

Exchange period in Bergen, Norway

General information regarding the exchange period

Fall 2015 was the time to enjoy an exchange period abroad. Of all universities and destinations available, I chose the University of Bergen (UiB), in Norway. This choice was fairly random to be honest; I selected Norway without any research or any particular interest in that country (that I was aware of), and I selected Bergen just because the picture illustrated on the website appealed more to me than the pictures belonging to Oslo and Trondheim.

Preparation

As you might expect from such a wealthy and developed country, ally of The Netherlands, no such thing as a visa to enter the country was required. Even though Norway is not part of the European Union, they are part of the European Economic Area, which guarantees free movement of persons. Once you have applied at the university, filled in the required documents and have sent them back and forth, you'll get the opportunity to sign up for an accommodation. The student accommodations (the rooms so to speak) belong to Studentsamskipnaden I Bergen (SiB), which is the student association in Bergen. The nice thing is, they guarantee you a room if you comply with a few easy conditions (sign up soon enough et cetera). Apart from housing, SiB also offers a lot of sports and has its own student café's, sauna's and swimming pool. In short, apart from getting all the required paperwork done and packing your bags, there is not much more preparation you can do. And if you feel somewhat nervous about going to Bergen, or just want to know someone in Bergen before arrival, you can sign up for the Buddy in Bergen program. In this you'll be linked to a Norwegian student who is excited to tell you everything you want to know about (student) life in Bergen.

Arrival

The semester starts towards the end of August, and since you'll probably be renting your room for the entire month of August it's a good idea to arrive much earlier, for example on the 5th, like me. This gives you enough time to walk around a little bit, meet some other exchange students, get to know the city and attend the introduction program. Note, you are likely to be living at Fantoft, a student complex which houses more than 1000 students, primarily internationals.

Anyway, upon arrival you're supposed to take the Flybussen to the city center, although in 2016 the Bergen Light Rail will also depart at the airport such that it can take you to the city center just as well. After making it to the center, it's necessary to pick up your keys and laundry card at the student center. This means climbing a hill with all your luggage, which makes it feel like a mountain. Just ask around for directions. Norwegians may appear grumpy, but at heart they are tender souls.

And then, after the awkward and painful first moments in Bergen, the introduction program (mentor week) hosted by the university will start. It's a week of exploring the city, the University, all the student stuff and meeting a lot of other students. Every night you'll go out with your mentor group (mainly Norwegians) after you've enjoyed the 'vorspiel', in Dutch known as indrinken, the preparty so to speak. Due to the intensely high prices of alcohol in the clubs, Norwegians prefer to get drunk before they hit the city, where a beer can cost you as much as 10 euro's (cheapest alcohol you can find will be around 3 euro's for a can of beer from the supermarket).

So don't forget to attend the necessary introductory events and the mentor week, because it's a great way of familiarizing yourself with the city and getting to know tons of cool people.

Courses

A while after the mentor week, your studying at UiB will commence. When going on exchange, you'll likely follow a few subjects mildly related to your studies at Erasmus. UiB hosts a lot of courses, however, in the field of economics and business the range of courses is rather short. The courses I have taken were Development Economics, Generalized Linear Models and Theoretical Philosophy, all worth 10 ECTS each (which is not a measure of difficulty or the amount of time you'll be spending on a course, although that's what it is supposed to be). Let's elaborate a bit:

Development Economics; a first year course primarily about how poverty can be defined and the measures a country can take to alleviate from it. The subject is super simple, basically just reading a book (the slides are enough!) and it is far from profound. The exam is written and every question can be answered easily, but they do expect you to elaborate and write as much as possible.

Theoretical Philosophy; about the meaning of knowledge. Given the nature of the course and the amount of philosophical thinking required for it, it can be somewhat tricky every now and then. Especially when you encounter a part of the course that doesn't appeal to you. However, this is also a first year's course and thus rather easy. Examination is done through an essay, in which you need to answer a question using the covered material.

Generalized Linear Models; statistical modeling, regressions and mathematical derivations. This could be part of Econometrics, and most of the theory was quite familiar to me. Of the three, this is the course that took most of my time and sometimes it was quite challenging. The exam is oral, in which the lecturer and the examiner will ask you a few questions which you need to solve on the blackboard.

Summing up, the three courses described weren't too difficult and didn't require much time at all. This holds for most courses you can take: the Norwegians like it easy and passing a subject is much less bothersome than at Erasmus.

Daily Life

Since you'll probably live at Fantoft, you'll need to take the Bybanen (the tram) to the city center. In a 12 to 18 minutes ride you can basically reach all the destinations you need. Good thing is the tram stops right in front of Fantoft. Student life is vivid at Fantoft. Many parties and game nights are organized in the public room. Movie nights are held weekly, but I didn't attend any of them. Neither did I play much games or attend many parties; I enjoyed the (people in the) city center and the vorspiels much more. Considering you won't be studying that much in Norway, you have plenty of time to enjoy the city and partake in fun activities. The city center is rather small, so you'll soon find yourself travelling across the country and hiking up all the mountains that surround Bergen. Going out every week is obviously part of the schedule. Since the Norwegians like to stick to their group, there's a big chance you'll go out with your mates from the mentor week quite often.

Further, different organizations will host plenty of trips and parties. One example, the people from

Fantoft are likely to host a boat cruise to Denmark (or any of such kind). This is a party cruise, and to go ashore in Denmark I was supposed to leave the boat at 8am, which was indeed impossible.

If you still feel like you have too much free time, Bergen has a lot of student societies you can join and work for. I worked as a reporter for the Bergen Student TV, which means meeting and working with quite a lot of people who are all having fun in making videos. Besides the work that needs to be done, it's a close society that hosts cabin trips, parties and a Christmas dinner which is an important part of the Norwegian culture.

Speaking of which, the culture is pretty much the same as in Holland, although the people can be somewhat more closed when they are in public. But don't worry; most of them are fun, especially the students.

Finances

Norway is one of the wealthiest countries on the planet, and therefore one of the most expensive for foreigners. This also depends on the exchange rate of the euro versus the Norwegian krone. First, the costs:

Type of expenditure	cost
Housing	€350,- per month
Public transport	€50,- per month
Sports membership (part of SiB, all sports you want for 1 price, including sauna)	€100,- per semester
Books	Let's say €150,- for the semester
Daily life (food, fun activities..)	About €450,- per month

So for five months you'll be looking at around €4500,- to €5000,- in total, also depending on a possible trip to the north of the country after the exams in December. Then the grants and allowances:

Type of allowance	amount
Studiefinanciering	€284,- per month
OV allowance* (public transport)	€100,- per month
Erasmus+ Grant (depends on duration of the exchange period)	€1233,- in total

*In case you're using free public transport as a student in The Netherlands, you can interchange this for a monthly allowance when going abroad.

In total the allowances will be around €3150,-. You can expect to add €1500,- to €2500,- of your own money to make your exchange period as it should be.

Summary

Despite the randomness of my destination I never regretted choosing it. And neither will you. Going on exchange is a life-changing opportunity in which you'll get to know yourself and learn about life. Make friends, avoid others and have fun; go on exchange. If you'd like to know a bit more, just send me an email: smhbitter@gmail.com