Introduction
Groningen is the largest city in the northern Netherlands, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants. Of these, more than a quarter are university students, which makes Groningen an ideal choice for either exchange or long-term studies. It also means that there is always something going on in the city.

Sights to see include the Martini Tower in the city centre, the Aa church, the marketplaces of Grote Markt and Vismarkt, and the old Academy building, which is now the main building of the University of Groningen. I would also recommend that you go and see the beach and some of the small islands off the shore, but although planned to, I never got around to see them myself.

Getting there
Since Groningen is pretty far from other larger Dutch cities, it takes a bit of planning to choose the best way to travel. The most used alternative from Budapest is to take a flight to Amsterdam or Eindhoven and get on a train to Groningen. Flights to Schiphol in Amsterdam usually cost more, but the train travel is more convenient: Schiphol Airport has a train stop, and every hour, there is a direct train to Groningen, which takes about two hours. On the other hand, flights to Eindhoven are cheaper, because the airport is served mostly by cheaper airlines. But the trip from the airport to the Eindhoven train station requires a bus ride, which does not only cost money, but can be very inconvenient with large baggage. There is also no direct connection, a change is necessary in Utrecht. The whole trip takes about three hours. These aren’t the only choices, some people flew to Rotterdam, and there are options to travel to or from Maastricht as well. There are also long-distance buses and travelling by car is also possible. These, however can take up a whole day, or even more, but allow for more luggage to be transported.

Compared to Hungarian prices, train tickets are very expensive. A basic Inter-City ticket costs around 25 euros, with an additional fee of 1 euro if you don’t have a chip card, which you probably won’t have the first time around. As for me, I never had one during my stay. There is also an additional fee if you pay with a MasterCard, as Maestro cards are much more common in the Netherlands. There are way to save money, though. There is a student’s discount which allows for free travel either during the weekends or the weekdays, and 40% discount on the other. However, I haven’t seen any exchange students with this, nor have I heard from anyone how to get it. There are also group tickets, which cost 70 euros, and can be used by at most 10 people. As of the end of 2015, there were no rules regarding whether the group should travel together, but this might be subject to change in the future, so it would be helpful to check whether the same rules still apply. As for organising the groups, there are several Facebook groups dedicated to this, but acceptance into one of them might take a longer time. For example, it took around 1.5 months for me to get accepted in one.
Once you have your ticket, the ride is very comfortable and convenient. Train carriages are kept clean, but sometimes they get a bit dirty by the end of the day. Also, there are silent carriages for those who want to travel in silence. Delays are rare, and even if they happen, they do not tend to be more than 10 minutes.

**Transportation in Groningen**

Inside the city, it is most advisable to get a bicycle as soon as possible. With the enormous Dutch popularity of cycling, and Groningen even being ‘the cycling capital of the Netherlands’, you can expect a huge amount of bicycles everywhere in the city. This also means that cycling paths and bike parking places are plentiful and available. The only time when I would advise against cycling is in the coldest periods of winter, when it can sometimes get as cold as -5 degrees, and there is always a wind. Also, paths and pavements are susceptible to freezing over, which is especially dangerous with a bike. However, during any other time, biking is by far the most convenient and efficient way to get around the city. Alternatives include taking a bus, which can be useful if you get an OV chip card. Without one, though, every ride will cost around 2 euros. Walking small distances can also be an option when the distance is small and you are not in a hurry. I would still strongly recommend getting a bike as soon as you can.

As for getting a bike, there are also several options. The safer but more expensive one is to rent one at one of the bike rental places. It costs a fair sum of money which you won’t see back, but rental bikes come with a warranty for getting stolen, and can be brought back to the rental shop for free repairs any time. There are also lots of bikes on sale at any given point in time. If you choose to buy a bike, you might have to also buy accessories like locks and lights for it to be able to be used properly. But it costs far less overall if you are able to sell it at the end of your stay.

**Accommodation**

The University provides several housing options for exchange students in student houses all over the city. The one I stayed in was Van Houtenlaan, the cheapest of them. A single room still cost just over 300 euros a month, and we had shared bathrooms and kitchens. We had rooms of about 9 square meters, which is just about enough for a bed, a table and a wardrobe, but we got used to it very quickly. The internet was not very reliable and our fridge stopped working, but in the end, it was all made up for by the people staying there. The shared facilities and huge common room created many opportunities to meet new people and make friends. And with around 150 people living on 7 floors, there are always people to meet. Also, this house is on the south side of the city, pretty far from the Zernike campus, where the Faculty of Economics and Business holds their lectures and tutorials. The city centre is about 10 minutes away by bike and half an hour on foot, while the campus is about 25 to 30 minutes by bike, and an unbearably long time on foot.

