
Exchange Report

Exchange year in Fachhochschule Joanneum in Graz, Austria
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Exchange Report



All pictures are from Graz or nearby.

INTRODUCTION

Now it has been more than one year when I left my comfortable home country Finland to go study abroad in Graz, Austria. Since I arrived to Austria a lot has happened and many memories have been made and some old memories have faded away, therefore there may be some gaps in this report and also some “vital” information may be missing, but I’m doing my best at recalling at least the best and most important parts.

I always knew that at some point of my studies I would go study abroad as I have always had at least some interest to people from other countries and to their cultures. I also knew that going abroad would give a boost to my language skills in English and I needed that.

In fall 2006 I was lacking badly motivation to study and I was looking into different solutions how to get it back or what else I could do besides studying. Resulting from consultation with my study coordinator, I decided that going abroad would be suitable solution, even though I was only in my third semester of my studies, which is usually not yet time for studying abroad.

BEFORE TAKE-OFF

Where to?

First two questions naturally were: “Where to? And for how long?”. For me the country didn’t matter that much, but I didn’t want to go abroad just for one semester as I felt that it would be too short period. This meant a little bit more work for me, because usually exchange period lasting for one year should start at fall and for me it started in February. This was merely matter of bureaucracy and paper work, but still caused some annoying extra work.

Even though it didn’t matter that much where I wanted to study, it took quite a lot of time to make my pick. I was choosing mainly between Netherlands, Germany and Austria. Out of these countries, Austria seemed to be the best one, mainly because of its central location in Europe and how that would make traveling easy.

Graz in Austria became my pick as it was the biggest city from the ones I had to choose from and lectures in the program that was specially designed for exchange students (Global Business Program) would be completely in English (and on the side I would have a change to learn German).

Practicalities

As far I can recall, applying process was simple and there was no complications in it. Filling some applications and sending them to FH Joanneum. Some time later I got a mail back that I’ve been accepted to study in Global Business Program in Fachhochschule Joanneum.

With the other applications I sent housing application to ÖAD describing what kind of place I’d want (can be limited with type, price, etc.). ÖAD is a local exchange service and they dealt with all the arrangements for housing. Mid-December 2006 I got mail from ÖAD, which had instructions to pay the deposit of 450 euros (I get 400 euros back) and information that they start searching a place for me as soon as they get the deposit. At the beginning of January ÖAD offered me a room from a triplex. Place sounded great enough for me to accept. If I wouldn’t have accepted and I would have asked for them to look for another one, I would have had to pay some extra for the extra work (if I remember it right, could also be from the third search onwards).

I applied and got 1 700 euro grant from *William ja Ester Otsakorven Säätiö*, plus something from ERASMUS-program. And naturally I would get same financial aids from KELA as I would get in Finland during my studies.

After searching cheap flight ticket for some time I got fed up with all the comparing and finally bought mine directly from Finnair. I had to pay 110 € for the direct flight from Helsinki to Vienna, which wasn't that bad.

Before I left, I also took travel insurance - just in case, I paid something like 200 euros for that and it covered pretty much everything that could happen.

Resources

- 1) FH Joanneum (in English): <http://fh-joanneum.at/aw/~a/home/?lan=en>
- 2) City of Graz (in English): <http://www.graz.at/EN>
- 3) Tickets through Opodo (in English): <http://opodo.com/>
- 4) William ja Ester Otsakorven Säätiö (in Finnish): <http://www.otsakorpi.com/>
- 5) Wikipedia article about Graz (in English): <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graz>

AFTER LANDING

Graz

Graz is the second biggest city in Austria and it is the capital of the state of Steiermark and there's about 250 000 citizens with principal residence status. Because Graz can't compete in tourism sector with Wien or Salzburg, big efforts have been made in order to promote Graz for studying. There's six universities in Graz, with over 40 000 students and there's also significant amount of exchange students.

Graz is quite tightly built, so everything can be found within walking distance and it's easy to get to know the city. Public transportation system in the city is great and somewhat cheaper than in Finland. With public transportation it is easy and fast to get to anywhere in the city and outer city. City center (Old Town) is beautiful with its old buildings and narrow streets and good shopping possibilities and also places to have a coffee during the day.

I could also recommend buying a bike, because it's easy to get around with that. Just keep in mind that in Austria bike has to have a light and that driving drunk is illegal - lacking light and driving drunk will both lead to a big fine.

