

# Studying in the High Arctic Archipelago Svalbard

## Erasmus+ exchange report

The University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS) is a joint institute from the Universities in Tromsø, Bergen, Stavanger, and Oslo, that gives students the opportunity to dive into diverse fields of research in the Arctic. For four months, from end of July until December, I studied Arctic Biology at UNIS via the European exchange program Erasmus+.

In the following report, I will describe the application process and organization, the journey, the student housing, the courses, and my daily life and leisure time.

### *Application and organization*

The application for UNIS was very simple once I found it on the webpage of the university in Stavanger, the partner university where I first intended to do my exchange semester. In Oldenburg, all I had to do was to follow the application guideline and Erasmus+ checklist. Therefore, I contacted the responsible person for exchanges in Europe, the departmental coordinator, and the study advisor. I applied in the beginning of February and got the letter of admission in April. Unfortunately, UNIS is not mentioned as partner university on the webpage of the university in Oldenburg, because it is not a university itself. You need to be enrolled into studies in one of the universities, operating at UNIS (Tromsø, Bergen, Stavanger, and Oslo). Nevertheless, it is important to note that you can study at UNIS even if you are not part of an exchange program. Then, you will be enrolled automatically in Tromsø and must pay the fee there. For the Erasmus+ application process, this circumstance made it slightly more difficult to write the learning agreement, because I first had to tell all the involved coordinators from both home and host university that I did not really intend to go to Stavanger. The learning agreement still must be signed by a university on the Norwegian mainland! Furthermore, the semester starts earlier at UNIS than at other European universities because of the dark season which starts in late October. But in the end, it all worked out really well and the responsible persons in Oldenburg even dealt with my application a little bit earlier to ensure that I can go to UNIS in time.

### *Journey*

Traveling by plane to Svalbard from any other European countries than Norway is very tiring because there are only two direct flights from either Tromsø or Oslo. An overnight stay in Copenhagen or Oslo is mostly not avoidable. It is necessary to have enough transfer time in Oslo on the journey there because the luggage is not checked through when arriving in Norway and taking another domestic flight (even though they tell you so at the airports in Berlin and Copenhagen). On the journey back home, this is not a problem, and the luggage is checked through all the way. In Tromsø, many planes make a quick stop to pick up some more passengers, and due to toll regulations, all passengers have to leave the plane to go through another security check and passport control. The last flight takes only one and a half hours, and if you are lucky, you can see partly snow-covered mountains and glaciers from the plane. Sometimes, however, it is too stormy, cloudy, or foggy in Longyearbyen for the plane to land, and it has to fly back to Tromsø. Once arrived in Longyearbyen, one of the two Norwegian settlements on Svalbard, a bus is waiting to take all passengers into town. The moment when the bus passes the Polar bear sign, indicating the end of the settlement, is when I realized that I am actually there – on High Arctic on Svalbard.

### *Student housing*

The student housing in Elvesletta, provided by the Norwegian company samskipnaden, was finished in August 2021. It contains two buildings, one for short-term inhabitants, one for students that stay for more than one month. The arrival at the student housing is very uncomplicated. The doors of the rooms are open, and the keys lay inside. If one of the two is not the case, it is very easy to contact



*Elvesletta building in front of Sukkertoppen*

the housing personnel by phone or go to their office in the next building. All rooms have bunkbeds, so that it is possible to share a room, and a private bathroom. Kitchens are shared with 4 to 9 people. It is also possible to rent single or two-bed apartments. The application process is initiated by an email that you will get from your Norwegian host university and works via an online housing portal. Elvesletta is located in the city centre, next to the river. The distances are very short: Five minutes by foot to UNIS, two minutes to the stores, 15 minutes

to the sports centre with gym, swimming pool, and climbing wall, and 10 minutes to Bruktikken, the best second-hand trade store in the world. Disregarding its expensive price, I was satisfied with my room in Elvesletta and very happy with the people I shared kitchen with.

