How COVID-19 impacted our Global Exchange Students
Strange places, new faces, unknown words, broken pavements
A kind professor, a laughing new friend,
discovering a world I’d never seen
Planning adventures but living every second now
Sunsets, bonfires, dirty happy streets,
perfectly ordered chaos in-between
Then it happens
The paths change
Suddenly you are watching your dreams through a screen

You still talk to them but with fingers instead of smiles
You watch as the world you saw rebuilding crumbles
You talk to a professor about the last case, while hundreds die there by the day
You appreciate your safety, your luck, being loved
But part of you still lives in the place that became home

COVID-19 Exchange Stories from Abroad

In early 2020, just as the world was starting to grasp the seriousness of COVID-19, over 100 Otago students were far from New Zealand, studying on exchange. By the end of February, we were urging them to return to the relative safety of home. For these students, long-awaited plans and dreams for travel, learning languages and experiencing new cultures were brought to an early and abrupt end by the pandemic, yet their adaptability, resilience and growth can be seen in this collection of stories about the strange and wonderful experience of being overseas during this extraordinary year.

While these 13 COVID-19 Stories from Abroad are probably not the tales of overseas exchange and adventure that these students might have imagined they would be telling, in their words and pictures we can still see positive and encouraging testimonies of the student exchange experience.

Otago Global Student Exchange team
COVID-19 hit Texas in full force around mid-March – right before spring break. We all left for our holiday with a wave of unknown ahead of us, not knowing that we weren’t going to return. No goodbyes, no final this or final that. We just left. I went to the Bahamas and a few days in I received an email assuring me that I was not to return to campus … ever. This left me in a bit of daze, considering I was in a foreign country with not much else to do. I was lucky enough, however, to have been living with four amazing American girls who took me under their wing. When we got back from the Bahamas, we collected our things from the apartment and went to Canyon Lake, where one of my flatmates had a house. We ended up staying there for eight weeks – swimming, boating, jet skiing, fire making, and making amazing memories (as well as finishing our classes online via Zoom). When things began to open up again, and classes came to an end, we all went on a road trip, hitting 15 states before finally arriving in California – our final destination, and my departing airport …

For my American Government class, we had to attend a political rally. It just so happened Bernie Sanders was coming to town, and a small crew of us went. We were right next to the media tent and managed to be seen in a lot of the news broadcasts and images from the rally. This was an experience I don’t think you would have outside of the United States, due to the sheer scale and patriotism experienced at the rally.

Laurel was an incredible place to live during my time in Austin, and in some ways COVID did cause everyone to savour more the moments we had.

Zion National Park in Utah was one of the most beautiful landscapes I have ever seen. I was on my last day of spring break and morale was pretty low. Everyone who had gone had booked flights back home to their respective countries that morning, as COVID had ramped up quite a bit. There was a massive outbreak of cases, and it forced many places to shut down. In all honesty I cried most of the way to Zion. Once we drove into the park, I forgot about everything going on and just had the best day exploring – it was utterly beautiful.

Alex Fenwick
University of Texas at Austin, USA

Alice Gray
McCombs School of Business, USA

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University of Texas at Austin, USA

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McCombs School of Business, USA
Dear COVID, you made my exchange memorable.
I’ve been staying in my little crib since then.
Attending web lectures in my dark room, on a bright sunny day.
First thing first in the morning became measuring my own temperature.
Hoping it will be between 36.5 to 37.5.
I have lost count the number of times I’ve taken it.
The picture that I have taken the most during my exchange.
My hand, thermometer and my little dorm.

It was a gorgeous day, and it felt like spring was just around the corner. We had all met up to say goodbye to some Americans who were leaving, but we did not know that it was going to be goodbye to a lot of people. At this point I had still thought I would be staying in France until July, but two weeks later I was homebound. I miss these girls and the friendships we made. It was the point in the exchange where we were comfortable with life in Lyon, had started to really bond and were excited to make summer plans together. As lockdown is easing in Europe, my best friends on exchange who live in Switzerland and Germany are meeting up. They are even making plans to go and visit Lyon. However, it is easy to put my experience into perspective. For everyone around the world it has been tough and New Zealand has been lucky to avoid the tragic human cost of the pandemic. Although my heart aches that I cannot be there with them, I know we’ll see each other again soon.

