

### Banged up abroad

It had been an amazing year studying abroad so far. I had chosen to spend my year studying in Cyprus, not my first choice, but I couldn't go to Australia as the Covid restrictions at the time had gotten in the way of that. Not a bad second choice by any means, though. I knew that I wanted to take part in the study abroad programme, and my only requirement was that it be a hot country that I had never been to before. Cyprus was a relatively small island, which means I was able to explore everywhere during my time there and balance my studies, from the beautiful beaches of Paphos to the amazing nightlife of Ayia Napa, from the strips of Larnaca to the amazing villages in the cold Troodos Mountains.

Actually, getting out there had been a chore and a half. The requirements for an entry visa were draining. Numerous blood tests, a chest x-ray, a police certificate to prove that I had no criminal record and a copy of my passport. Everything short of the kitchen sink was needed, which then needed to be sent off for an apostille stamp at an exorbitant price per document to be sent back to me and mailed to Cyprus. After every procedure, I wasn't even able to fly out until the end of October when I was supposed to have been in the country by the start of September. I had been attending my classes over Zoom, and due to the time difference, if I had a 9 a.m. lecture I would need to be up by 7 a.m. to attend it.

I made sure to bring some comforts from home with me despite not having a ton of space. Primarily among which was my PS5. This thing travelled with me to and from the country on every flight, wrapped in bubble wrap and placed gently into my backpack as I didn't trust the airport luggage team. Despite some weird looks from the customs people, it went swimmingly.

My room in my student accommodation building was incredible, cheaper than anything in England and much nicer. A studio apartment with a king-sized bed, a big double shower in an ensuite bathroom with a TV and desk included in an air-conditioned room, my own private balcony and a beautiful wall decorated with murals. Video calls from friends and family were basically just a montage of making them jealous.

Apart from the bad quadbike crash I had in Paphos, where I had flipped a quadbike off a ditch and nearly killed myself, having to pay hundreds of euros for the damages. The rest of the year had been filled with new friends, new learning opportunities, and new adventures travelling across a country I had never been to.

I received an invite from friends that I had met through events hosted by the Erasmus programme to go to a party on the northern side of Cyprus, which had been invaded by the Turkish years ago and was now held under occupation. In hindsight, this was something that I should have absolutely learned more about, as this could have seriously aided in my decision-making skills.

Sophia, a Czech girl I had known since arriving, had texted me, 'Hey Charlie, I'm near the border gate now, no one else is here where are you?.'

I read the text whilst sitting in the Bolt on the way to the gate. I had called the Bolt and left my building in a rush in the worry that I would be late and was now slightly concerned that my driver had been on a phone call the entire drive, not even using a speaker or handset, just driving with the phone held to his ear yelling at someone.

'Almost there, currently worried about dying, my driver's on his phone.' I responded with a laughing emoji.

Once I arrived at the border gate, donning a small chest-slung bag and a bucket hat I had gotten from a friend back home. This bucket hat was one of my prized possessions, my friend's mother had made one for each of us, and the design on it was a plethora of chocolate and sweet wrappers with the words cut and put together to spell curse words.

I greeted Sophia, and we waited for the others. About 15 minutes had passed, and we were considering giving up when the others finally arrived. Peter, Christopher, Noellie, Filip and Orienne approached dressed in festival-style clothing, and the gang got out their passports and negative COVID tests so we could cross the border.

Due to the occupation, inflation had skyrocketed, and we quickly procured bottles of alcohol for fractions of the price that they would have normally been. I picked up a bottle of Gordon's Gin for what equated to about three pounds. We drank them en route to the party, which was being held on the rooftop of a hotel.

When we arrived at the party, we weren't finished with our alcohol, but as students with not a lot of money, we didn't want to waste anything, so we found a large bin near the hotel and hid our drinks in a bag behind. We collectively agreed that this was a genius move and headed into the party.

The party went amazingly, with a DJ and a pool; it was an unforgettable night. There was a big display of lights on a mountain in the distance displaying the Turkish flag. The weather was warm despite it being dark. The drinks were cheap, and the company was good. Everything was looking to be a great night.

The party was only stopped by the actual event ending and a very intoxicated group heading home. We retrieved our treasures from the ground and continued to drink on our way back.

At some point, the group split up due to different after-party arrangements or leaving via different border gates. I chose to head home as I was in no state to attend an after-party if I valued my liver's health.

I was then by myself, very drunk and lost. I used my phone to navigate this foreign land before laying my eyes on a set of fences with a large gap. I looked at my phone map, noticing that I was near the gate. I glanced through the fences. It was just broken-up gravel on the other side. I could make out no signage on the fencing indicating that it was important, be that either my inability to read other languages or my inebriated state impairing my observational abilities.

'Oh, it must be roadworks,' I thought to myself, 'I'll just cut through here for a shortcut to the gate.'

It was, in fact, not roadworks.

