Information about your stay

Study subject(s)	M.Sc. Biodiversity, Ecology and Evolution
Purpose (e. g. Study, Internship, Language- or specialisation course)	Internship
Destination country, city	Greece, Heraklion
Host institution	Natural History Museum of Crete, University of Crete
Period of stay (mm/yyyy to mm/yyyy)	12.02.2024 to 30.06.2024

Please answer every question in a body text. Every box should be filled with at least 750 characters.

What kind of personal and academic reasons had you for a stay abroad?

As a student who wants to pursue a scientific career and follow an academic path, it is important to experience a diverse academic environment. Since I am a student, who studies Opiliones (Arachnida) diversity worldwide, I have to visit different museums and start gaining more experience by examining more and more specimens around the globe and learn new methodologies. Additionally, my master program offers a great variety and plethora of practical and theoretical courses but of course, cannot cover all the fields and techniques that are available in biology. All these reasons led to the rather obvious decision to pursue an internship abroad and even better, in a world-leading institution like the Museum of Natural History of Crete of University of Crete.

How have you managed your preparation? What did you pay attention to specifically? (Application at the institution, getting a visa, booking the flights, organising a place to stay, insurance, fees etc.)

The preparation for my internship at the Natural History Museum of Crete of University of Crete was rather straightforward. I was already aware of the possibility of conducting an internship there due to their informative website, which highlights such opportunities. Additionally, I had friends who had previously interned at the museum and spoke highly of the experience, noting that it hosts international students from various places worldwide and provides a pleasant, safe, and creative environment. My academic focus on arthropod biology, specifically Arachnid taxonomy, made the museum an ideal choice for my internship. Applying to the institution was quite simple. I sent an email to the responsible people at the museum, contacted the Erasmus office at my university and the receiving university, and prepared the necessary paperwork (learning agreement, grant agreement etc.). The internship does not have any language requirements, though competence in English or Greek is rather necessary. Additionally, conducting an internship in the Natural History Museum of Crete does not demand any tuition fees or other contributions since it is a public institution. Since I am an EU student, visa or residence permits were not required, making the process even more straightforward. However, for non-EU students, it is important to check visa requirements well in advance to avoid any last-minute complications since other international friends had such complications. The state does not require any city registration as in Germany.

One of the more challenging aspects of the preparation was arranging travel. Flights to Crete were particularly expensive, especially the return tickets since I left during the peak tourist season in the heart of summer. I planned to book all my tickets very early and I used several apps and websites to check the best possible deals. Later in the summer, there are many seasonal airlines, which show excellent deals for tourists, and these can be advantageous for students. A rather cheap approach to reach Crete from Germany involves flying to Athens and then taking a ship to Crete. This can significantly reduce travel expenses. There are two major ship lines to Crete and the travel needs about 8-9 hours overnight. So, in order to be on time, you have to take into consideration to be one day ahead since it needs a night of travelling in case you use the ship. Before booking ship tickets, it is important to check discount offers. For instance, I used the ISIC card, which is mandatory in many services in order to recognize student offers and I received a 50% discount on boat tickets. The transport from the port is easy since there are many bus routes to reach various parts of the city. I learned that there is an app and a website for all the bus routes, which includes live tracking of the bus and thus, I could schedule my trip from the port to my apartment easily.

Finding accommodation proved to be another challenging step. I initially searched through numerous places on Airbnb. Due to Crete ' s popularity as a summer tourist destination, most rooms and apartments were either overpriced or already booked. I ended up staying in an apartment that was not very close to the city center. I later realized it was rather expensive considering the utilities and the location. More apartments close to the city center are excellent regarding the location since all shops, services and night life are all gathered in the city center. However, most of those apartments are very old and this was a big problem. The better places regarding the age of the building and the utilities are out of the city center but the transport is getting more difficult. However, my accommodation experience improved significantly after discovering Erasmus groups on Facebook and other social media platforms. These groups offer numerous sublet opportunities and options for sharing apartments with other Erasmus students. Moving in with other students turned out to be a great idea, as it allowed me to meet new people and mutually benefit from living together.

Securing the necessary insurance was relatively easy. My health insurance was covered by my German insurance card through the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). For students who do not have such coverage, there are numerous programs available to cover all necessary insurances for Erasmus students. Although these programs can be expensive, they provide comprehensive coverage that can be tailored to meet individual needs. I found a very good deal, costing approximately 100 euros for six months for all the nee

Which experiences have you made through out your time abroad?
(Conditions at the institution, courses, exams, workshops and/ or conferences you've taken)

During my time abroad, my experiences at the institution were incredibly enriching, filled with acceptance and a friendly atmosphere. This wasn't just a place for learning and research, but a welcoming community where everyone, from faculty to students to museum employees, played a vital role in creating a sense of belonging. The museum's many labs and offices felt like parts of a big family, a feeling that was strengthened by the regular visits from international scientists and interns. These interactions significantly contributed to the museum's inclusive spirit, making it a lively mix of cultures and ideas.