Danielle Cooper
Université Jean Moulin, France

Cheryl Lee
National University of Singapore, Singapore
Despite my exchange being very much dominated by COVID-19, and short-lived, it was the best two months I could’ve asked for. The Essex campus was filled with great cafés and a fab market on Thursdays (the best doughnuts and sausage rolls FYI) and being only an hour away from London meant there was always something going on. From the Waitangi Day pub crawl in the centre of London to getting $40 flights to Vienna, those two months were an experience. I met some of the most brilliant people who I’m so thankful I got to experience the highs and lows of exchange with, especially the mayhem and stress that was COVID-19 and the race to get home. Just as we were about to finish classes and begin proper travel in Europe, it was cancellation after cancellation. And after the most stressful flights of my life, including being almost stranded in Dubai, I have never been so thankful that I get to call New Zealand home. It wasn’t the typical exchange, but the memories I made in those two months will stay with me for a long while.

Being over in the United States during the COVID-19 outbreak and spread was a surreal experience. While I considered returning home to New Zealand, where I was situated, in Santa Barbara, seemed to be handling the virus pretty well and I was loving living right on the beach and taking in the beautiful Californian climate. Of my 14 housemates, 12 went back home, which left myself and two others from the house remaining, while the area was in lockdown with only essential shops open. This went on for perhaps a month and a half. While the usually busy and buzzing student town of Isla Vista, in which I was living, became a little like a ghost town during this time, we were able to spend a lot of time going for hikes in the backcountry of Santa Barbara’s national forests, swimming and chilling at the beach, as well as getting into good habits of exercise and experimenting with our cooking. University switched to remote learning during this time, and this gave us a bit more freedom to be able to spend our days as we liked. Slowly, students began to return to Isla Vista and our house filled up again. Restaurants, bars and other shops opened up for the last month or so, which meant we could all enjoy our final weeks together as we would have before the virus hit.
I spent the outbreak of the pandemic in Lisbon, Portugal. The year 2020 has been unforgettable for everyone throughout the world; even though my exchange was different from what I expected and had planned for, I would do it all again.

Through my quarantine we laughed, we sweated, we baked (in the sun), we played cards, cut hair, wandered empty streets alone. We had online classes (when the Wi-Fi worked). We cooked, made pasta from scratch, had birthday picnics on our neighbours’ roof and found joy in the little things. Grocery shopping became the most exciting activity of the week. Cooking together with my flatmates allowed us to experience all of the cultures our flat shared, from German (spätzle), Italian pasta, the classic Kiwi fish and chips, French crêpes, Portuguese grilled sardines, dumplings from Taiwan and even a Russian pancake night – with vodka of course! Now the beaches are open, museums are empty, the streets are filled with people (wearing masks), but everything goes on as summer begins.

Now that the peak of the pandemic is (hopefully) over we try to do as much as possible, as you can say in Portuguese “aproveitar” which means to use the time you have and enjoy taking the opportunity to do what you can.
My flight out of Montreal circled round low over the city, so I had one last chance to say goodbye. I had made many plans for what I would do in Montreal when the snow was gone and the weather warmed up – little did I know there would still be snow on the ground when I left!

I loved living in Dublin. It’s interesting how quickly you can adapt to a new environment, and how quickly I started thinking about Dublin as my home. Whenever I would arrive back in Dublin from a trip away, it surprised me how much I looked forward to returning. This was a sentiment that was felt by many of my exchange friends, and why having to leave so abruptly was so devastating.

The last full day I spent in Dublin, my roommate and I went to a restaurant for lunch in Dublin’s Temple Bar area. Halfway through, and while we were eating, the Irish government ordered all bars and restaurants in Dublin to shut. It suddenly started to feel very real. Signs started to pop up throughout the city, and the gorgeously warm feel that Dublin always had disappeared with the government shutdown.

It’s a strange feeling when you can’t buy a pint in Dublin the weekend before St. Paddy’s day! We took a bus out to the coast and slowly walked back to our flat. My heart goes out to those struggling in Ireland. I loved my time there, and I can’t wait to go back.

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“Our last few days in Ireland were spent in this fort that we built in our accommodation in Ashfield.”

“The day Prague locked down around us and two days before the scramble to find a flight back home before the borders closed.”
Let’s get through together. Whāia e tātou te pae tawhiti.