



My Volunteer Experience in Croatia



Hello everyone!

First of all, let me introduce myself briefly. I'm Mina, 29 years old, and I'm from Istanbul. I'm an art teacher and a decorative artist. As I write these lines, I find myself nearing the end of an incredible experience. I believe that such experiences are the kind that can be cherished for a lifetime. The experience I'm referring to is the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) program. This program allows individuals to spend a certain period of time outside their home country.



CARPE DIEM

The duration can range from short-term ESC, which lasts from two weeks to two months, to long-term ESC, which spans from two months to one year.

I chose the latter, and since July 2023, I've been volunteering at a youth center operated by a civil society organization called Carpe Diem. I've been working with children, organizing workshops for them, and teaching art.



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Work shop



ESC is a European Union-funded solidarity program that enables voluntary work in another country for a period ranging from 2 weeks to 12 months. During this time, most of your expenses (pocket money, food, health insurance, accommodation) are covered. For more information about the program, you can check the European Youth Portal. Setting aside the details of the ESC program, I'd like to share my own story with you. It all began after a major earthquake in my country, where I felt responsible to go and help in the earthquake-affected areas.



Children work shop



However, I didn't feel psychologically prepared for it. Instead, I volunteered with a local NGO in Istanbul, distributing food to the homeless. I believed I could indirectly contribute something positive since many people were already helping in the earthquake-stricken areas. It was there that I coincidentally met someone who also felt responsible for such efforts but didn't feel psychologically ready to go to the earthquake zone. We shared the same sentiments.

Later on, this person introduced me to the ESC program. At the time, my English was quite poor, and I didn't think I had a chance for such programs. However, after seeing Carpe Diem's project involving children, I felt I should be part of it and applied. I was excited because it was my first application for such a program. I had an online interview with my supervisor, Alex, and coordinator, Katarina.



Children work shop

My English was really bad, and I was very nervous. After the interview, I thought I wouldn't be selected due to my language barrier. However, the next day, I received an email from Katarina saying that I was accepted for the project. I was incredibly happy and excited because I would gain valuable experience by living in another country and would have the opportunity to work on a project that suited me.



I quit my job, packed my belongings, said goodbye to my family and friends, and booked my first flight to Zagreb. Even from the plane, seeing Croatia from above filled me with excitement because the country looked amazing. However, I must say, the first month was not easy. It took time to adapt due to the language barrier and cultural differences. I experienced culture shock, and the adaptation process was slow.

Yet, surprisingly, I quickly found comfort in the warm and helpful nature of the people. Despite the initial challenge of the language barrier, people were patient and understanding. This experience enabled me to adapt swiftly to the new environment and reinforced the importance of communication between different cultures.



I met other volunteer friends during the trainings I attended, which gave me the opportunity to form friendships from various parts of the world. These friendships not only flourished during the training programs but also allowed us to spend leisure time together.

We participated in local festivals, explored the city, and even had the chance to take short trips to other countries.

These experiences enabled me to delve deeper into different cultures and understand the value of having a global network. These friendships will stay with me not only during this experience but throughout my life, enriching me with an international perspective.





Looking back now, I'm grateful for all the good and bad experiences I've had. At the same time, I feel more confident, stronger, and slightly more optimistic because I believe that while our essence as humans remains unchanged, it can be enhanced through life experiences. ESC, in particular, can provide you with what you need to grow personally because ultimately, I believe the only way to make our own lives meaningful is by valuing the lives of others.

Orahovitsa-education

Being part of this project was an unforgettable experience for me. It was a wonderful opportunity to come together with local children, provide art lessons, and witness their creativity. Additionally, exploring different cultures and meeting new people was a great enrichment for me. This experience also contributed to improving my language skills and understanding the importance of social responsibility projects worldwide. I am grateful to everyone involved, and I highly recommend participating in such projects to everyone



And now, as my year in Croatia is coming to an end, I can't help but reflect on how much this unforgettable experience has enriched my life. Not only have I improved my English proficiency, but also I've gained a broader perspective on the world through the places I've visited and the people I've met.



The individuals I've encountered have brought richness to my life and filled it with unforgettable memories. The time spent with these wonderful people from all around the world has created bonds that will last a lifetime. I am immensely grateful to everyone who has been part of this experience and has contributed to making it what it was. Without their support and guidance, this journey wouldn't have been the same. I'm thankful to have been a part of such a project, and I'm grateful to everyone who made it possible for me to live through this experience.