There are also other places, but I haven’t heard a lot about those, only that they are only slightly better furnished but have a much higher rent.
University

I have attended the University of Groningen (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, RUG), more accurately the Faculty of Business and Economics. This is one of the main universities in the city, the other being the Hanzehogeschool Groningen. My lectures took place at the Zernike Campus in northern Groningen, while other faculties, like Psychology and Arts took place downtown, in the historical buildings of the University, dating back to 1614. The university also uses some other facilities, like a cinema and an old church to hold lectures.

The Dutch semester is divided into two halves, with a short exam period at the end of each. You are expected to complete around 3 courses in each half, and every course is worth 5 ECTL credits. Because I took courses in Master’s level, my courses were, in my opinion, a bit more difficult than Bachelor’s ones, but they were far from impossible to complete. The workload is more or less shared evenly across the semester, with weekly or bi-weekly assignments and an exam at the end. Some courses didn’t have lectures, but still required us to meet the teachers almost every week.

The grading system is different from the one I was used to in Hungary. Grades range from 1 to 10, and you need to get a 6 to pass. However, getting a 9 is pretty rare, and I have only seen one person get a 10, so grades don’t translate well into the Hungarian 1 to 5. An important thing to note about exams is that there is only one opportunity to take an exam in a half-semester (quadrimester?). There is one opportunity to take a resit, but it takes place in the next period, so if you are spending only a semester in Groningen and fail an exam in the second period, you will need to travel back in the end of March or the beginning of April to take a resit. Repairing assignments is more lenient, however, if there is a minimum point score to reach from assignments, a repair opportunity is presented to reach that level.

As for the equipment of the university, there can be no complaint. With the Zernike campus, every building is modern and up-to-date, there are plenty of areas to study either alone or with a group, and several computer labs around the campus. The whole area is covered by Wi-Fi, and you can use that even in buildings of other faculties, which can be a life saver in the city centre. There is even a grocery store and stops for several bus lines in the Zernike campus.

Daily life

As for me, since I lived in a student house, I wasn’t bored for a day. Outside of the house, there are regular ESN events organised almost every week. There were often thematic parties, for example a white t-shirt party, a Halloween party, or a Dutch night, where all participants had to wear something orange. The ESN group also organised an Introduction week for our first week in Groningen. This included several parties, getting to know the city, a sports day, and even some dinners. It also helped to get to know some other foreign students in the city, outside of classmates and people from the student house. Some of these friendships lasted over the semester, and we had opportunities to meet up with the group after the Introduction week as well.
Daily life naturally includes daily eating, and at first, grocery prices may seem intimidating. Generally speaking, basic food costs around 1.5 to 2 times as much as in Hungary. This incentivises cooking for yourself, which is an important skill to have anyway. Speaking from my experience, I could have learned to cook much more things, but I didn’t. Options for shopping include Lidl, which I was a bit reluctant to go to at first, but I was pleasantly surprised: they sell quality goods, for lesser prices than other stores. In the neighbourhood, we had an Albert Heijn, which is a bit more expensive, but has premium products that are quite often worth their money. There is also a bonus card in Albert Heijn, which was included in a welcome package for me, and it offers discounts on various product, changing weekly. These discount can be quite significant: I even had my card borrowed on several occasions. Speaking about prices, the costs of services are even higher compared to Hungarian ones, and prices in bars and clubs cost around 4 to 5 times that much. For example, it is not uncommon for a large glass of beer to cost 5 euros, so moderation is advised in those places, from the standpoint of one’s wallet.

**Personal opinion and experiences**

As I might have already mentioned several times, I have absolutely no regrets about choosing Groningen as the place of my Erasmus semester. The situation was a bit scary at first with the small rooms and shared utilities, but it only took until my first time in the common room of our student house to change my mind. All of the inconveniences were worth it for the people and the cultures I got to know and the skills I started to develop. I think this semester abroad has helped me solve problems on my own, learn to look after myself and build friendships better.

I have also improved academically, even though I could get none of my courses accepted at home. Still, my time in Groningen was helpful in improving my professional English and getting to know different areas in which to use things I have learned before.

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