One, two, three, four steps I took across the gap in the fences and onto the gravel before hearing a loud yell in a language he didn't understand.

'FUCKING STOP!' I understood that time.

Three soldiers appeared from a broken-up building with assault rifles pointed at me.

I immediately complied as every instinct in my body told me I might be about to die; my heart was racing, and I was in a cold sweat. I had never had a gun pointed at me before, let alone under the threat of being shot. I was ordered onto my knees with my hands behind my head as the soldiers checked my pockets and took my bag, searching through it.

'You are English?' one said as he looked through my passport.

'Yes, I'm studying at a university on the south side. I'm just trying to get back home.' I said in my best attempt at a polite voice so as to not antagonise but which likely came out as a fast, panicked vomit of words.

One of the soldiers mentioned that they had a cousin from England, and I tried to use that, conversing with him, asking where his cousin was from, telling him where I was from and so forth. Formalities that were attempting to build up to asking them just to let me go. The other two seemed very suspicious of me, however, and had called someone. Be it either the fear of very real danger, the alcohol in my system, or a mixture of both amplified by the other; I began to think of ways to make a quick escape as, in my head, they could very easily have put a bullet in my head and covered it up to avoid the stress of an arrest. However, my fears of death were calmed when a police truck showed up at the scene, and I was bundled into the back of it.

I was arrested for trespassing on a military zone on the north/south border and taken to a police station still on the north side. Where I was told I would probably be out in a couple of days as it was clearly just a drunken mistake. This brought me a mixture of relief and dread. On the one hand, I wasn't going to die and would be out soon. On the other hand, I had never been in a prison cell before, and I couldn't imagine the cells on a mostly dilapidated side of Cyprus were very nice, to say the least.

My bag, jewellery and phone were all taken, but not before I was able to send a text to my dad explaining what had happened. I was taken underground and put in a prison cell with no windows or clocks. I lay on the cold concrete with no clue as to what was happening and drifted into a painful sleep.

What followed was the world's worst hangover, a rude awakening by my cell bars being clattered on by a guard. I sat up and looked around. The cell was small and entirely concrete. Even the bed was a raised slab of concrete. With no pillow or any kind of comforter. I was given two rough blankets, one to fold up and use as a pillow and one to cover myself with. Despite being in a ridiculously hot country, the cells were freezing. I was afraid of insects being in there with me, but I doubt even a cockroach could have survived down there. My only way of telling what time of day it was a small, thin vent in the top corner of my cell that led to the surface. Through this, I could see if it was light or dark.

My head hurt, and I couldn't see as I had to take my contact lenses out in order to sleep, and I didn't have my glasses with me. I was ordered out of my cell, handcuffed, and taken to the surface. I caught a reflection of myself in the window and shocked myself at the mess I was in, I was dirty from being on the floor during my arrest and still had glitter on my face from the party. I was again put into the back of a police truck and taken to a Covid testing centre, wherein myself and other inmates were marched past gawking pedestrians in order to be tested. I had never been more embarrassed in front of people I didn't know and would likely never see again.

Once we returned to the station, I was given the worst news yet: it would likely not be a 'couple of days' as I would have to go to both a regular court and a military court. This ignited new fear within me as I didn't know what any kind of sentencing would have in store for me.

I was allowed one call or text from my phone before being put back into my cell. I chose to text my dad as I wouldn't have trusted him in a million years to pick up a phone call. He had seen my previous text, and I opened my phone to a reply.

‘You fucking idiot Charlie are you okay?’

I replied, explaining that I was okay, but I would be here for longer than expected. I let him know the name of the station I was at and asked him to get in contact with the British Embassy. One of the benefits of being in Cyprus is that the British army had quite a large presence there, and I hoped that my British citizenship would aid me in being released.

The days I had inside the cells were more mentally tough than anything. Not knowing what time of day it was, combined with the fact that one couldn’t shower or clean their teeth, made me retreat into a sort of survival mode. At one point, someone who had clogged the toilet was dragged out of their cell by the neck and hit by the guards before being made to clean it by hand. The food was tough to eat by itself, let alone when you haven’t been able to clean your teeth, two sandwiches wrapped in foil shoved aggressively through the cell bars a day. Bread so hard it could be used to build the third little pig’s house, a rubbery bit of cheese, a slice of tomato so slushy it may as well be puree, a bit of lettuce that I was convinced was just green-coloured paper and a slice of meat so processed that it would make SPAM blush.

To make matters worse, I lay in my cell every day wondering if the text had even been sent. This was potentially what could save me, and I knew the reception underground wasn’t great. If my dad hadn’t got the text, then there was nothing that could be done.

