

Initial Thoughts

When looking at going on exchange my criteria was a country that didn't speak English, had a different culture to NZ and a university that is both well recognised and teaches a different style to Otago. I narrowed it down to Warsaw, Prague, Vienna and Spain but decided to go for Warsaw on the basis it would be the biggest change in culture, which was what I was looking for. I 100% do not regret going to this amazing city in this stunning country and you won't either.

This guide will hopefully be pretty comprehensive because there were heaps of things I didn't know that would have been useful and I have a 12 hour bus ride ahead of me.

University Work

Warsaw School of Economics (or SGH as it is known locally) is the most well-known business/economics school in Poland and students have to work quite hard in College to be accepted there. They offer very flexible classes for both Polish and exchange students alike. Typically you will have only one class a week, for 1 hour 40mins or 2 hours 20mins. I only had one class with two a week (polish class) but twice a week was good for practice.

The course work was easy compared to NZ standards with a focus on internal presentations. Most classes had a presentation or two in their marking scheme, sometimes 40mins long and sprung on you only a few weeks prior but they are much more informal and laid back than Otago. One of my classes had only a 40min presentation as the whole course. The teacher gave every except 2 people a 5 (top mark) and a few 5.5's which is technically not possible!

Most classes had the option of taking zero term exams which were tests more than exams during the last class which counted as the exam. It meant that exam time was less busy and if you could get zeros for all of your papers you could go travel earlier.

Participation is much more prominent and the lectures are much more 2 way than in Otago which I really liked, it helped pass the sometimes long classes. You also had the chance to ask the questions you really wanted to know and debate them a bit.

Paper Selection

On the Polish end this was the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life! First off you select courses on their online Dean's office which is barely useable at best but then the



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actual courses offered chops and changes constantly, with classes even being cancelled after a few lectures have taken place. This is an absolute nightmare for exchange students who then must find others to fit into their timetable and that may cross with Otago, and send them back for consideration before finding out if they are ok or not. Add in the ever present minimum number of credits you must take and it is an absolute mess.

The minimum I think is 30ECTS points for Otago but other people take 20 or 25. I ended up taking 38 because there were interesting classes I wanted to do but since they were mostly small credit classes, I had a huge amount of lecture time! I would recommend taking less classes but some worth more than the 3 or 4 normal ECTS. Also avoid online courses, I took one from America and it was more work than an Otago paper!

Sports classes are also offered which only give one credit but can be good fun. I took swimming class which was 1 and a half hours a week with free entry to the pool and a coach training you. That was good for fitness and the social side, I got to meet lots of Polish people doing that.

Also lectures can be cancelled at no notice, it was odd for me to have a week without 2 or 3 cancelations. It sometimes throws you off but you just have to roll with it and understand Poland is like that!

The exchange coordinators (student ones) have a list of all the papers in English and you can see feedback from previous students. The ones I enjoyed were: Behavioural Finance (favourite class ever studied), Financial Consulting Project (with same teacher as Behavioural Finance), Polish for Foreigners, European Economics (sometimes dry but a really comprehensive course), Intro to game theory and Health Economics (because it was hardly any work, only one 40min presentation the whole semester).

Weather

“Poland, really?, you are going to freeze for your whole exchange”. The typical phrase I encounter once I told people I was going to Poland. Even the guys in the currency office in NZ couldn't believe someone wanted to go to Poland during winter time. However it was not as bad as I thought it would be, by far! The temperatures are of course colder than Dunedin but it seems much drier, with snow quite regular but hardly any cases of rain and cold temperatures. Also the houses are much better (warmer) than the typical Dunedin student abode, in fact my dorm was far too hot during winter we had to sleep with the window open! The cold was not a disabling factor like it can be in Dunedin on a wet winters day. A good coat is recommended, something I set out to buy in Warsaw but never got around to. I was fine with a rain coat and some warm (multiple) layers underneath. Lots of people bought a winter jacket in Warsaw when they arrived rather than fly with it, which was a really good idea. I vividly remember leaving Warsaw in the cold to go on Easter break and then coming back from travel and it was hot and sunny. Easter marked the turning point where the weather started to get warmer and days longer.

The last few months (May June) in the sun the city came alive and we were always outside on the beach or in the parks when we could be. University, most bars and all clubs had a

coat check so you can wear your big coats to town and they would be looked after. It actually got pretty hot towards the end so pack for all seasons.