One of the most nice aspects of my time at the museum was the daily lunch breaks. These were not just moments to eat but also chances for all students and staff to come together and have meaningful conversations. It was during these lunch breaks that I built strong connections, discussing not only our ongoing projects and scientific inquiries but also sharing personal stories, cultural insights, and life goals. These interactions were key to creating a strong sense of camaraderie among us, making each day at the museum a unique blend of academic and personal growth.

The museum also held monthly meetings that were crucial for my intellectual development. These meetings featured scientific talks where new research findings and updates about the museum were shared. I eagerly looked forward to these sessions as they were a source of great inspiration and intellectual excitement. The variety of topics covered not only expanded my scientific knowledge but also sparked a deeper curiosity and passion for my field of study.

My supervisor played a crucial role in shaping my academic journey at the museum. His guidance was nothing short of excellent. With immense patience and a clear, methodical approach, he introduced me to various advanced methodologies, ensuring I understood even the most challenging concepts. His dedication to teaching and his ability to simplify complex processes made my learning experience incredibly enriching. Under his mentorship, I developed a strong foundation in research methodologies, which I am confident will benefit me throughout my academic and professional career.

Attending PhD defenses was another unique opportunity that significantly influenced my academic aspirations. Watching these defenses gave me valuable insights into the hard work and dedication required to achieve a doctorate. The experience was both enlightening and motivating, reinforcing my desire to continue my academic journey and contribute meaningfully to my field.

One of the practical skills I acquired during my time at the museum was managing natural history museum collections. This museum hold a huge wet and dry collection in plants, animals and fossils not only from Greece but also for the whole East mediterranean. This experience was particularly fulfilling as it combined my love for science with careful organizational skills. I learned how to handle delicate specimens, catalog them accurately, and understand their importance in broader research contexts. This part was necessary in order to do the first step of my project which as to examine specimens from the collection This knowledge has given me a deeper appreciation for the behind-the-scenes work that supports scientific discoveries and public education. Especially, my research passion about Opiliones has been flourished since I was able to see many Opiliones specimens from the collection in order to complete my traineeship project, an opportunity, which helped to come up with new ideas and research projects for the near future

What were the language requirements like and were there barriers to manage?
(E. g. language course offers, working language, communication on site)

When I first considered going abroad for my Erasmus traineeship, I was very curious about the language requirements. Since Greek is my mother tongue and the main language of the institution is Greek, I was not certain whether there will be a different approach in the language requirements for Erasmus students. Thankfully, I was able to use my Greeks as the main language, a case which make easier my experience in terms of language use. There were no strict language prerequisites in any case. Since I am fluent in Greek, I found it easy to communicate and fit in at the institution, as Greek was the main language used in daily interactions.

However, the truly interesting part of my experience was the multilingual environment. The institution was a mix of cultures, with many international students and visiting scientists. This diversity gave me many chances to practice and improve my English. English was the common language among international peers and was often used during lectures, meetings, and informal gatherings. The institution made sure that language was not a barrier for anyone, switching to English whenever international students were present.

This bilingual approach benefited me both academically and socially. For instance, during scientific talks and monthly meetings, presentations were often conducted in English to accommodate the diverse audience. This helped me stay engaged and improved my academic vocabulary and understanding in English. Moreover, the discussions and Q&A sessions after these talks were great opportunities to practice speaking and listening in a professional setting.

Apart from English, I also had the chance to practice my German. The institution hosted students from various countries, including Germany and Austria. Interacting with German-speaking peers allowed me to refresh my German language skills. Casual conversations, group projects, and social events often provided the perfect setting to practice German, making my language learning experience more practical and enjoyable. Also, most of the literature for the project were old-German texts. Thus, this was even another possibility to practice my language skills

The multilingual setting extended beyond the classrooms and labs. During lunch breaks, which were a highlight of my day, students and staff would gather to eat and chat. These gatherings were a blend of languages and cultures, with conversations flowing seamlessly from Greek to English, depending on who was present. It was during these informal interactions that I realized the importance of language as a tool for building connections and fostering a sense of community.

The institution's inclusive language policy was also important during field trips and hands-on activities. On trips around the island of Crete, where I learned about local biodiversity, instructions and discussions were primarily in Greek. However, for the benefit of international students, explanations were often repeated in English. This dual-language approach ensured that everyone could fully participate and benefit from the experiences, regardless of their native language.

Managing natural history museum collections was another area where language played a crucial role. The detailed documentation and cataloging of specimens required clear and precise communication. While Greek was commonly used for internal records, many labels and descriptions were also provided in English to facilitate international collaboration and research. This bilingual documentation system highlighted the institution's commitment to accessibility and inclusivity in scientific research.

