In this report I will try to highlight some of the most practical, surprising and memorable experiences that I had during my semester abroad at the University of Stavanger during the winter semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. Please be aware that my exchange experience might have been a little different or not as complete as those of others due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I recommend you read reports from previous years too to get a full picture of what’s waiting for you up North!

PREPARATION

Because I am taking a joint degree master between UoL and UiS the application to the host institution went fairly smooth - my spot at UiS was basically guaranteed when I started the first semester of my master program at UoL, without any language requirements or need to write a motivation letter of some sort. The preparation for my exchange thus mostly consisted of applying for funds and finding housing. In terms of funding, I would recommend applying to the Erasmus+ grant (before you leave) and the mobility grant (while you’re there), both of which can be arranged through the International Office at UoL. Norway is an expensive country (a cucumber can easily be three euros, and don’t even get me started on the beer prices!) and you will definitely need all the financial aid you can get. As far as accommodation goes, I did not really hear of any students having serious issues finding a place to stay. I did not apply for the student housing they offer, though it seemed good, affordable and definitely a hub for exchange students. Instead I opted to live with friends, and we found a house to rent in the city center through Finn.no. Hybel and Airbnb are also great resources. I think you should expect to pay between 400 and 500 euros on housing per month.

GETTING THERE

While most people travel to Stavanger by plane I would highly encourage travelling over land by train and/or bus. From Hamburg you can either get a direct Flixbus to Oslo or a train to Copenhagen and a bus to Oslo from there. The Norwegian train from Oslo to Stavanger is super comfortable and offers 40% student discount. Combined with the discount you get from the Semesterticket on your way to Hamburg, the whole journey is probably cheaper then flying, it saves you a ton of CO2 emissions and it is most of all a very rich experience – you get to see a lot of places on the way, and so much time to reflect upon and be excited about what’s waiting for you in the upcoming months!

UNIVERSITY LIFE

During my stay in Stavanger I followed to following courses:

1. Emigration and Immigration: A Northern European Perspective (12 ECTS)
2. Migration and Integration (6 ECTS)
4. Controversies Over Multiculturalism (6 ECTS)

I have mixed feelings about Norwegian academia. The university campus and its facilities are very nice. The university library was one of my favorite places in the city and the same goes for the highly modern yet very affordable gym facilities. The education itself was pretty solid and included important pieces of theory, yet I was personally often missing a more critical/radical approach. I felt there was a lack of reflection upon Norwegian society and Norwegian practices, and I wish I would have learned more about (the forced displacement of) the Sami, the indigenous people of Northern
Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Although this critique in my opinion also holds for the two courses taught by the Slovenian partners (Migration and Integration, Controversies Over Multiculturalism) I think the African Perspectives on Migration course as taught by Lotte Pelckmans and Eric Hanou is a very welcome exception and is very critical upon European practices in portraying and intervening in Africa. Altogether I still learned a lot this semester as I was forced to do more self-study (partly due to Corona) through which I was able to focus more on topics and perspectives that I felt resonated with me, such as Nordic colonialism and Sami assimilation. I also learned quite a bit of Norwegian as I attended the course they offered at the university. I can also recommend going to the language cafés hosted by the university library as well as the public library in the city, which are completely free of charge! Sami studies and Norwegian are both things I could not easily have studied anywhere else, so that has been a clear benefit from studying in Norway!

TIPS

- Try to make local (Norwegian) friends! When I came to Norway I was told that Norwegians were very introvert and it was going to be hard to connect with them as a foreigner. My personal experience was completely different. I joined a climbing group and an environmentalist group both consisting of only Norwegians and I was instantly welcomed. Norwegians generally speak perfect English and usually don’t mind speaking it either. It was especially when corona hit and many internationals left the country that I was very happy I made Norwegian friends. Since they had access to cars and cabins I was even able to travel around the country with them for the rest of summer!
- Get a bike! As a southern and coastal Norwegian town Stavanger has a mild climate that is very suitable for biking. Although it has good bus services (also during the night) the distances are short making biking almost always faster than public transport. If you buy your bike second hand (I can recommend Finn.no or otherwise one of the second hand bike stores on Løkkeveien) and sell it after your exchange it will even be significantly cheaper too. Make sure to get a bike with good breaks and gears, and maybe bring a clean sweater or t-shirt if you’re biking to university – the hills make biking a good workout!
- If you get the chance to travel – go up North. Southern Norway is nice but I only really felt that I was in Norway when travelling further up the country. Friends of mine saw the Northern Lights in Tromsø in winter, but I personally backpacked through Nordland, Lofoten and Vesterålen during summer. The midnight sun, kind people, wild camping and generally stunning nature make for an absolutely unforgettable experience!
- Want to admire beautiful landscapes a bit closer to Stavanger? Explore Lysefjorden beyond Preikestolen or Kjerag, or travel to Hardangervidda or Jotunheimen National Park (Both East from Bergen). I also went surfing along the coast just south from Stavanger where they have beautiful sand beaches. If you’re into outdoor climbing you’ll be happy to find yourself in Norwegian climbing Mecca with enough crags and routes for a lifetime of outdoor fun! For these things you definitely need a car though, so either rent one with a group or – to get back to my first tip – make Norwegian friends!
- A collection of nice places around the city: Stokkavatnet for swimming and camping in summer, Café Sting for drinks and roof terrace, Hanekam for late night dancing, Fretex for cheap second-hand clothing, Mosvatnet for a nice walk, Godalen beach for swimming and a nice view over the fjord, Gadja for phenomenal Ethiopian food, TOU scene for concerts and culture, Gamle Stavanger for old white houses and cobbled streets, India Tandoori for mind-blowing Indian food, Greenpeas and Lille Asia for cheap (Asian) groceries.