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Institute where Øystein works.

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A Norwegian PhD student in Greece

The Norwegian student Øystein Brekk will spend the next years in Athens, doing research on Parkinson`s Disease for his PhD. Øystein is a part of the PhD fellowship “Marie Curie Actions Training Network”, which provides training and research experience for researchers of any age or nationality. We asked Øystein to write an article for the Embassy’s webpage about his experiences in Greece.

Written by Øystein R. Brekk

It is well known that when in Rome, one does what the Romans do. Sound advice, and equally applicable for when one finds oneself in Athens, the ancient capital of Greece and cradle of western civilization. But what characterizes the modern Athenians? And, how will their characteristics affect the doings of yours truly, a Norwegian student usually as far removed from the heat of the sun as from that of political turmoil?



The street I live

Though far away, Greece is hardly foreign to Norwegians, which migrate in great numbers to the Greek isles every summer, seeking the sun, blue skies and beaches we are so often deprived in our homeland. Though justifiable, these are not the reasons for my being here. Rather, I am here for academics, working as a PhD student at the [Biomedical Research Facility of the Academy](#)

of Athens.

This fact should surprise no one, especially when considering the history of Greece – rich beyond measure of legendary thinkers and their ideas. Rather more surprising is the uniqueness of my situation, as I would have expected students from all corners of the world to stampede through the halls of Greek universities - seeking higher education from its source.

Truth is, Greece has a stringent barrier of red tape surrounding their universities like a crime scene - with fluent mastery of Greek as an example of a bottleneck very few aspiring exchange students would be able to squeeze through.

Even so, there are ways to traverse these issues, with the [European 7th Framework Marie Curie Actions Training Network](#) being my modus operandi. This is a PhD fellowship promoting collaborations between European countries by offering funding for research leaders to hire foreign exchange students for research on selected subjects – in my case the Parkinson`s Disease-associated protein a-synuclein. With both salary and additional benefits far exceeding that of your run-of-the-mill PhD scholarship, the Marie Curie fellowship is more than lucrative for the students themselves.

Asides from these excellent features of the Marie Curie Actions, there are other challenges associated with taking up residency in Greece, of both a practical and bureaucratic nature. Undoubtedly, without the excellent help from my Greek colleagues in sorting these matters, they would have proved taxing indeed.



Øystein

In the lab, with my previous experience being from Norway, I was surprised at the easy-going nature of the Greeks in combination with their ability to be productive. For me, the idea of productivity is talking to as few people as possible during my practical lab work, and then retreat to a dark corner of the institute to push through articles. This, I learned, is not the way things are done here, with shouting and laughing occurring as frequently as experimental procedures and thesis writing, and I found myself impressed at the ease of which these people were able to get through their daily routines in the lab.

Though not to the same extent capable of exercising my social wits in tangent with my academics, I appreciate the relaxed and informal nature of the lab here, and I thoroughly enjoy the company of my new colleagues.

Athens

When comparing living in Athens with my previous place of study in Trondheim, or my childhood home on the western coast of Norway, the differences far outweigh the similarities. Athens is a vast concrete jungle, with jump-packed cars (both parked and stationary) lining the narrow streets, and a dry, hot air that seldom seems to shift. In other words, a far cry from the space and fresh air one grows accustomed to in Norway. That said, one can get lost in Athens with comfortable ease – finding unexplored venues hiding down every street, with people you have never met before and will probably never meet again. It gives a certain anonymity that is very pleasant and hard-found in Norway, allowing one to go adventuring without giving a second thought to anything. The hot evenings and nights lasting well through October are also rare luxuries to me, with late outdoor dinners being the norm rather than the exception to the rule. All these things combined, Athens is a very pleasant place to stay, and you really would need to put in an effort to not have a good time here. Just keep an eye on the A/C settings, as cranking it to 11 will get you pneumonia along with that good nights sleep.

The Greeks

The overarching theme to all the things I like about Greece is probably the Greeks themselves. Though the situation is dire for many Greeks, it is not as apparent as I would have expected. Undoubtedly, my own mood and hospitality would have suffered far worse were I in their shoes.



Ermou shopping street in Athens

Being a Norwegian, with the norm being to keep a polite distance from other people lest they make it clear to want otherwise, I find it liberating to socialize so effortlessly with strangers. As an example, my professor let me stay at his house for a whole week while I searched for an apartment, a thing unheard of at most Norwegian faculties. Though situations like this can be a little awkward for me, being accustomed to the Norwegian etiquette, I am quickly adapting, and I will undoubtedly be better off for it.

Considering how difficult the current situation is for Greece, and how incredibly friendly and easygoing everyone seems to be in spite of this, I truly wish I could have experienced this country and its fine people during easier times. It would undoubtedly have been a sight to behold.

[Back to top](#)

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