

## Experience report of my Erasmus+-exchange semester in Košice, Slovakia (Summer term 2019)



Vodopád Skok (SK)

### Preparation

During my Bachelor studies I took part in other exchange situated in Rennes, Brittany (France) so that it was quite obvious what advantages and experiences one may get during this exchange semester. The first preparation was in fact attending the information events of the geographical institute. First, I was sceptic that my English would not be proficient enough to attend regular classes of geoinformatics and GIS in English. Another fact is, that due to some experience visiting a friend in the next bigger neighbour town Prešov, showed that English is not always spoken by the locals. The preparation, which first started more or less in April 2018 (so 1 year in advance) with some paper work was setting up a motivation letter, write a “co-letter” about the classes you want to pick at your top-2 selected partner universities, get an actual transcript of records, certificates proving your English proficiency, internship reports, and your A-Level diploma. After a short time after approval by the Geographical institute in Cologne (about a month) the partner university already send the acceptance letter. After reading through the webpage of the partner university (available in English) I chose Košice over Leuven and Lille because I was looking for a challenge, especially dealing with classes where I just had some field work experience (geoinformatics and GIS) and I was also interested in taking part in field trips (physical geography, geology and international excursion). Maybe you are worried about taking this challenge, but it turned out that the teachers explained everything from start on, so that you may pass the exams without issues. Before heading there I also met my predecessor and asked about her experience. There are also some reports from other students, mostly medicine or veterinary students online. After getting the acceptance letter you prepare and fill in your learning agreement and everything else is going through E-Mailing which is quite convenient (comparing to my previous exchange semester).

### Housing

You have the choice of moving into the student’s dorm (Mey Hostel on Kysucka 16), but I decided after one night to move out. It is quite far from the geographical institute (Jesenná 6) and the surroundings are mostly dominated by large housing complexes. In addition, you’ll also share the room with a random student (130€+-, see p. 5) on the top floor of the complex. There is also the possibility to get an own room (for 180€) but I preferred living in the nicer old part of Košice. So, I first moved to another Hostel, called Happy Bull Hostel (on Ulica Vratná) and the hostel father offered me to move into one of his tourist apartments, which had quite a good location (Mäsiarska 41) but were only available until May, but shortly after I looked in the English-flat-group on Facebook I found a nice room (300€) in a shared apartment located next to the Cathedral on Alžbetina 29. It turned out, that finding a decent place to live was not a challenge. What’s more, there is a student’s canteen where you can eat for around 4€ but get some of the value back at the end of the month, so that I never tried it. Košice is a popular town to study Medicine or Veterinary and has several international companies (e. g. T-Systems), so that local landlords are used to have foreign tenants.

The general costs of groceries are almost comparable to Germany, nevertheless the alcohol and meals in restaurants, are a lot cheaper. Same goes for travelling costs, you get an extra-discount if you are aged less than 26 (with the provided ISIC-card from the university). If you are planning of travelling by plane to Kosice it will take around 8h (door to door) and is normally with a stopover in Varsow (by flying from Dusseldorf). The costs of accommodation in hostels were also comparable to Germany but expect to pay higher prices in Bratislava.

If you are a car-owner I can just recommend bringing it as well because most places are off the beaten track and often less not too time-consuming to reach. Car theft is not common anymore, fuel prices are lower (1,14€/litre Diesel May 2019, cheaper gas stations next to Tesco, Jurki-stations or bigger shopping facilities).

