

Exchange Evaluation Report, Otago University

Host University: Háskóli Íslands (University of Iceland)

Exchange Period: Otago semester 2, 2016 (August to December, 2016)

Degree: Completed BSc in geology at Otago in 2015. Completed one semester of my PGDipSci at Otago, then finished my second semester at the University of Iceland in 2016.

Background

To sum up my exchange, it was the best experience of my life, composed of a number of good and bad experiences. The semester abroad opened my eyes as to how great our own country New Zealand is, while also showing me how isolated we are. It allowed me to travel to many places, explore different cultures, meet new people and be introduced to a number of languages.

I left for my exchange in mid-June after finishing the first semester of my PGDipSci at Otago. I travelled through Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Norway before I arrived at my exchange destination in Iceland. Iceland was a very distant and unknown place to me with good geology so seemed the perfect fit to experience a new language and culture while also meeting the locals that lived there.



Living

First and foremost I feel I am obligated to address the living situation in Iceland. I arrived in Iceland with the idea, presented to me by Otago, that if I apply for student housing I will be ok. I quickly realised this was not the case. The influx of tourists to Iceland has led to student housing and housing in general being very scarce and extremely hard to find. For weeks I tried to find a place to live. All I could find, if anything, was shared bedrooms for 90,000isk (\$1100) per month, minimum. If it wasn't for me having a tent I would have lost all of my savings paying for hostels or Airbnb rooms in my first month (yes, I was forced to live and study in my tent at the university). This experience was one of the worst experiences of my life and I was almost at the stage where I felt I had to come back to New Zealand. Otago and Iceland exchange departments were no help at all and gave no warning it would be this hard. If I was simply told to have my accommodation sorted before I left that would have made a world of difference. Once I left my tent and finally found accommodation, the exchange became the best time of my life.

So, before you go a) if you apply for student housing, apply for it on the minute applications open, otherwise b) make sure you have it completely sorted before you arrive. Realistically, the exchange should not be offered if accommodation cannot be guaranteed. It is a long way for someone to travel from New Zealand to then be told there is nowhere for them to live. Also, all the estimated prices given to you before you go on your exchange are much lower than they are in reality, so beware.

As with accommodation, everything else in Iceland is very expensive. This includes food, activities, shopping for clothes, etc. From my experience I suggest you go dumpster diving at Kronan. They throw out an abundance of perfect food and it will make your stay a lot more affordable. Otherwise shop at Bonus as they have the best prices. Meat is very expensive but Bonus has good deals on fish, and Kronan has cheap horse meat. Skyr is a must for your diet there too. The campsite in the city is also a great place to get free food as people leave a lot there before they head to the airport.



If you need new clothes, etc. buy a plane ticket with friends overseas. It will cost the same price all up but you will have also visited another country and had a great time experiencing it with your new friends (I went to Lithuania). If you drink alcohol buy as much duty free as you can as this is also very expensive in Iceland (\$90-\$100 for a bottle of vodka).

Academic Experience

University of Iceland does a lot of block courses. Because of this I finished 3 of my courses within the first 6 weeks of university, leaving only one for the rest of the semester. This gave me a lot of free time to do whatever I wanted which was great. I also found university there is extremely easy if you are a native English speaker, but the only downside is the lectures feel excruciatingly long (3hrs each!) as the lecturers have to talk so slowly for the other students. This led me to rarely attend class as I could teach myself everything I needed to know in a third of the time. The quality of teaching is not quite as good as Otago either. A lot of what I was being taught at postgraduate level in Iceland I had already been taught at Otago in my undergraduate degree too.

Holidays and Downtime

Iceland is an amazing and beautiful country with plenty of places to visit to keep you endlessly busy. I tended to hire a car with a group of people, or hitchhike, and go exploring during the week and weekends. Camping is a cheap and easy form of accommodation outside of Reykjavik so take a tent if you can. 80% of the time the weather is terrible, with rain and intense wind. When it is sunny, it is the most amazing place in the world. So take good wet weather gear! If you are into hiking the Laugavegur trail is a must. As is visiting Kerlingarfjöll, Skaftafell and the glacier lagoon. These were the best places I visited.



For enjoying life within the city I highly recommend buying a pool card and a bike - you won't regret it. The pool was a great place for students to congregate and relax together, and biking makes

it very easy to get around the city and meet people. The bus is very expensive so a bike would also be the cheaper option in the long term. The social life is great with exchange students if you make the effort. I took a geology course where I went on a field trip at the start of the semester and met heaps of people so that was a great start. There are a number of bars in town that are great to hang out with people and party. The student bar, bar 7 and bar 11 have the best deal on drinks. If you want to drink before going out make sure you get your alcohol before the store closes at six, or is even open to begin with!

It is easy to meet exchange students but I did find it hard to meet locals as they are very shy people and generally don't seem to take an interest in meeting exchange students and tourists. It is also very hard to learn Icelandic as on top of the language being as hard as it is to begin with, everyone knows English so well they just start speaking it as soon as they realise you are not from there.

Summary

All in all my semester at the University of Iceland was an amazing experience. That said, it was great as I worked hard to get the most out of it. If you want a breezy ride for an exchange I can guarantee going to Iceland is not for you. It can be very stressful at times trying to organise yourself there. So work hard and get involved in any opportunities that come your way and you will have the time of your life too!