### *Courses*

All courses can be found at [www.unis.no](http://www.unis.no). There are summer (June-December), and winter (January-May) courses. Choose your studies (Arctic Biology, Arctic Geology, Arctic Geophysics, or Arctic Technology), and then the courses you want to take. I took Arctic Terrestrial Biology, and Arctic Population Ecology, two courses with 15 ECTS. The workload for both courses is quite high, as each has a report and final exam as examinations. The lab work, too, can be tiring. But the work is definitely worth it. I learned not only biological aspects, but also connections between all research fields in the Arctic, including climate change, and skills such as reading, presenting, and writing literature, communication, and teamwork. The teachers and guest lecturers at UNIS have a great knowledge of their specific research field, and a very good relationship to their students. All teachers were available most of the times when help with the reports was needed. They were supportive and positive regarding our ideas. The highlight of the courses, however, is the fieldtrip to stunning places on Svalbard where you would not even go with a tourist company. As amazing as these excursions may be, as important it is to be well prepared in the field, where hazards like landslides, avalanches, rockfall, and most important, Polar bear encounters can occur. Therefore, UNIS has mandatory safety courses in both summer in winter, instructing the students in how to orientate without cell phone service, how to be safe in water and on land, and how to scare a Polar bear. Altogether, the courses at UNIS met, and even exceeded my expectations.



*AB201 fieldtrip*

### *Daily life and leisure time*

The daily life in Longyearbyen is simple and incredibly relaxed. There is no rush or hectic felt at all because of the short distances, and, during winter, because of the cold. University starts at 9 am and goes until 2 pm or sometimes 4 pm, depending on the course. There is one hour lunch break in which everybody comes together in the cantina, warmed by the fireplace in the middle, that is surrounded by sofas. Students on Svalbard spend their leisure time with all sorts of activities. There are many sport courses offered at Svalbardhallen, the local gym. Especially during summer, people hike up the



*Student cabin in Björndalen*

mountains surrounding the city, to the glaciers and ice caves, or go for overnight hikes to cabins. One cabin that needs to be mentioned here is the student cabin in Björndalen, the next valley. Student led groups care for the cabin maintenance, student equipment renting, Friday gatherings, and other activities. If you want to meet many new people and dive deep into UNIS's daily life, then get involved in one of the groups! Another highlight is Pyramiden, the abandoned Russian mining settlement that is reachable by boat from Longyearbyen. Additionally, there are many tourist companies in Longyearbyen, offering dog sledding, ATV rides, and similar trips (mind the costs there). During dark season, when the boat trips stop, and long hikes get more difficult, the people in Longyearbyen organize many events like movie nights, parties, festivals, and concerts. Not to forget: Northern lights. It does not get boring just because it is dark!

### *Experiences*

I cannot tell any "worst experiences" during my stay on Svalbard. However, I must mention that I got much more sensitive for the ecological impact Longyearbyen brings to the Arctic ecosystem on Svalbard. Of course, tourism is a major factor, and I was just lucky that no huge cruise ships landed while I was there. Although many locals depend on tourism, the idea of thousands of people running through Longyearbyen's streets disturbs the picture of the quiet and relaxed place I lived in. Another factor that needs consideration is that there is no sewage system in Longyearbyen, and that people still heat with coal (although the mine is right around the corner, so that there are almost no transport emissions). Just think about this before visiting Svalbard.

Best experiences on the other hand are many: a peaceful encounter with a Polar bear mum with two cubs, the fieldtrip, dogsledding, hiking up snow-covered Nordenskiöldtoppen and Sarkofagen mountains, and Pyramiden.

The Dos and Don'ts on Svalbard are simple: Do whatever you want and can under consideration of safety issues (especially Polar bears), don't have too much fomo – fear of missing out -, you will get a unique experience anyways.



*Sled dogs in front of the famous Polar bear sign*