Because of the location of the city the weather is quite mediterranean. Spring begins around February and by beginning of May the weather is pretty much like July in Finland.

Accommodation

For me living in a dorm wasn't an option, therefore renting from a private provider was the only solution. Still I wanted to have some company in the flat, so renting a single was also out of the question.

Flat and the room were pretty much as I had imagined. Rooms were furnished and flowered (flowers, nor the plants didn't manage to survive my company). Flat is a triplex with kitchen, bathroom, toilet and two balconies and plenty of storage space, and also laundry machine, which is a big plus. From the balcony I'm able to see Schloßberg, where's probably the most known landmark of Graz, Uhrturm (The Clock Tower). I can reach city center in ten minutes by walking and pretty much everything I need is close by. So at least for me, the flat was a success. Some friends have had quite horrible holes, but it's usually possible to change accommodation afterwards.

All my flat-mates have been great, so I've been lucky also in that sense.

Pretty much the only thing to complain was the amazingly slow pace to provide internet. It took almost two months before we got internet and some other friends have had similar problems.

Bureaucracy

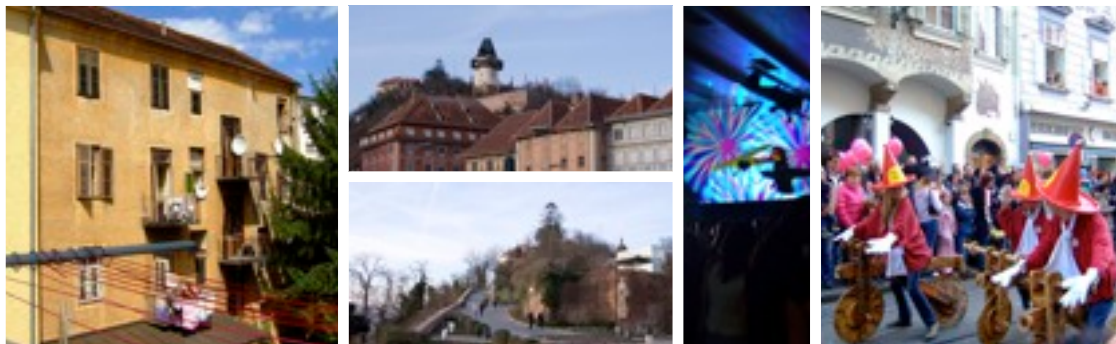
EU citizen has to inform both, city of Graz and the State of Steiermark about their arrival. School gives instructions what to do and what to fill, but it still means a lot of work and queuing.

In FH things were less bureaucratic - only normal enrolling to courses and signing attendance lists.

LIVING, TRAVELING AND PARTYING

Like said before, there is a lot of foreign exchange students in Graz and this resulted to my main language being English. Because it was so easy *not* to speak German - I didn't. Also the amount of Finnish people is amazing and it's hard to avoid them. It is totally up to oneself, which language to speak and I have to say that now afterwards I'm disappointed to myself for not speaking more German. When I came to Graz I had basically no knowledge of German language and I know that I could have done much more than I did, even though at the moment I'm able to get by with it.

Price level in Austria is generally quite close to Finland, but there's some exceptions. Alcohol bought from grocery stores is cheaper: one could get 0,5 liter beer as low as 35 cents and wine from 90 cents per bottle. Differently to Finland, in Austria any alcohol can be bought from grocery stores. Annoyingly stores are open only until six or seven (with the exception of few Spars).



All pictures are from Graz.

Trips

From Graz it is easy to make day-trips, weekend-trips or longer journeys in Europe, because it is located in a great spot in Europe. Neighboring countries are easily and cheaply accessed by car, train, bus or airplane. During my stay in Graz I've visited Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Hungary and Luxembourg (some countries I visited during my summer "Road trip/Interrail").

Many of the exchange have traveling almost as their major, so it shouldn't be hard to find some company for getting to know the extended neighborhood.

Eating and Drinking

Eating in restaurants is cheaper than in Finland (it is also generally cheaper in Graz than in other parts of Austria), therefore eating out was many times more desirable, than cooking at home. It is common to tip in Austria, but it is not necessary (even though expected).