### **Arrival and first weeks**

In the first confirmation letter it was written that the semester will start around the 11<sup>th</sup> February but nevertheless the first Erasmus-Students arrived already beginning of February and could so get comfy with the new town. The first event was an introduction by the international office followed by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which also offer study buddies which help you with anything, and well are always open for “student-related-activities”. It turned out, that the ESN of Kosice was really motivated and offered every weekend a hiking trip in the near-located Tatras and there were quite a lot of activities (one per week more or less) and took a few more-than one-day trips. The first week just before beginning of classes (11<sup>th</sup> February) was packed with daily activities. Unfortunately, same as in Brittany I got a study buddy attributed who was not very communicative and I did even not meet him in any event. Nevertheless, I found other great ESN-er’s which helped me out or where quite motivated to do some something together. After the first events I went spontaneously with an ESN-er, who studied at a near located institute to the geographical institute and did a welcome tour with the international office coordinator (RNDr. Stela CSACHOVÁ, PhD.) at the Geographical Institute Stela and met most of my teachers. They were all quite happy to have an exchange student and after some time a fellow student from Turkey came as well. The organization of the classes was chaotic in the beginning and after some time you took individual classes with the teachers because the normal lectures were in Slovak and in one case (Terrestrial Laser Scanning, see also p. 5) the students did not want the classes held in English. You can take all classes which are offered in English on the website and so it should not be a big deal taking Masterclasses if you are only studying in the B. Sc. Besides the geographical classes you can also attend a Slovak language class for foreigners, but I didn’t follow the classes until the end due to timetable changes and inefficiency of the teacher. Nevertheless, almost every Geography-teacher endeavoured giving the classes in English. While on excursion, normally the teachers attribute a student as a translator (speaking German or English) when it comes to visit outcrops. Another fact which is maybe relevant before leaving is that the Human Geography excursion normally takes place before the actual semester (winter term), so that it might be a good idea to check the dates to be able to participate and just contact the responsible teachers. It turned out, that especially in the evening when attending “regular activities” as students my fellow Slovak people enjoyed to speak German or English and there’s a high possibility to learn the basic Slovak quite quickly 😊 Another issue which might bother the decision going abroad is writing your thesis(es) in English. Well, it will take some time in the beginning but after a short time you’ll master to phrase in English (as well).

### **Everyday life & free time**

As a matter of facts, due to my many field trips, I didn’t have to many classes (max. 3h/day) which allowed me to shape the leisure time quite good. You can take part in the University sports and there are also gym’s in town. I majorly planned my trips for the weekend or ran through the parc next to the train station or close to the river Hornad next to the Anicka-parc in the North of the city. Kosice has around 300k inhabitants and you can find shopping malls (Atrium Optima, Galleria...) but mostly everything is located next to the Hlavna & Aupark next to the Double Three Hilton Hotel. In case you need kitchen tools, linen or other household items you can go to the shopping complex (brownish façade) opposite the Hilton hotel and get it for a decent price. Almost every weekend I travelled to different places in Slovakia and neighbouring countries after doing some research and reading tour guide books such as Lonely Planet, Marco Polo ... but also travelled to Olomouc, Brno, Krakow, Novi Sad, Belgrad, Balaton Lake, Budapest, Bratislava, Pusty hrad next to Zvolen ... but keep in mind that it always takes at least 2h to get there. Closer destinations are for example Bachledova Dolina, Simonka, Spis Castle or the High Tatras which are just suited for 1-Day or 2-Day trips. I really enjoyed hiking and can just recommend visiting the Slovensky Raj (Slovak Paradise), just try google pictures and you might already be convinced 😊. If you are planning to visit Ukraine, especially Lviv, consider that crossing borders might take more than 4h with a bus, much more if driving a car (road conditions are even worse)... Košice offers also some viewing tower in the North which allows beautiful views of your next (year’s) semester! It is also possible to practise ski in the Tatras but the prices are quite comparable to Austria (around 80€ for 1 day including cheapest accommodation, transport, ski pass, decent dinner...).

As already mentioned before, the ESN is super motivated and does organize also bigger trips (f. ex. wine tasting, Integration Weekend, National Hiking trips ...). There are not many clubs in Košice, nevertheless there are quite a lot of pubs (f. ex. Kino Usma or Collosseum, Jekyll & Hide, Bernard's ... and many more).

## **Conclusion**

To put in a nutshell, I can just recommend attend an exchange-semester because you'll get to see how to live & study abroad, becoming more independent and it is quite nice to meet people from different backgrounds and to discover new places. Especially if you are looking for a challenge or just a change of scene it is the best you can do. What's more, you are getting twice the chance to go abroad (B.Sc.+M.Sc. twice 1 whole year), so why should one neglect this even when getting scholarships to do so?

