



From July 13th to 25th, I took part in the UFMG Summer School on Brazilian Studies (SSBS), hosted by the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) on its main campus in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Being selected for the programme was a special opportunity, as the number of places was limited, and Erasmus+ support made it possible for me to take part.

I came in not knowing anyone and not really knowing what to expect, and I left with a deep understanding of Brazil, a phone full of new contacts across a dozen countries, and the kind of warmth that's hard to put into words.

What struck me immediately was how welcoming everyone was. The Brazilian professors and administration staff went out of their way to make sure we felt comfortable, and the local students were just as generous with their time and energy. Each of us was paired with a Brazilian student buddy. My buddy and the other Brazilian students were available whenever I needed help, from navigating the city and settling into accommodation to just explaining things about daily life in Brazil that you'd never find in a guidebook. That kind of personal support made the transition into a new country so much smoother, and it never once felt like an obligation on their part. Because the program ran two full weeks, this wasn't a one-off welcome, it was ongoing. Almost every day the program and Brazilian students had something new to offer - a museum to check out, a viewpoint to see the city from, a local hangout spot, or a party to bring us along to. There was rarely a dull evening, and it was always led by someone who actually lived there and wanted to share their culture with us.

The lecture series was the backbone of the program, and it was genuinely impressive how broad and well-curated it was. Over the course of two weeks we had daily sessions with professors covering Brazilian history, Brazilian geography, society and race in Brazil, Brazilian politics, Brazilian architecture,

Brazilian economy, Brazilian law, Brazilian foreign affairs, and Brazilian culture. Each lecture offered a distinct lens on the country and having them stacked one after another really let you build up a layered, interdisciplinary picture of Brazil rather than a superficial overview. The professors were clearly passionate about their subjects and encouraged discussion rather than just delivering one-way lectures.

Alongside the lectures we had daily Portuguese language classes. Everyone was placed into groups based on their existing level, which meant the lessons matched our pace, beginners weren't left behind and more advanced speakers weren't bored. I was in the beginners' group, and over the two weeks we learned basic conversation phrases, the alphabet, numbers, days of the week, months, colours, and countries. It was a nice complement to the academic content, since it gave us a practical, everyday connection to what we were learning in the classroom.

The program wasn't confined to campus, either. We took memorable day trips around the state of Minas Gerais, including Ouro Preto, the historic colonial city with its baroque churches and cobblestone streets and Inhotim, one of the world's largest open-air contemporary art museums, blending striking installations with lush botanical gardens. Both excursions did a great job of grounding the academic material in something tangible and gave us a break from the classroom while still tying back into the themes of history, art, and culture we'd been studying.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the program was the diversity of the group itself. We had participants from Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, the USA, Australia, China, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK. Spending two weeks with people from such different backgrounds, swapping perspectives over meals, on bus rides to Ouro Preto, or during Portuguese class, added a whole extra dimension to the experience that went beyond the syllabus.

If the whole program had been building toward something, it was the last night. Everyone came together for the luau, a talent show that's become a tradition of the program. Students got up and performed songs and dances and it turned into this joyful, slightly chaotic celebration of everyone's different backgrounds. Paired with that was a gift exchange, where everyone brought something small and personal to swap. It sounds simple, but it ended up being one of the most touching parts of the whole trip, unwrapping a little piece of someone else's home and handing over a piece of yours in return.

Overall, I'd highly recommend the UFMG Summer School on Brazilian Studies to anyone curious about Brazil or just someone looking for an immersive academic and cultural experience. The combination of expert lectures, language classes, cultural excursions, and genuinely good food made it academically and culturally one of the richest two weeks I've had. But honestly, what I'll remember most is international and Brazilian mixing together over pão de queijo before a 9am lecture. It's the Brazilian students choosing, night after night, to spend their evenings showing us their city instead of just handing us a map. And it's that last night, the luau, watching people who'd been strangers two weeks earlier get up and perform, then trading small gifts that meant more than their size suggested.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to take part in the Erasmus+ mobility programme and gain this invaluable international experience. Two weeks is a strange amount of time, long enough to build real friendships, short enough that the goodbyes at the end hit harder than you expect. If you get the chance to attend, take it. Just be ready to leave a little piece of your heart in Belo Horizonte.

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