

Experience report Erasmus-stay at the SLU, Umeå, Sweden

winter term 2010/2011

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Even though only harbouring 80000 inhabitants, Umeå (pronunciation [Üme-o]) is the largest city of the northern part of Sweden, since most of Sweden's 9 Million population lives in the Southern part of the country around Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg. The whole northern half of Sweden is also known as Norrland, and Umeå is the capital of one of its coastal provinces, Västerbotten. About 100km North-East, Lapland begins and only about 5 to 10km in the East you find the shore of the Baltic Sea.

I stayed in Umeå for 5 months, arriving on November 10th 2010 and leaving at the end of March 2011, the complete winter as you can say. I chose to go there on winter for two reasons. Firstly, it matched quite well my time plan so that I could end the German Summer term by mid August, did an internship from mid August to mid October and then could drop in to the second of two periods of the Swedish "autumn term". The academic year is subdivided in the spring term (mid January to the end of August) and the autumn term (end August to mid January), which again are subdivided in 2 periods each. The whole course system is blocked and the combination of these two settings allows a maximum of flexibility for foreign students. The only disadvantage that I experienced by dropping in to the middle of the term was that I had to learn that all the buddy programs and many (Swedish) language courses start by the beginning of the terms, but this was not a big disadvantage since I was perfectly integrated, living on a corridor with both exchange and domestic students. I anyway experienced a very international atmosphere during my whole stay, living and studying together with other students from all over the world.

Formally I was enrolled as student of the SLU. The courses I chose however all took place at the UPSC, the Umeå Plant Science Centre, a research centre which comprises a, say, joint-venture of the SLU and the Umeå University, the second university of Umeå. The UPSC is as I said a research centre but in contrast to many research centres, one which is involved in teaching. This fact maybe explains that expectations towards students' commitment and motivation are significantly higher than at usual university courses, means, that at least at the courses that I visited ("Functional Plant Genomics" and "Plant Biotechnology and Molecular Breeding") we were really kept busy with assignments like lab reports and so on. I learned extremely much in these five months but those who choose courses at UPSC and expect to have a lot of free time for cultural or recreational activities may be a bit disappointed. I most appreciated the very informal way of treatment (everyone's called by the first name e.g.) and the extremely well balanced ratio of theory and (lab-) practise.

The second reason for me to go to Umeå from November to March was to experience the severity and beauty of a Nordic winter. When I arrived, Umeå was not covered with snow yet, but this should change: During the next few weeks constant snowfalls, day temperatures around -10°C and night temperatures around -20°C helped to pile up a massive snow layer of about 80cm in average. The lowest temperature I experienced there was -27°C in the mid of January. Coldness is the one, darkness the other thing: The sun set around 4 pm when I arrived and at around 2 pm around Christmas, and it's course is a very low one at this time, resulting in a permanent evening mood during the day. Springtime was about to start when I left at the end of March when the thick snow layer slowly started to melt. No doubt, if you go there in winter, you have to like this season. But I do and therefore really enjoyed this aspect.

There are various public traffic connections to Umeå. There is a frequent bus connection to Stockholm (Ybuss) which is one of the most reliable means of transportation in winter. Night-buses are cheap but not comfortable at all though. You can reach Umeå by plane, too, at Umeå airport, but with domestic flights only, as I was there. This might change,

since Umeå is designated European culture capital in 2014 and might become a even more travelling goal then. I preferred travelling up North by night-train however. The night-trains of SJ, the Swedish train company are really comfortable and are available for decent prices for students.

Concerning prices, Sweden is generally a rather expensive country to go. Still far away from Norway but more costly than Germany. Especially food is a cost factor, as prices are about 20% higher than in Germany. Prices for accommodation meet the German level, I would say, so that I spent 2400 Swedish Crowns (SEK) for my student hostel room (~280€). All Swedish student hostel rooms provide an individual bathroom, by the way - a luxury that is normally not found in German student hostels. Communication costs, especially mobile communication, is ways lower than in Germany.

The Swedish language sounds and reads very similar to German and to English and many words can be understood from scratch. To understand more complex contexts or spoken Swedish by all means requires a language course however. To get in contact with Swedish people is not a problem at all though, since the big majority of the population are excellent English speakers due to non-dubbed English TV-broadcasts and films.

Student unions (kår) play a prominent role in student life. To be member of a student union is not obligatory any more since 2011 but is highly recommendable since these unions organize a lot of social events, especially for foreign students and the membership is connected with certain advantages in everyday life, like discount at many shops or entrance to certain student clubs.

Most of students live in a neighbourhood called Ålidhem, since most of the student hostels are located there. All important shopping can be done there and also student life is very vivid there and you nearly do not have to go to the city centre if you do not want to. If so however, you use the city's public bus-transport system. Payment of most of things in everyday life is done by credit card, much more than in Germany, and it is therefore highly recommendable to possess one there.

Umeå provides a wealth of leisure activities. Not only the city centre with a very progressive Opera, a very good Jazz club and several nice clubs and cafés, but also the possibility to do a lot of (winter) sports in the region is very comfortable. Umeå also harbours Northern Europe's largest and very impressive indoor sports-centre, located very close to Ålidhem. As an outstanding event of the year, the Brenbal (a Scandinavian form of Baseball) world championships take place, where teams even from New Zealand take part. Proceeding the 2014 status as European culture capital (along with Riga), permanent activities of involved groups, other current European Capitals of Culture or sister cities take place in the so called Glashuset (House of Glass) in the city centre.

Concluding, to choose Umeå as an Erasmus goal is a very good choice for several reasons. Concerning the teaching I can only talk of SLU/UPSC, since I did not visit any other institution, but this should not be too different at other places: Facilities are quite new and extremely well equipped with space, material and staff. I also had the impression that universities play a more prominent role in research than in Germany and therefore receive more funding. But besides that, all the teaching I received at UPSC was excellent if not outstanding and teachers and organizers were very committed to do their best to teach us.

Furthermore, Sweden and especially North Sweden is a quite unique place to stay. Not only the climatic and geographic setting but also the kindness and helpfulness of the Swedes make it a very pleasant place to stay as a foreigner. The rank as European Culture Capital in 2014 will bring even more internationality to Umeå. All these reasons make Umeå an absolute insiders' tip to go.