

Viennese Venture

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“Saying the word Vienna was like striking a tuning fork and then listening to find what tone it called forth in the person I was talking to. It was how I tested people. If there was no response, this was not the kind of person I liked.” – Sándor Márai

It is important for students to consider what their objectives and expectations are prior to embarking on a medical exchange. With this mindset, one can direct the goals they set out for themselves and steer the experience to one that is both meaningful and rewarding. However, it is equally imperative to adapt to the unexpected and embrace with open arms the delightful twists and turns you encounter but do not necessarily anticipate.

I was elated to learn I would be traveling to Vienna, Austria in the summer of 2015—a country of breathtaking scenery, home to pivotal figures in Western culture, and a society interwoven into the fabric of European history. I eagerly booked my flights and meticulously planned out what attractions I intended to explore. I had expected to gain significant exposure to the field of neurosurgery and observe numerous fascinating operations at Allgemeines Krankenhaus der Stadt Wien. What I did not foresee was that I would be warmly welcomed by the geniality of other international medical students and forge memorable friendships with these incredible individuals.

What an opportunity it was to commute altogether on the U-Bahn Wien to the hospital at dawn while swapping stories of our journeys through medicine back home. We were present to support and encourage one another as we inserted our first intravenous lines or delicately removed surgical sutures on the hospital wards. We bonded over our mutual interests in the neurosurgical cases discussed in early morning rounds and shared in one another's excitement when opportunities finally arose to assist chief residents and attending physicians in the operation theatre to correct cerebral aneurysms or resect neoplastic tumours.

Living in a student dormitory allowed us to socialize in the evening after shedding our hospital scrubs. Our gracious Austrian host students attended to our every need and proudly showcased impressive relics from the Habsburg dynasty around the city. The fantastically organized social program included an excursion into the country interior to explore the quaint city of Salzburg and marvel at the magnificent Alpine landscape.

Medical exchanges provide students with the opportunity to challenge their existing perspectives on healthcare, disease, and education. It offers alternative ideas to how medicine can and should be practiced, uncovers unique and distinct populations, and allows you to appreciate the unfamiliar and foreign. It marks and facilitates a period of personal development that simply cannot be replicated by

any curricular exercise. I was fortunate to experience this growth as a medical student and call beautiful Austria “home” for four weeks.

I encourage all to explore and expand their horizons—the world is much larger and brighter than you have ever imagined, filled with people and stories you have yet to discover!