It seemed fairly easy to get to our destination.

It wasn't.

We were stopped by some sort of Metro's supervisors, because Telmo lost his ticket and they wanted us to pay 40 leva. We were astonished by their behavior towards us: they could clearly

tell we were foreigners. We would later learn that was the exact reason why they did what they did.

We managed to save the situation, when they expelled us from the Metro. We got back in, free from harassment and pressure, and were saved by the first nice Bulgarians we met: they warned us we were going in the wrong direction and we needed to leave in the station we were in. I guess our suitcases gave away our purpose.

We finally arrived at the Bus Station and an entire new challenge began: finding someone who spoke in English, in order to know which bus to take. We asked around, including the Information Center, and no one could help us.

Telmo stopped to eat pizza and we discovered another thing about Bulgaria: they put pickles in their pizzas. Telmo was not happy about it and, in the six months we spent here, he remained an unsupported individual of it.

We were being approached by taxi men, from all sides. They kept coming, trying to manipulate us into taking their cab. On the verge of desperation, we stood in the corner of the building we thought to be the right one.

A janitor approached us and started to speak broken English, but well enough for us to communicate. I saw Telmo disappearing into the restaurants, with that same man, and after five minutes of absence, I thought he'd been kidnaped. I started panicking and called Telmo's number. He answered immediately and advised me to stay in the same place he left me: he was buying our tickets and the man was coming to lead us to the right bus.

I breathed of relief when I saw both guys walking towards me. My colleague was carrying the tickets and we walked to the bus station that, strangely enough, was situated on the left side of the building we had been on.

We later discovered that no good deed comes undone and our savior, the janitor, asked Telmo for money. We didn't have a cent, so it was impossible to reciprocate his assistance. Thank God we were already in the right place, because the man wasn't happy.

It took us three hours to arrive to Razlog. We were mesmerized by the landscape: green, yellow and all kinds of Nature's evidences.

We were awaited by David, our project coordinator, and Rúben, a previous volunteer and current worker of the organization. They greeted us with smiles and beer – Bulgarian's favorite drink, especially Pirinsko.

We had lunch with the entire team and we were communicating in English and Spanish. I was already happy: the ability to improve my language skills was something that gave me a lot of joy. July in Bulgaria was a very satisfactory month. I, Telmo, Tina and Léo composed the SYA team and we worked in villages around Razlog, as well as Razlog, organizing activities and giving English/Spanish classes – this last task was mine and Telmo's responsibility.

Tina left and, to replace her, came Loretta. At the same time, Media for Youth Project was being formed. A few weeks passed and Léo also left. Then, there was me, Telmo and Lori – as we started to call her, from the very beginning.

We were told that, in the month of September, our Time Table was going to be tighter: school was starting. We were very excited and, to be honest, the heat of the outside fields was becoming very aggressive for our skin.

And so, September came and two months passed, in the blink of an eye. We were travelling on the weekends, discovering the country and its culture, as well as the border countries. One of our favorite hobbies consisted in testing every restaurant in Razlog. We initiated a new tradition among the youngsters: whenever a new volunteer joined, we would eat a “Detelina Sandwich” in Riverside Restaurant.

The month of September was also marked by my first on-arrival training: one week in sunny Sfia, learning about EVS and engaging in new friendships. We obtained a considerable amount of useful skills and I was very thankful for my trainers. They guided my way into adulthood and the field of professionalism. It was an unforgettable week, filled with amazing hotel food and people from all over Europe.

With the beginning of the school, came another member for our team: Mayra. We were four, once again. Two Portuguese and two Italians.

We worked in Banya, Gorno Draglisthe, Dobarsko, MOGA (center for disabled people) and Yane Sandanski, one of the schools stationed in Razlog. We had our days filled with work. We planned activities on the weekends, organized them with the purpose of not being lost with so many wonderful and exiting ideas, when it was time to execute them. We were huge fans of crafts and the kids enjoyed everything we brought to them.

In our spare time, we would visit the children of the orphanage, or Home for Kids, as we called it. They became our family and we worked in a more fixed way with them, in the first two months. When school started, there was not a scheduled hour to be with them. For the team, it was important to maintain the relationship we cemented with these children.

Luis, one of the volunteers from Media for Youth, would often join us in the orphanage. We stayed there for hours, if we had the chance: we rode bikes, played volleyball and braided each other’s hairs.

