

My experience at Umeå University - Summersemester 2012

By Daphne Gehrels

After learning my options for going abroad with the Erasmus program for my Master Sociology - European Societies, I quickly decided that Sweden would be my preferred choice of country. I had never been to Sweden before, but heard so many good things about the country, about its nature and landscapes, about the people, about the social system and about the food. I applied for the program in July 2011 and soon had to start preparing my stay in Umeå, and exchange semester at Umeå University. The Erasmus coordinator in Umeå was a really big help, as well as my own coordinator at the Freie Universität. Soon all the necessary paperwork was taken care of, and with the help of useful internet resources at www.umu.se I was able to find interesting and appropriate courses I could take during the semester. Whenever I had questions I could contact the coordinators personally, per email or per telephone. The welcome/information package from Umeå University was also a valuable resource in preparing myself for the exchange, especially the booklet 'Survival Guide'.

Housing was not a problem at all, as every exchange student in Umeå has the opportunity to book a room through the International Housing Office, which was a huge relief because it meant I did not have to look for a place to stay myself. My room, with personal bathroom, was located in a 'studentkorridor' (Swedish for 'WG') and together with 7 other students I shared the kitchen. Every housing complex has their own caretaker, who will come to fix problems or broken object when needed, you just have to give him or her a call. The rules in my korridor regarding cleaning were pretty strict. You were supposed to clean up after yourself immediately after using the kitchen, and every week one student had cleaning duty, which meant cleaning the kitchen and the hallway, emptying the dish-washing rack, and taking out the trash and the recycling. Recycling is very important in Sweden, and they have separate containers for glass, plastics, paper, metal and green trash.

At Umeå University many things had been arranged to make exchange students feel welcome. On the first few days introductory events and gatherings were organized and information on finding the course schedules was easily accessible. Everybody was really nice, if you had troubles finding the right seminar room or searching literature in the library you can always just ask someone. The university system in Sweden is slightly different from Germany, as courses are given a percentage as to how intensive and time-consuming they are. Courses usually do not last the whole semester, so finding the right courses that do not overlap in the same time period is important. I managed to combine my courses in such a way that I was always occupied with a course, but not too busy at one point in time. The grades given are either a fail, pass or pass with distinction, and I managed to pass all my courses without a problem. Teachers in Sweden are very non-authoritarian and open to discussion. You can always ask questions, it is actually highly encouraged, and a lot of the learning is based on discussions in seminars, instead of

one-way lectures. I also signed up for a Swedish course, level A1-A2, and it was nice to learn the language and being able to have conversations in Swedish.

Another great opportunity offered to exchange students at Umeå University is the so-called 'Buddy Group Program'. Here you are assigned to a group with about 40 other exchange students and fun social events are being organized regularly, such as snow activities, pre-parties, games nights, barbecues and fika's (the Swedish coffee tradition). It is truly a great way to meet people and make good friends and I highly recommend signing up for the program.



My new friends from all parts of the globe

Because I arrived in January, it was still very cold in Umeå. It was snowing a lot and freezing almost all the time. It is important to bring good warm shoes and warm clothing, and not to underestimate the force of the winter in North-Sweden! If you like winter sports, this is a great place to be of course, and trips to Lapland are organized if you want to go even further north. I managed to see the Northern lights in Umeå, which was really amazing, as well as real-life reindeers. Umeå is a small town (about 100.000 inhabitants), but there is still quite a lot to do. It has a few nice museums, many bars and cafés, an great shopping centre and especially a lot of nature. It is very easy to go out to the countryside and enjoy the landscape of Sweden, or just take a long walk in the many parks and forests around Umeå. Another great way to spend your time is at the sport center IKSU, which is the biggest sports center in Europe! You can

sign up for a 4 months membership (about 200 Euros) which gives you unlimited access to the complex and the classes. IKSU offers a wide variety of classes, from dance to boxing to cardio training to strength training and swimming. If you are sportive this is really a great place to be, and many students have a membership so it is easy to find a workout buddy. As I play the flute, I also joined the student orchestra of Umeå University (<http://www.snosvanget.se/>). They practice together every Wednesday and it is an organization very much focused on having fun together.

Sweden is unfortunately quite expensive in daily commodities, so it is important to have sufficient funding for your stay here. I managed to find a side-job as a cleaner, but generally it is very hard to find a job as an exchange student if you do not speak Swedish well. To be able to work you need to register at the migration office, and at the tax office to obtain a so-called 'samordningsnummer' (temporary tax identification number). Jobs can be found on the website of the Swedish job center: <http://www.arbetsformedlingen.se/>.

During my time in Umeå I have also made several trips, such as to Stockholm and Vaasa (on the other side of the Baltic Sea in Finland). Public transportation in Sweden is very good, there are many train, bus and even ferry connections to take you where you want to go. Also within Umeå most places are reachable by bus, but I recommend buying a bike just like I did. Umeå has a huge networks of very good bike paths, it is very safe to bike around and even in the winter the roads are accessible because city maintenance cleans the roads after every snowfall.



Me on my trip to Stockholm, the beautiful capital of Sweden

My best experience:

The night of the the Shåååven concert with Snösvanget, the student orchestra was one of my best nights in Umeå. We played the whole evening, the audience was great and it was amazing to be part of this event. After the concert we all had dinner together, singing traditional Swedish songs and having fun. On my way home I passed the lake and for the first time in my life saw the Northern lights in the sky. It only lasted an hour, but it was extraordinary. What a night!

My worst experience:

To discover that I am not really a winter person, I like it more when the temperatures are a bit higher. Also to spend 5 months away from my boyfriend and my friends in Berlin was pretty hard, I missed them a lot, despite the fact that I made really good new friends in Umeå as well.



Me in the snow in front of my house