

July 2020

### **Study Abroad Report: Stavanger, Norway**

My semester abroad in Stavanger, Norway was unique for multiple reasons. First, Norway is one of my home countries yet I had never before lived in the city of Stavanger. Second, this semester was interrupted by COVID-19 and like every other aspect of life, the school routine and daily schedule was upended. The preparation process was relatively easy given that I have a Norwegian citizenship and that this semester abroad is an integral part of my European Master in Migration and Intercultural Relations (EMMIR). Therefore, there was little bureaucratic work that had to be completed for a residency permit or credit transfers.

Organizing a place to stay was an aspect that required a little extra work. Together with my soon-to-be flatmates (two friends in my EMMIR class) the three of us spent several weeks searching for a flat in the coastal city of Stavanger. Being the only Norwegian speaker in the group, it was natural for me to be in charge of completing paperwork and communicating with the landlords. After multiple unsuccessful e-mail exchanges and phone calls with potential renters, our looming departure date narrowed our list of criteria down to any affordable place with a roof. Our steadily declining standards combined with slight desperation made us jump for joy when we found an offer online with a vague description stating, “all you need to bring is your toothbrush!” followed by three blurry pictures, one of which had a finger covering 40% of the image. We signed the housing contract that same day. In retrospect it sounds a bit reckless but what the landlord lacked in marketing and photography skills she made up for in hospitality. Early January, I took the train from Oslo and arrived at the Stavanger station seven hours later. The landlord and her husband waited on the platform, helped carry my embarrassingly heavy bag, and drove me to the house where my roommates had already arrived. Our house was surprisingly big for three students. Built in 1910, the tall, wooden structure would creak and sway in the gusts of wind coming off the coast. Every corner and closet of that house was haphazardly filled to maximum capacity with antique appliances, old furniture, and vintage decorations. It was a dream house for antique hoarders, a nightmare for fire-safety regulators, and an unlikely residence for three women on a student budget. One day the landlords scolded us for hanging up a poster on the dining room wall, informing us that they had personally flown to London to buy that 18th century wallpaper. In our defense, we hadn’t known the age or value of the wallpaper. In their defense, we probably should’ve assumed that everything within those walls was old and valuable. Another day, I locked myself outside and when I called the landlord to ask if they had a spare key hidden outside, they drove 20 minutes out of their way -without me even asking- to unlock the door for me. All in all, the house itself was an entertaining experience and the owners, as eccentric as they may have been, were warm, helpful, and at the very least, never boring.

Living with roommates always has its perks and challenges. Luckily I knew my two roommates well and the three of us got along splendidly. We built a nice routine of making and

eating dinners together most evenings. One didn't eat gluten, the other was vegan, and I am borderline religious about cheese and bread. In hindsight, I now recognize how this situation made me reflect on social norms, nutrition, and adapting to new habits. I now cherish these shared evenings as one of the highlights of my time in Stavanger. I also eat more vegetables.

Physical activity was a cornerstone of daily life in Stavanger and the gym memberships we signed up for were a godsend. One of my roommates and I would walk home from school as often as we could while our other roommate, a lovely Dutch girl, would bike (true to her roots, she was almost physically revolted by the idea of walking when we all knew of the existence of bicycles). In late January, my American roommate and I were shocked to find out that the university had a lacrosse team. Lacrosse, a field sport originating in the indigenous tribes of North America, was something I had played as a child in the U.S. and had never seen it played in Europe before. I sent an email to the captain of the team asking if the two of us could join, never expecting that we would be allowed to so easily. A few days later we were the token American players on the university's lacrosse team and training to be in the tournament for the Norwegian national championship. While COVID-19 may have rudely interrupted our chances of becoming national champions in lacrosse, I will still tell my grandchildren that story.

We went to classes and mingled with students in the hallways and at gym classes. As the half-Norwegian student in the class, I felt like a Norwegian ambassador of sorts. Stavanger, however, was new to me too. As Norway's fourth largest city, it still feels like a town. Although more than five decades have passed since the city became wealthy on oil found off of the coast, I still felt as though it was perpetually stuck between the old fishing town and the ultra wealthy oil industry. This strange limbo meant that the streets lined with the quintessential Norwegian wood houses were quiet all day, every day until Friday and Saturday evenings when locals in expensive wrist watches would come out to drink copious amounts of alcohol. My foreign classmates would ask me about the culture, why public spaces were so quiet, why everything was so expensive, why people ate so much bread and potatoes. I would jokingly respond with, "from another perspective, almost every country you go after you leave Norway will be cheaper and warmer" and they laughed but nodded with seriousness. Thankfully, there was another Norwegian in the class who was more enamored with national ties and traditions and could defend this country much more passionately than I. In all seriousness, I tried my best to explain that while other countries may offer livelier urban scenes or more exciting cuisine, Norway distinguishes itself with a culture that is collectively and passionately centered around nature. My classmates and I enjoyed some excursions to surrounding islands and low lying coastal mountain tops. I attempted to explain the importance of Norway's *friluftsliv* (outdoor life) and how the Norwegian identity is rooted in and shaped by the country's remarkable fjords, harsh climate, vast mountains and forests. To fully appreciate Norway, one must pack a tent, leave the cities, and embrace the Norwegian gospel: there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. Unsurprisingly, as we zipped up our rain jackets and put on scarves day after day, this phrase wasn't always well-received among my peers.

This semester and previous studies abroad have taught me a few points that can be useful for student exchanges. First, remember that as a foreign student you are not only representing yourself but your country as a whole- act accordingly. Second, it's important not to think of new surroundings within a binary of good and bad. Rather, things are simply different. One will profit from putting more energy into curiosity and less energy into judgment. Third, everyone you meet is someone you can learn from. Some of the most insightful conversations I've had as an exchange student have been with grocery store workers, elderly neighbors, and taxi drivers. As an exchange student in France, my first lasting friendship was with a cashier at the local pharmacy and some of the most important history lessons I learned were the stories my school's janitor would share with me. Seek out people of different backgrounds, ages, and interests who are all around you and listen, ask, learn. The simple sentence "I'm from another country and I'm interested in hearing what you think about..." or "I just moved here from abroad and I don't understand why..." can roll off the tongue. Using this to your advantage can provide new color, complexity, and meaning to the foreign surroundings. In a new country where our familiar comfort zones from home no longer apply, it can seem more natural to break that barrier that has been constructed between strangers. I've found this mindsight to be helpful in most countries and especially so in places with more introverted cultures.

In conclusion, this semester of living in Norway and experiencing a new city alongside my foreign classmates has allowed me to observe this familiar country and culture from a new perspective. I appreciated, enjoyed, and learned much more than I expected and I'm therefore thankful for this unique experience.