In Gorno Draglisthe, we made a lot of wonderful friendships. We were steady visitors of the infamous guest house of Dshka. We loved everyone that worked there! They offered us tea, coffee, Bulgarian food. They even gave me a present on my name day (also my office family, which surprised me with a cute owl bag and a beautiful white shirt, upon my returning at the office). We became good friends with Roxi, one of the school’s teachers: she invited us to her house and cooked us lunch, she offered us the products of her garden and spoke about her adventures in Portugal, where she had worked ten years ago.

In Banya, we became friends with the lady of the Cafeteria, to whom we gave the nickname of Mama (actually, that was Lori’s doing). She cooked the best pizzas and prepared the best coffees – after a few months, she purchased Hot Chocolate and coffee was no longer on the list of requests.

Dobarsko was a very small village, with a single school, and twenty kids in total. These kids were divided by four classes. They were all together, whenever we came to execute the activities.

We had our challenges with this place, but the ride going there was very special. We would see a whole different side of Razlog.

Yane Sandanski was the first local school we worked in. Its Director is a traveler and he prioritizes the learning of other languages and the world: a concrete proof of this fact is the collection of flags displayed in the steps of that same school. Children start to learn English language as soon as they ingress in the school and, by the last grade, they have a pretty solid knowledge of it. For this school, we had seven different classes, from first to fourth grade. Most of the children here came from gipsy heritage and it was explained to us that this fact changed people's viewing of the school, which was the best one in the district of Razlog, in terms of pedagogy methods. Nonetheless, we worked the best in this particular school: teachers were very open and helpful, as well as the kids. Our pronunciation was often corrected, in a non-judgmental way, by the youngsters. Our Bulgarian level evolved, thanks to them.

We saw the first signs of snow in the final days of November. I was dreading its appearance: I was told that it could be as high as five meters and the temperatures dropped with its growing. I am used to cold, but this was a whole different dimension. The snowflakes dropped on my nose and got stuck on my hair and clothes. It didn't take very long until the magic sank in my eyes. Unfortunately, it didn't last long: the white on the roofs and the streets came and went as fast as the sunrise. The days were also getting shorter: by 6 o'clock, streets were empty and dark. With the cold, our walks were moved by trips to the furthest supermarkets (Lidl and T-Market).

One day, I was told that I could extent my staying in the program and I instantly accepted the proposal. Now, I was leaving January 6th, instead of December 6th. This agreement allowed me to plan more travels, including Christmas and New Year's Eve in a country that wasn't Portugal. It was time to plan the Christmas' events: we already knew we were going to take part in MOGA's bazaar. We spent two months helping Craci – the facilities' responsible – designing postcards, coloring snow-boots, Santa Clauses and a very unique snowman (which I hardly doubted it was going to sell). For our organization's part, we planned a charity event, named "One toy, a thousand smiles". We dressed our German guy, Vincent, in a Santa Claus outfit and stayed in the center, waiting for people to donate their old toys. We added a letter intended for the kids to write it and send it to the fictional North Pole. We disseminated our initiative in the schools and in the center.

Another relevant telling of my experience in IIC had to do with my personal project. I am a published writer in Portugal and I've been writing from the moment I learned the alphabet. The personal project is obviously related with a personal passion of the volunteer. In my case, it wouldn't make sense if I organized something unrelated to writing. Firstly, I sought the help of the local volunteers and asked them if they thought it was a good idea to pursue this project of mine. They were very excited about it and told me they would attend it and disseminate it in their own schools. The first session started amazingly well and I was mesmerized by the new talents I had in front of me. I previously planned 16 sessions, but it was impossible to fit them in the months I had left. So, I shrank them into 8 sessions and one continuous task that consisted in writing a story, wheatear long or short, in a random order. The participants of my "Creative

Writing” workshop followed the guidelines without questioning and even took time to ask me for advice regarding to writing methods, action that I was very flattered by.

All in all, my time in Razlog was productive, humble and necessary. I gained a lot of new friends, experience and self-worth.

Doing an EVS project is a great tool for self-growing. You discover yourself in new ways; you find trades of yourself that you didn’t know to exist. I will never forget my Bulgarian family and Bulgaria itself, a country that has a lot of potential.

If you decide to visit Bulgaria, explore its nature and get in touch with your emotional roots.

Every Saturday, I climbed the steps that led the way to the main mountain in Razlog and, every single time, I noticed a new detail that I hadn’t noticed the previous weekend. The beauty of the city I stayed in, Razlog, made me feel at home. I never felt threatened or insecure; people showed me love and respect. It was a fantastic experience, an experience I won’t forget.

I also have two new tattoos to remind me of my time here. So, clearly, Bulgaria will never leave me, both physically and emotionally.