WUR Goes Abroad

1. Student Information

Field of study in Wageningen	Molecular Life Sciences
Study period exchange (dd/mm/yyyy)	01-09-2019 until 25-01-2020
Country (exchange)	Italy
City (exchange)	Siena
University (exchange)	Università degli Studi di Siena
Faculty (exchange)	Medical Biotechnologies

2. Motivation for exchange

Why did you choose to go on study exchange?
I wanted to experience the Italian culture, and also study something towards the biomedical sciences.

What is the reason you chose for this country/university?

I was curious about the Italian culture and this was the only university in Italy that I could go to with my study.

3. Accessibility to reach destination

Do you have any tips to reach your exchange destination? (E.g. bus, train, etc.)
You can reach Siena after flying to either Bologna, Pisa, Florence, or Rome (Ciampino or Fiumicino). The fastest would be from Pisa and Florence, with Bologna as a close third. Don't book your return tickets yet! After signing up to ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Siena, you get a great deal for flying with Ryanair (I went back home for Christmas and therefore took the plane 4 times in total, and 3 of those were with Ryanair for an average of €10 per flight, including a 20 kg suitcase). You also get discounts on Flixbus with your ESN card, which helps you reach Florence, Bologna, and Rome faster and cheaper than with the train. Siena does have a train station, by the way.

4. University and studying

Could you provide some general information about the followed courses?

	Course	ECTS	Short description of the contents	Appreciation of course: 1(low) – 5(high)	Remarks
1	Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases	11	Clinical virology and antiviral resistance, clinical microbiology and antibiotic resistance.	4	High focus on medical aspects, but still enough attention for molecular mechanisms (I hoped for a little more of the latter, though). Overall a very interesting course if you're interested in infectious diseases as a biotechnologist.
2	Information Engeneering for Biotechnology	7	Analysis of NGS experiments, systems biology (deterministic and stochastic models), machine learning.	4	Yes, Engineering is spelled wrong, but that's how they spell it on the official study plan, so be careful. The professor for this course was very good, and I even learned some basic Python in the computer practicals. Don't follow this course if you really hate math. A friend of mine took a course called Gene Therapy instead of this one.
3	Next Generation Genetics and Genomics	11	Bacterial Genetics (bacterial metabolism, transposable elements, phages), Nucleic acid detection and analysis (PCR variations, sequencing variations)	3	Very uninspiring professors. Make the lectures feel like a long time. Luckily, you don't have many lectures. The course material itself, however, is surprisingly interesting. You just have to look past the professors.
4					
5					
6					

How is the study formalized? (E.g. study forms, academic level, examination, workload, lesson material)

There's not any labwork involved in these courses. You only get lectures, and the (very helpful and interesting) computer practicals for Information Engineering. The amount of contact hours per week differs, but expect an average of around 10 to 15. Seems like a walk in the park compared to WUR (and don't get me wrong, it is), but don't underestimate the amount of self-study because the course material is not easy! Also not super hard, by the way. Expect a level that is more or less similar to a WUR BSc level (even though all these courses are MSc level). You will get higher grades in Siena than

at the WUR, but don't forget the conversion. I haven't received by converted grades yet, but based on the results of my classmates in Siena, I expect my nines to be converted into six-and-a-halves.

What is the culture of the university? (E.g. How approachable are the lecturers, engagement with local students? What are the differences with the WUR?)
The professors seem a lot less engaged and enthusiastic than at the WUR (with exceptions). But that is not generally what to worry about:

Oh my god, be prepared for a very flawed organisational and communication system in Siena. I had an absolute lovely time there, with the city, food, people, nature, and so on. But my patience was repeatedly and heavily tested. You want a form signed? Make sure to start on that three weeks in advance (no exaggeration). You want any information on anything? Make sure to start on that three weeks in advance, NO EXAGGERATION. This all seems very dramatic, but let's just say that I got very frustrated on several occasions, just be prepared for that and you'll be fine. I was fine and did not get into more serious trouble in the end. It just causes stress.

What does the university offer the student additionally? (E.g. Catering, sports facilities, laundry facilities?)
There are mensas all over town, and most of them are quite good. Don't expect restaurant quality of course, but the meals are €4.50, and more than enough for the average person (therefore, enough for me). I stayed in a university residence myself, and had an overall positive experience. You do have to share a room with a roommate though. Laundry facilities are included in the residency where I stayed (De Nicola). There is a sports organisation from the university, but you really have to be fast to get involved in training or sports teams there. I started to try halfway October and gave up in the end of November, and so I didn't get to do any sports while in Siena.

