

Romania: Internship & Culture Reflection

Coming into the Romania trip I had very few expectations (good or bad) or even much knowledge of what the experience would be like. This was mainly because the school year was so incredibly busy that I did not have any time to think about much except the present moment, and the class was too far into the distant future. Upon arriving in Romania, almost all of my expectations were exceeded. From the people to the work culture to the history, the entire trip was an incredibly fun, and sometimes challenging learning experience. The following is a reflection on all the different elements of the trip.

The Internship

Arriving at Continental, I knew little about what the company did, but I was expecting to be paired with Tobin and Rachael in a department so I could lean on them a little; however, once we reached the company and I was put by myself on the data science team I felt both nervous and excited. It's intimidating to come into an environment where not only are all the people unfamiliar, but also the language and business practices. Everyone was incredibly friendly from the start, which helped me feel more comfortable. I was also impressed by how well everyone spoke English, but felt bad that they were forced to speak English simply because I was there.

After introductions were made, I was given a data cleaning task which sounded straight forward, but of course data cleaning is never very straight forward. I think one of the most challenging parts of doing the work was that I was intimidated to ask questions. I wasn't sure what style of worker my supervisor was. For example, does he prefer someone who works through problems by themselves no matter how long it takes or does he prefer being interrupted multiple times but the work gets done faster? I decided to feel out his style and at first simply kept trying to solve the issues I had by myself and using Google.

This worked out until I reached a breaking point where I absolutely could not figure out the next step, so I asked him for help. He was responsive and spent time working through the problem with me. I decided from then on if I spent more than an hour or so on something without success, it was best to see if he had a spare moment and ask for some help. I was able to work through a few different tasks at Continental and was glad that I could help contribute to work that they needed to get done.

Additionally, I learned new coding techniques and it was great to be able to see how data science was being utilized by a manufacturing company. I actually wish I had been given more information and explanation on what different team members were doing and how their work was impacting the bottom line at Continental. I should have been a bit more willing to ask questions and put myself out there, but did not want to disturb the quiet work environment.

One of my favorite things about work was how friendly everyone was with one another. As each person walked in in the morning they would go around the room and say hello/shake hands with their fellow employees. I thought it was quite nice for everyone to acknowledge each other in this way. Additionally, everyone always ate lunch together. Even in the busy canteen, the first few to get food would wave everyone else down to the eating spot and we would all converse on various topics. Lunch was where I got to know the rest of the employees and I felt like I made some really good connections. I hope that they got a good impression of an American student and worker, and I was able to learn more about Romanian workers and their process to get to their current employment. We also found similarities in

our hobbies, taste in tv shows/movies, and so much more. It is wonderful to be connected in this way across so many thousands of miles. Overall, I had a good work experience and would recommend more data science students being paired with that department at Continental.

The Culture

Having no previous knowledge of Romania's history or people, I'm glad that history and cultural lessons were a part of the trip. I enjoyed the lectures by the professors in the Engineering school, especially the presentation on the invasions in Romania over the course of the centuries. I also enjoyed the visit to Astra Museum and the walking tour around Sibiu. Sibiu has a such a rich history and to walk around and have it explained to us was interesting. My favorite cultural element was going to people's houses and eating traditional food and drink. I am Greek, and food is such a big part of Greek culture. I felt a similar hospitality and pride from the Romanians as I typically do with the Greeks which was wonderful. In particular, it was fun to go into the basement of the first family's home and drink his homemade wine and tuică! It felt very authentic and I could see the joy of Romanian people even though many of them have gone through difficult and challenging times.

The Adventures

I believe that our group was lucky we only had nine people. This enabled us to move a bit more freely on road trips, stay overnight, etc. I enjoyed seeing the different areas of Romania like the castles, Alba Iulia, and especially the hike into the mountains. One of my favorite things about Romania was the landscape. It reminded me of Montana and I felt really at home in that environment. It was exceptionally green which was a slight change from dry Montana in July! I wish we could have done more hiking and outdoor activities closer to Sibiu. Even though it was an adventure to go see the castles, etc., so much of our time was spent in the car. Overall this detracted from the experience and in hindsight I would have preferred to take shorter trips to maximize our time. I also felt like there was an interesting dynamic between people wanting to go on trips because they wanted to or because they felt obligated to. Perhaps a group vote (potentially anonymous) would help outline the exact activities the majority of the group wants to do and lend to making the adventures the best they can be.

The People

Finally, what really made the trip so wonderful was the people. I felt welcomed by everyone we met with the entire time. First, the Romanian students were such an integral part of the experience. I am actually slightly shocked at how willing they were to donate their time to be with us and help us navigate in a foreign city. They were so accepting of the entire group; it really turned into one big family over the course of the trip. I made some friends that I will hopefully have for a long time, and I know that I am always welcome back in Romania by them and they know they can come to Montana to see us at any time. These students were integral to the experience and I hope that they will continue to be there for future trips because it is so much more fun with them around! Additionally, faculty from the Engineering school, especially Mihaela, really went above and beyond to make it an exceptional trip. And finally, all the families who opened their home to us to share a meal were very kind and gave us a window into what life is like for a Romanian. A big thank you to you and Eddie for facilitating the trip. I hope that it continues to be an option for future students and the nasty flu we got was just a fluke from our year!