For those who want fast food (like I do), there's kebab-joints every 100 meters and cheapest Döners (sort of a pita kebab) are around 1,50 euros. Usually they use only chicken, and it's really hard to find a place that would actually have real kebab meat (or any other meat).

Bars and clubs are hard to miss, but in those drinking isn't that cheap. Nightclubs are mostly located near universities in *Univiertel* and in there one can find many places to spend the night. One thing I missed, was *Lonkero* and also sider - those two things are impossible to find (with sider one might get lucky in some Irish pubs). Therefore I had to transform from alcohol drinker in to sophisticated European wine taster.

Nice cultural difference compared to Finland is that every bar, cafe, restaurant, etc. (night-clubs usually not) have service to tables.

Free Time and Sports

Universitäts-sportinstitut Graz (USI) offers sport courses ranging from ballet to parachuting. Choices seem quite endless and prices are really low. You could do for example football, martial arts or dancing for about 20 euros per semester. Just to mention something that's offered: archery, wall climbing, kayaking, bowling, etc. Public gyms in Graz are also moderately priced, it's possible to get a month for 20 euros.

Accident

In the middle of the first semester I had an accident and broke few bones too many from my right hand, so I got to know also the Austrian health care system closely.

Everything worked nicely with the European Health Insurance Card and I got the same treatment as anyone else would have got. Biggest problem was that there wasn't that many people at the hospital that were able to speak English, and that made communication quite complex.

For my hand I needed first of all a cast, I don't even remember how many visits to hospital, operation which hospitalized me for three days (had to pay separately 20 euros for accommodation) and several therapy sessions. And that 20 euros was everything I had to pay.

STUDYING AND COURSES

Global Business Program

Studying methods differed quite a lot from what I was used to in Finland. First of all, semesters are different than ones in Finland. First semester begins at October and ends at February and the second one begins at March and ends in the end of June. Our program was specially designed for incoming exchange students and it was entirely modular, with the exception of continuing German courses. Modularity in our program meant that each course was taught in two one-week blocks, either sequentially or some other courses between. All GBP courses are worth 5 ECTS points and all have the same weekly time schedule: lectures from Monday to Friday, working hours between 09:00-13:00. Most courses have one to two presentations and multiple case studies (some courses had different case daily) and exam at the last day of the second week. Some exams were “open-book” and some even “open-laptop”.

IMME	IMME	Free	IFM	MMNE	MMNE	IFM	Free
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Description of GBP course modularity with three different courses: “International Marketing and Market Entry” (IMME), “International Financial Management” (IFM) and “Managing Multinational Enterprise” (MMNE). Each block equals to one week.

Resulting from the modularity and the ease of selecting and dropping courses, it was easy to plan other activities like trips to other cities or countries.

Compared to the way “normal” students study here, GBP is kids-play. They have extremely tight schedules, amazing workloads and high demands. Their days go easily from eight to eight, sometimes they’re studying at Saturdays and they have to study everything with ridiculous detail. I would also say, that it’s a bit easier to get the points in GBP than it would be in Finland.

My Studies

Well, like I said before, I lacked studying motivation while I was studying in Finland, so it’s quite obvious that I was quite far away from a “study-monster” in Graz, but for my defense I may say that I was no worse than majority of our merry group.

During the my first semester I managed to finish only three courses resulting 15 ECTS point. This was not strictly result from low motivation, but also the accident I had, caused failure of few courses, because of absence and disability.

Latter semester went a bit better - at least study-wise - and I got 25 ECTS points from the five courses I finished and I also did three-week intensive German course. I had a change to do that German course also first semester, but I decided to skip it because of its price, which was 200 euros.

Learning Agreement I made in Finland changed totally during my studies. At the beginning of both semesters I enrolled to every offered course, but because it was possible to drop a course till the end of the second course day, I used this possibility to take a look if the course was interesting and worth taking and if not, then I dropped it.

In Class, Out of Class

One thing that differed a lot from how it would be in Finland was openness, grouping more than sub-grouping, happiness and friendliness of fellow students. Surely, because everybody in our group were exchange students, the whole group was in the same boat in that sense. Still when compared to normal classroom situation in Finland, our class was a lot tighter in a good way. People also actually made comments during lessons without teacher “forcing” them to say something, which I haven’t seen to be that common in Finland.

Our groups did also things together out of class as a group. Though I have to say that I spent more time with local friends, than the ones from my groups. As a GBP student, you’re definitely not going to be alone, either there’s the support of the group or you’ll find friends from the locals.