Which personal impressions stay on your mind from your time abroad and how do you evaluate them?
(Everyday life, mentality, formative events; Have your expectations been fulfilled?)

During my time abroad, several personal impressions have stayed with me, shaping my memories and evaluations of the experience. These impressions cover various aspects of everyday life, the local mentality, and formative events that occurred during my stay. Looking back, I can say that my expectations for an Erasmus traineeship were not only met but often exceeded, providing me with a wealth of knowledge and wonderful experiences.

Everyday life in the new environment was a delightful experience marked by a pleasant and easy rhythm. The pace of life was relaxed, allowing me to enjoy my time and absorb the surroundings fully. The locals were incredibly friendly and welcoming, which made settling in much easier. One of the highlights of everyday life was the access to fresh and delicious products, particularly fruits, which were available in abundance. The freshness and quality of the local produce added a delightful aspect to daily meals, making even simple dishes taste exceptional. The same holds true for the local cuisine who was exceptional.

However, the weather presented a bit of a challenge. After mid-May, the temperatures soared, often reaching extremely hot levels. While this took some getting used to, it also taught me how to adapt and appreciate different climates. Adjusting to the heat became part of the experience, and it provided an excellent opportunity to learn how to manage and enjoy life in a warmer environment.

The local mentality was another aspect that left a lasting impression on me. Hospitality and inclusiveness were not just occasional gestures but fundamental parts of the culture. From the very beginning, I felt welcomed and included in various activities and social circles. This welcoming atmosphere was evident in both personal interactions and institutional practices. The culture of hospitality extended to the project itself, where collaboration and support were always emphasized. This inclusive mentality made it easy to form connections and work effectively with others.

Formative events during my stay were particularly impactful. Attending presentations and PhD defenses was a highlight, as they were both extremely interesting and educational. These events provided a deep dive into advanced research in systematics and biogeography and offered a glimpse into the dedication and effort required to achieve a doctorate. As a student who want to pursue academic career, this proved very helpful. The monthly meetings where the entire museum's activities and achievements were presented were also very enjoyable. These meetings not only kept everyone informed but also stimulated my interest in various scientific topics and fostered a sense of community among all attendees. Though a monthly meeting, this was not strictly a scientific meeting but a friendly gathering of people who are interested and work in the different scientific fields in the museum.

Unfortunately, I was unable to participate in the meetings of Erasmus students as our schedules often did not align. While I missed out on these specific interactions, I found other ways to connect with fellow students and interns. We were going to local festivals or exhibitions, we scheduled to go for dinners or coffee breaks. Through informal gatherings and shared projects, I still managed to build a network of friends and colleagues, enriching my overall experience.

Reflecting on my expectations for the Erasmus traineeship, I can confidently say they were more than fulfilled. I went into the program hoping to gain practical experience and learn new methodologies. What I found exceeded these hopes. The practical experience I gained was invaluable, particularly the hands-on work in the lab. The methodologies I learned have significantly broadened my research skills. I saw rich natural history collections with worldwide value, I used new equipment and I even learned to use programming languages in order to analyze my data. This internship project had a nice structure to follow and showed from the beginning to the end how to approach a scientific problem and to solve it with morphometrical methodologies.

What kind of practical tips would you give future students that plan an exchange?
(E. g. time/ semester, finances, language requirements, …)

-Choosing the right time to start your exchange can make a big difference. Aim to arrive between late winter and mid-summer when more housing options are available after the academic terms end. Avoiding the busiest summer months not only helps you find a place to live but also lets you adjust to the local weather more comfortably, which is extremely hot/

Finding a place to live is a priority and can be a challenge. Use online apps and websites to search for accommodation. Also, check Facebook groups for Erasmus students where you can find rooms and shared apartments at good prices. Be careful of scams by checking listings carefully and, if possible, visit the accommodation before you decide.

For travel, consider indirect routes to save money. Flying to major cities like Athens and then taking a ferry to your destination can be cheaper and give you a scenic journey. When you arrive, learn about local buses—they're reliable and inexpensive, especially if you get a monthly pass.

Managing your money well is important. Shop at local markets around mid-day for fresh food at lower prices. Cooking meals at home is cheaper than eating out and lets you try local dishes without spending too much. Use your student ID to get discounts at museums, restaurants, and other places.

Communication is key. Get a local SIM card when you arrive to make it easier and cheaper to talk to local people and other students. Use popular messaging apps like Viber instead of whatsapp, which is widely used in Greece, to stay in touch with friends and classmates.

Learning a bit of the local language can be helpful. While English is usually enough for work and daily life, knowing a few basic Greek phrases can make it easier to communicate and feel more at home in your new surroundings.

To really enjoy your time abroad, get involved in the local culture. Go to festivals, try local food, and visit historical sites—it's a great way to learn about the country you're living in