Regarding all the experiences while travelling and living abroad since my studies, it is challenging to put into words in a short report. Regarding the extramural expectation, I had spent my first exchange semester in Rennes, Brittany; with a high expectation. So far, the extramural life in Košice did not correspond to my expectations. It is maybe connected to my age (27) compared to the average Erasmus-student (which I estimate to be around 21-22 years) and the fact that the different faculties are not situated on 1 campus, and maybe due to my choice not sharing a room at the student's dorm. Another disenchanting observation, which is unfortunately often part of a semester abroad is the issue when students maybe unintentional just stay together with fellow students speaking the same language and maybe do not (from their home-country) and maybe do not improve their foreign language skills (in this case Slovak or English) as they like to. I was quite surprised by the lack of interest of travelling and exploring together as a group, whereas in France it was quite the opposite. For some other exchange students it was sometimes the first time being abroad...At this point, it should be mentioned that I was not able to benefit from the ISIC-card for buying cheaper train and/or bus tickets, which also lowered the attractiveness for others to join in for trips by car. Also, Kosice is quite known for medicine or veterinary studies...In matters of dealing with the tasks of the initial phase (finding a place to live, organizing classes...), it turned out to be less challenging than expected. Before my stay for the summer term 2019, I already knew exactly what the semester will look like, but I am quite upset about the "travelling & socialising issues". Regarding the university, I was quite surprised by the highly motivated ESN and the willingness of the teachers giving us even choice in content of the classes (based on our knowledge from one's classes). De facto, it turned out that due to some of my internships (working with total stations) before arrival, the normal way of learning – from theory to practical work – was reversed and it was possible to get a basic knowledge about geoinformatics. In fact, I must confess that I avoided geoinformatics due to some unpleasant mal-functioning geographical information system accompanied by dilettantish introduction-GIS-classes in my Bachelor studies, but I improved my skills during my Master studies and the stay in Košice. In addition to this, we were even allowed to use the institute's equipment (f. ex. drone or laser scanners) under a short introduction. At this point, I have to say that I chose the university not only for the challenge of acquiring new subjects but also to have more practical classes (i. e. excursions) instead of only attending "classic" lectures. To resume, I think that Košice is quite a good place to take part in an exchange-semester, especially if you are studying in the Bachelor's degree (and being younger than 26) and if you like spending your free-time in nature, especially hiking, skiing or biking. If you are looking for places to visit don't miss to look up "Slovakia travel". I think that I was able to improve my English and had the opportunity to learn new subjects, nevertheless I spoke quite a lot of German. Even people coming with low English-knowledge dealt somehow staying in Košice and Slovakia in general. It turned out that the locals were quite happy if you tried starting a conversation by "dobry den" or other basics such as "D'akujem" 😊 Also, when travelling around there were not many language barriers. So, what are you waiting for? Don't miss your chance!

## **Useful addresses:**

- Jaro Koman; komanj2002@yahoo.co.uk , English+German speaking landlord (has a 2-3 pp flat)
- <https://erasmusu.com/en/erasmus-kosice>
- <http://slovakia.travel/en>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Kosice.Flats.For.Rent/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Kosice.Stuff.For.Sale/>
- <https://www.upjs.sk/en/university/international-relations/erasmus-plus-mobilities/geography-courses2017-18/>
- <https://geografia.science.upjs.sk/index.php/en/>



## Pictures



Hiking in the Slovensky Raj



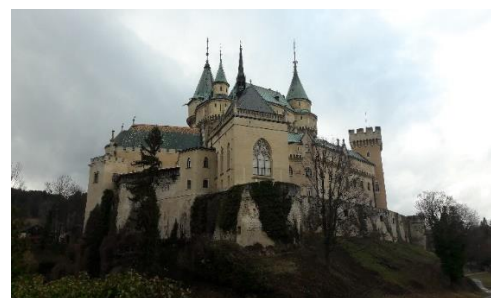
Hiking in the High Tatras (around 1700m AMSL)



Strbske Pleso



Drone flying with Prof. Kanuk



Bojnice Castle





Geology excursion



Mei Hostel dorm



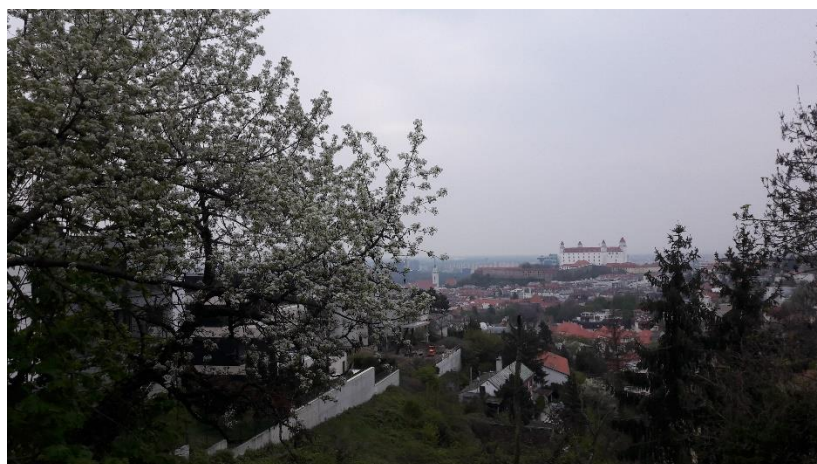
Cathedral, view from Ul. Alzbetina, Košice



Border from Poland to Slovakia



Open-air village museum, next to Martin



View from the military cemetery, Bratislava