Following could probably be defined as “returning culture shock”:

I visited my school in Finland some weeks ago and the whole thing felt really awkward, cold and somewhat phlegmatic compared to what I got used to during the past year with GBP. When I would have the choice I would rather study in studying environment like I studied in Graz, than I’ve studied back in Finland.

TIPS TO OTHER BROAD-MINDED PEERS

It is common to be formal in Austria when you speak to people you don't know or when you're speaking to older people or for example to your professors. Also being polite is important and you should not forget to add "Bitte" to your sentences.

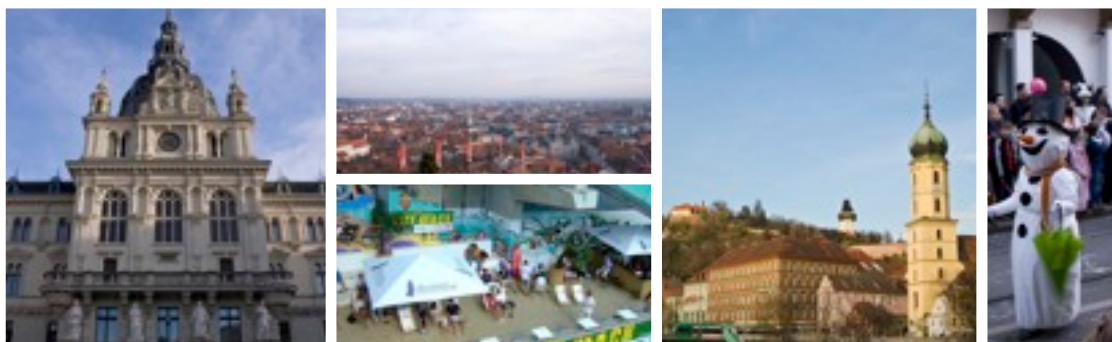
In Austria you greet people by saying: "Grüss Gott" and you say goodbye by saying: "Tschüss" to your friends and formally "Auf Wiedersehen" or in an Austrian way by saying "Auf Wiedersehen".

It's also common to use conditional for example when ordering food: "Ich hätte gern..." or "Ich möchte...". And don't forget to be polite.

Here's some general tips:

- I. Live with others as you have then easier access to parties, company, help, etc. If you don't want to live in a dorm, then shared flat is also great solution.
- II. Get European Health Insurance Card, it can be obtained from KELA. It is good to have just in case "if something happens".
- III. If you're going to travel, then getting international student card (ISIC) might be wise as that sometimes gives some discounts in hostels. And with that you can get discounts in many other places too.
- IV. Even though credit card can't be used many places in Graz, it still makes life easier, for example when planning traveling, booking hostels, tickets etc.
- V. Open local bank account as it is totally free and it makes money transfers and withdrawals easier (and if you smoke, you need a card for the cigarette machines).
- VI. Get ÖBB VorteilsCard. That is a discount card for train travels (with that you can get also some other offers) and you get around 50% off of your ticket price. The card costs only about 20 euros, so it pays itself back when you take a train from Graz to Vienna once. You have to be under 26 in order to be eligible to get it and you also need picture of yourself and address in Austria.
- VII. If you have change to do something new - then do it!
- VIII. Leave your tight-ass-mind at home!

What There is Left to Say?



All pictures are from Graz.

Should you go abroad? “I would say: hell yes!” I think that going abroad gives something to everybody. Students from zit-faced shy corner-boys to Miss Sixty-nines will get something out of the exchange experience.

I’m not sure if I can say that I would have learned something new about myself, but I have definitely learned many things about other cultures and people. And that has only increased my desire for more intercultural encounters. People are different, they think differently, they value different things and they behave differently, but that only makes them more interesting.

Socially I’m somewhat more open than I was before, but I know that I could still be more - so let the intercultural experiment continue.

For me Graz was a perfect place to live. I got quite a lot of new friends, my English got better, and I got mediocre German skills (still working on that).

To anyone whom it may concern:

My blog (in Finnish): <http://www.aisengaad.com/blogi/>
I was a bit lazy writing that while I was studying, and there’s also topics not concerning my exchange period, but try to manage.

Also my email address can be found from this report,
so feel free to contact me if you have any questions.