I made a few friends there, the only two people who could speak English. A guy who had been arrested with counterfeit money, and a guy who had been arrested for trying to break into the country. They translated for me as during the day, the cell doors were unlocked, and we could all stand in the L-shaped cell block and talk. Some inmates even managed to get cigarettes in and would smoke. The stories I heard from these inmates blew my mind. Some of these people had lived such unfortunate lives, as well as committed serious crimes. One guy, an older Turkish gentleman, had been arrested for trafficking cocaine and pills over the border. he was also an extremely loud snorer, and it was hard to sleep at night as his snores would reverberate throughout the cells. Another couple of guys, two Syrian brothers, had been arrested trying to get into the country and had been in those cells for three months by the time I got there. I simply couldn’t picture it, living in those conditions for months on end in a country where virtually no one spoke their language. I felt less able to complain about my position when face to-face with these people.

We made sure to all stand in the half of the block that was away from the entrance, however, as that was the only area not covered by cameras. I tried to keep up conversations with people to stop myself from going into despair, but not being able to see, combined with the fear of screwing up my life over drunkenly stepping into the wrong area, was always on my mind, and I often found myself returning to my cell to either stare at the ceiling or nap to make the time pass faster. I wasn’t eating, so the lack of energy made it easier to sleep.

About a week into my incarceration, a fight broke out. I had been lying in my cell at the time, worrying about missing my exams and wondering what would happen if I did. I heard yelling in Greek from around the corner, followed by loud bangs as someone was thrown against a cell door. Two guards came running in, and as I opened my cell door, I saw them dragging a younger Greek guy away and out of the cell block for medical attention. his face was bloody, and his nose looked broken. I asked one of the guys who spoke English about it later, and they told me that he and another inmate had gotten into an argument regarding football teams, which had then escalated into the younger man insulting the other inmate’s family. When we were locked in cells underground in those conditions with nothing to do all day, tensions could rise easily. I feared

making enemies in there since the cells were left unlocked during the day, and nothing would stop another inmate from coming into my cell and harming me were I to be napping.

I'm agnostic at the best of times, but I often found myself praying for help.

I was arrested on Saturday night and was supposed to have been able to go to court a few days later, but delays were quite common, and it was nearly two weeks in those cells before I was taken to court. I was handcuffed to another inmate. I had no solicitor and spoke for myself with a translator present. The translator advised me to explain what had happened and to act remorseful, but there was no acting needed as I, at that point, was the epitome of scared and apologetic. The court ruled that my case would be settled in a military court as I had technically broken military law. As I was being taken out of the courthouse, again handcuffed, I heard a frantic yell from behind me.

'CHARLIE!'

I turned around to see my mother sprinting toward me, followed closely after by my father.

I asked the officer taking me if I could have a second to talk to my parents, and he graciously agreed, much to the disdain of the inmate to whom I was handcuffed.

It was emotional, not just because I'd been in prison and was in a state but because since being out there, I hadn't seen them much at all. They'd divorced when I was eighteen, so seeing them together was even more rare. They were allowed to ride back to the station in the truck with us, and we were allowed to speak before I was taken back below. It turned out that the British embassy had done nothing except tell them where to find me. No solicitor had been issued since they assumed I would be out in a few days. The officer and the translator were with us when we were talking and let my parents know where the military court was so they could be with me. I said goodbye to my parents and was again taken underground to the cells.

It was two more days before I was taken to the military court, and my parents had rented a room at a nearby hotel in order to be there to support me. I was taken to the waiting room outside of the court and sat with them whilst my mother attempted to feed me more food than Henry VIII consumed on a weekly basis.

Eventually, I stood before the court in the same setting as before. One of my friends in the cells had advised me to keep my hands by my side as opposed to in front of me as it was a sign of respect. I spoke again with remorse and waited with bated breath for the verdict.

The military court wanted to give me one day in an actual prison, a full one, not like the cells under the police station I was being held in. This, however, would have meant an extra 14 days of isolation in prison. But the fact that my parents had flown to my help out worked in my favour. The Turkish seem to be a very family-oriented culture, and since the officer assigned to my case had got along with my parents, he took pity, driving to the prison and signing the papers that said that I had served the one day, before returning and saying I was being released. My possessions were returned to me, thankfully including my prized bucket hat.

I was taken to the border gate, and my passport was stamped, indicating that I could never return to the north side of Cyprus. I had essentially been deported to the south side. I did not care as now I was free.

I met up with my parents, and we went back to my apartment in a taxi. I was receiving calls and texts from friends and family who had no clue as to where I had gone. My friends had been calling hospitals and the police, trying to find me. After returning to my apartment building, I had to

go through the awkward process of explaining to the receptionist where I had been as I had been gone for so long that my key card no longer worked. My apartment needed a desperate clean during my unexpected absence as food had gone off and dust had settled. I took a long shower, and we went out for the first real food I had eaten in weeks, I had lost over half a stone during my time locked up and could barely finish my burger now my stomach had shrunk. My parents were already making the 'Midnight Express' jokes. But I was home, and that was all that mattered.

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