5. Housing-travelling-living

What are the possibilities for housing? (E.g. Availability to sign up for a room on campus, private rooms, rent rates?)

You can sign up for a university residency, but those are shared rooms. A lot of my Erasmus friends managed to get housing "inside the walls" (city centre), and not in university residencies. There are several Facebook groups where rooms are offered. The rent is about similar to what you would pay in Wageningen.

What is the culture of the country like? (E.g. Differences with home, local cuisine, habits, manners?)

Italy is totally different from The Netherlands. As I mentioned before, Italians there generally suck at making arrangements or planning meetings. But in return, you get absolutely amazing food for a very

low price at restaurants in Siena. Do absolutely try the aperitivo experience. This is when you have a Spritz or a wine at a bar or restaurant with food like meats, cheese, bread, and the like.

Could you give a general price indication of the place of residence compared to living in Wageningen?

About similar. You pay 297 euros for a shared room in a university residency (for me, this included free use of laundry machines and cleaning two times a week). Rent in non-university rooms differs from place to place, but is generally between 200 and 400 euros, too.

Could you give some information about public transport infrastructure? (E.g. Cost public transport card, taxi prices, how to travel to the university?)

Public transport is not as ideal as in The Netherlands, but a little bit better than I expected. There are quite some bus routes, and you could get around during the day with the bus. There's also a system of electric bike stands throughout Siena for only 20 euros per year. The electric function of the bikes work about 25% of the time (and you need it for the hills), but there's usually 4 or more bikes in one stand, so you can get around. The bus tickets are €1.40 if you do it right, you have to validate (stamp) them in the bus and they are valid for 70 minutes. You can also get a 3-month student transport card for an okay price. Everyone from inside the wall travels by foot to their university buildings in under 10 minutes. My buildings were way outside of the wall, but that's also where my residency was, so I also always travelled by foot (in under 10 minutes). It's what most students do in Siena.

6. Free time

What are must-sees in the area? (E.g. nearby destinations, how do you prefer to travel, when to plan?)

So many things to name! Explore Siena! For recommendations, you'll figure it out yourself, but I could help you get started of course. Around Siena there are numerous towns and cities that are worth visiting. To name a few: Monteriggioni (!!!), San Gimignano (best ice cream in the world winners several times there), Montepulciano, Radda in Chianti, Castellina in Chianti, and so many more! These are cities to visit as a day trip. Bigger cities are also quite close. Florence is absolutely worth visiting several times (or as a long weekend), and Pisa and Livorno are cool for one time. Bologna is also quite close and I loved visiting that too for a weekend. I preferred travelling by Flixbus, but train is fine too. Some friends of mine also visited Cinque Terre, and I did a long weekend Napoli. Rome is also close enough for a weekend.

What does not appear in the travel guide, but is worth a visit?

For hiking enthusiasts, the Via Francigena is a must. I don't consider myself one, but I still enjoyed the hike from Monteriggioni to Siena very much. You will not be able to avoid the cute towns of Tuscany, but people do forget to enjoy the Tuscan nature. Even if you usually don't enjoy this, you should still try it in Tuscany, it is something else.

Do you have general tips and tricks about leisure time (E.g. recommendations for restaurants, going out?)

My courses started mid-October, but the really fun parties are already over by then! Do the Italian language course in September! In September, there are still Contrada parties (really cool local parties in the small piazzas of Siena). Even if you don't want to learn a language, that's okay. A lot of my classmates didn't want to either. Just do it for the September experience in Siena. It's more than worth it.

For other recommendations, don't hesitate to contact me if you're going to Siena. There are more than enough places to eat, and more than enough cultural experiences.

7.Challenges & best moment abroad

What was a challenge you have experienced?

Again, the organisation and communication in Siena. That was a 5-month challenge, but I did win it in the end!

What was your best memory abroad?

My best trip was the one to Bologna, but even that comes back to the people I was with. Siena is very lovable and a perfect recipe for having an amazing Erasmus period, but it is the people that really make the experience.

8. Contact details (optional)

Is the reader allowed to contact the writer?	Yes! ☒	no ☐
Name/e-mail	Dylan de Wit, ddw2000@live.nl If you have any questions regarding anything about Siena, I would love to help you out!	