

Study Abroad at UCLA – Laura Nagle

Reminiscing on my time spent at UCLA is a bittersweet moment. The 10 weeks that I spent there were filled with new experiences, friendships and a lot of sun. It was a bit of a shock to the system, having left a very cold brisk Irish January, to arrive to the 20-degree climate of Southern California, but I settled in well. I was very lucky to have travelled with another girl from my course, and the Ad Astra academy, Molly, someone I was already very good friends with, so it made the trip less daunting and distracted from any feelings of homesickness. However, once college and classes started up, we were quickly whisked away into the hustle and bustle of UCLA 'Bruin' life.

Classes at UCLA were quite different to what I have usually experienced. A focus on more in-class discussions and student contribution was something that took a while to get used to. Additionally, continuous assessment was a large aspect of my final grade, which reduced the pressure surrounding the final exam; something I was very grateful at the end of my time there, considering the conditions in which I had to take these exams. Classes were engaging and enjoyable, however I missed the more practical aspects of my degree in terms of laboratory classes and hands-on projects; something which UCD excels at, in my opinion.

Outside of the classroom, it felt like I was living in a movie. Day trips to the beach at Santa Monica, watching the skateboarders at Venice beach, strolling down Rodeo Drive keeping our eyes peeled for celebrities. It didn't feel real. The most surreal experience was the night myself and my friends ran to the nearby town, Westwood Village, to get a glimpse of Justin and Hailey Bieber. After hiding in a famous cookie shop for over two hours, we managed to get photos of the couple walk by; I still have to look at the pictures I took to remind myself that it was real. Life there is so different to home; the sunny weather and celebrity lifestyle feels as if you've just walked off a set of a Nicholas Sparks movie.

Unfortunately, this dreamlike world had to come to an end; and so, it did rather abruptly. Within a matter of days of the Covid-19 situation worsening, both in California and at home, and the introduction of a travel ban between Ireland and the United States, we made the decision to come home. Those last few days were quite a blur. I had a 12-hour turnaround from when I booked a flight home to actually leave the country, and all of this was during finals week. Having already completed a lot of my coursework, the pressure wasn't as high, but it still didn't completely alleviate the worry of getting home.

It was as a result of the Ad Astra Academy that enabled me to have this wonderful experience and to be able to travel to the West Coast America for college; something I have wanted since I was in secondary school. Additionally, the support from the Ad Astra Academy during these unprecedented times has been extremely comforting and reassuring. They kept in touch to make sure we were safe and have alleviated any worries and concerns we had.

I look back on my time at UCLA with fondness and happiness and count my blessings that I was able to go on exchange. Following my time spent at UCLA, I am really excited about commencing my masters in energy systems engineering at UCD this coming September and having the continued support and guidance of the Ad Astra Academy.



Molly and I, with Brian O'Driscoll, at the Rugby 7s tournament in Los Angeles



Molly and I at the Hollywood sign



Myself, my friends, Annabel and Riya at Venice Beach



Myself at Santa Monica Beach