Transportation

Yet again cheap is the word here. Warsaw has metros, busses as well as trams which can all be used on one public transport ticket. The easiest and cheapest way is to buy a three month pass in the metro that puts the pass onto your student card so you always have it with you. Once that runs out we all purchased a one month pass and that got us nearly through to the end of our time. The 3 month pass is something like 140zloty so about \$55NZD and this gets you on ANY public transport in Warsaw during those months. It is so useful to have. You could catch them without any ticket but there are rude and strict ticket inspectors on platforms.

Transport outside of Warsaw for your trips around Europe can be quite cheap but can take a bit of organising especially if you are with a group. Overnight busses are good for longer trips so you don't waste precious traveling time. Polski bus is Poland's bus line that is basic but gets you where you need to go.

The best sites for travel:

Rome2rio – Shows all of the travel options between locations

Whizzair – Budget Airline

Ryan Air – Budget Airline

Polski bus – Local bus lines

DB Bahn – German bus and trainlines

Some train tickets can be obtained cheaply but busses tend to be cheaper. Some lines cannot be bought online and must be done at the station but is not hard to do.

Accommodation

SGH is unlike most other exchange destinations as it has a student dormitory (Sabinki) that exchange students can apply to live in. The Dorm is 5mins from university and 4mins from the metro station so is well placed. I lived in the dorm along with about 500 others about 1/3 or 1/2 were exchange students, the rest Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian. You have a roommate that you are randomly put with, so get to know someone pretty well. The rooms are pretty basic but for the price (1900zloty or



\$760NZD) for 4.5 months you get what you pay for. Lots of ESN events are held at Sabinki as well as pre parties and birthdays etc so it is a good location to be for these. The bathrooms are communal and so are the kitchens. Pretty much nothing is provided, you need to buy your own cutlery, plates, washing powder, food etc. Basically you get all the basis and nothing else. If I started over again I would go to Sabinki because I had a good roommate and it was a really good way to meet exchange students and locals alike.

The other option to live is in a flat which are spread around the city. I am not sure of their price, people said they were still cheaper than normally at home but more expensive than Sabinki. Lots of exchange students lived together and either sorted a flat before they arrived in town or came and stayed in hostels for a week or so before university started and found one then. Living away from university meant you might have been closer to town but also rely on transport to get to and from uni every day.

Money Matters

I know this can be a big point in decision making for exchange so won't miss it out. Poland is quite possibly one of the cheapest places to live in Europe, with Ukraine pipping it for the cheapest in my opinion. Travel, food, accommodation are all below NZ prices and the only



things that weren't were movie tickets and some clothes. Food generally has the same face value number in Poland as in NZ but when you take the exchange rate into account that means it is 2.5x cheaper.

I was lucky enough to get the Westpac Travel Scholarship through the business school which gave me \$1800. Also I managed to get an Erasmus K+107 scholarship which is part of a huge exchange program in Europe and even

though Otago is outside the EU I somehow managed to get it. I have also heard tales of the Polish Government having some form of grant for exchange students but not sure if that is a thing anymore with the change in Politics that has gone on. This Scholarship was worth about \$6000NZD which meant I only had to use a tiny amount of my savings on the trip. I could have lived cheaper but with the lower prices and the scholarship I could afford to not eat the classic student diet of rice and pasta. The actual Poland expenses were low, most of the money went on travel and events.

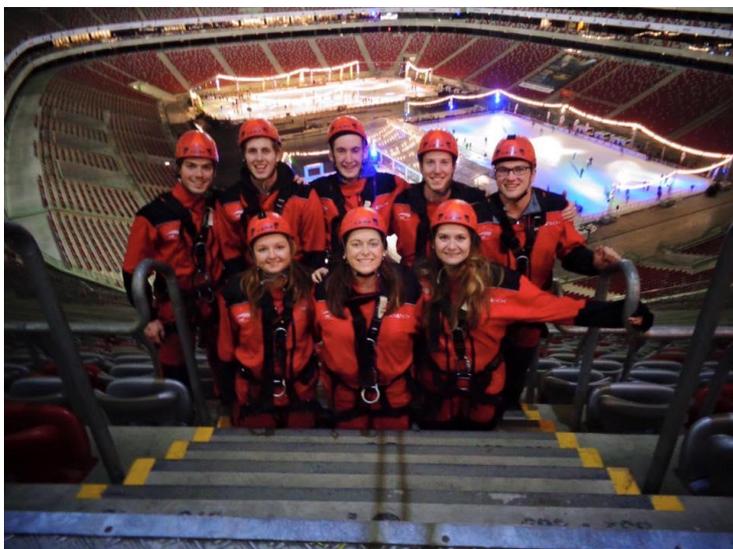
The biggest cost was flights (about \$1900NZD return) and insurance which everybody on exchange needs which was about \$800NZD.

The Cuisine

Polish Cuisine leaves a lot to be desired in my opinion. The main local dish are dumplings called pierogi which are better fried after being boiled. Potatoes, cabbage and sausage are consumed regularly along with the main 'meal' alcohol. Alcohol in Poland is cheap and readily available. All of their corner stores (think dairies) have beers, wine and spirits for you to buy if you are over 18. From the shop you could buy beers individually or in multipacks of 4 normally. A single beer might be around 1-2NZD however their beers are all 500ml and are a higher % than NZ so you get even more for your buck. Vodka is their national drink and consume it like water, adding juice to take the taste away. You can get Vodka (particularly their most famous one with a bison grass, Zubrowka) for very small amounts compared to NZ. In pubs and bars drinks cost more but are still well below NZ prices with a beer costing you around 3-5NZD

The language

Polish is hard!! Very hard, but also very rewarding. Unfortunately lots of elderly Polish people can be quite rude to you but a few words of Polish seems to melt their hearts and they are much friendlier and accommodating. There is Polish for Beginners offered as a class and about a third of exchange students took it, myself included. Despite having a witch of a teacher (Anna X) I managed to get through and learnt enough to talk at restaurant, post office, and supermarket etc. basically I could survive in Poland by the end of the course. This



is handy because although most young people speak pretty good English, most people over 40 can't and this makes it really hard to do some things like open a bank account. If you are looking for a comfortable experience language wise and interaction wise Poland might not be the best but I loved that challenge because once you got over that barrier it was hugely satisfying and the Polish people were much more welcoming.

There was also tandem courses offered in which you can teach someone else a language you know and they teach you one they know. It was at a pub after class one day a week and run really casually. I used it to practice Polish with a Polish person and it helped heaps!

Tips and Tricks

- Everyone gets a buddy who is their Polish support person. MAKE THE MOST OF THEM! They are full of info and sometimes become one of your closest friends in Warsaw. You will find out in advance who your buddy is so you can ask questions. They are good for combating the language barrier initially.
- Download the Public transport app, shows you the fastest way to get to where you want to go. It is called **X**.
- Explore the city. Warsaw may seem grey and dull on the outside but it hides lots of hidden treasures that you just have to explore to find.
- Get involved in a Polish sports team or activity. I did a weekly run with Polish people and it was a good way to meet locals. Others played team sports which did the same thing.
- Don't get too worked up about anything, Poland seems to run against the norm on purpose and if you took every change in plan hard it would be a very tricky exchange. Just go with the flow.
- Get involved: ESN (the Buddy group at SGH) offer so many activities including learning how to cook pierogi, kayaking down the Vistula River, pub crawls etc so get involved in as many of those as you possibly can. It is a great way to meet people and you will have a great time.
- In the library you have to take a number from the librarian and give your student card in and then sit at the number seat. Not sure why but some Polish students get quite upset if you break that rule! There is a better place to do work though, if you go into the library and then go right to the end and then into the room on your right you only have to put your name down and you can sit anywhere. It is much quieter and comfortable.
- Make the most of the good weather in the parks. They beat NZ parks hands down most of the time.
- See Poland: It may be tempting to travel out of Poland lots but the country has so much to see. Krakow (do the ESN trip for this!), Wroclaw, Gdansk, Sopot, Gdynia, Zakopane, Poznan are all brilliant cities. Also try and sail the Masurian Lake District, it was one of the best times of the exchange!

Conclusion:

I honestly loved my time in Poland and already want to go back, see more of the country and see the people again. I had some reservations about the location before I went but those were blown away by my experience. Highly recommend Warsaw and any exchange, it will be one of the best experiences of your life and you learn so many general life skills. The only thing you will wish is that you could make it longer or do it all over again!! You won't regret it!

I wrote (started to) a blog for the first 2/3 of my exchange before travel, exams and life took over but it shows my first perceptions of Poland and what helped etc which may help. You can find it at: <https://flyingkiwitailes.wordpress.com/>

If you have any questions, I am happy to answer any and all and can be found at m.moloney111@gmail.com ☺