Erasmus exchange report – University of Cologne, 2018/19, Wintersemester

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In this report I would like to talk about my exchange in Cologne, which took place between 01.10.2018 and 28.02.2019 on The University of Cologne, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. I myself study Sociology on Corvinus University of Budapest and later I am planning to learn Internation Economics, so this university and especially this faculty really fitted my needs. I want to summerize the most important details about my experiences and recommendations regarding all fields of the my exchange. It has been an extraordinary period of my life, so first of all I would like to recommend it to anybody to try himself/herself out with the Erasmus program and with – at least – half a year of exchange. It is really worth it.

Cologne – city and culture

Cologne is a city located in the western part of Germany, in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. Therefore, it can be found in the middle of a region, which is amongst the most economically advanced, not only in Germany but in the whole of Europe. Cologne is located next to the river Rhine, which crosses the city itself. It is the 4th largest settlement in Germany, 1 million people is living inside its borders, therefore it has a huge and comprehensive infrastructure, providing all the services what a metropolitan area can provide.

Cologne is not only in an advanced region, next to the „Ruhrstadt”, the city itself is a progressive territory, already entered into the 21st century. The industrial activity is outside of the city, in consequence the air of the city is really clean, almost not polluted at all, although a lot of cars cross the city. Cologne is a city of 2000 years, it was founded by the Romans and was always an important city. Unfortunately, thanks to the bombardments of WWII, a lot of historical and cultural sights were annihilated, together with the beautiful eclectic buildings, which dominated the inner city. In spite of this, Cologne is today a flourishing cultural center, with a lot of culutral programs, at least 1 or 2 of them taking place in each week. And the inner city still provides a lot of really important sights.

One of them shouldnt suprise anyone: the almighty Dom of Köln is a beautiful and worthy building, everyone should visit it. It takes only 2 Euros to go to the 100 meters hight of the building, from where you can see the surrounding area in a range of 50 kilometers. The Dom itself is 147 meters large, it is an extraordinary structure, even from the outside. The inside if even more beautfiul, with the gothic elements, the many centurty old sculputes and other reliquies. And there are supposed reliquies of the Three Kings as well, who visited Jesus, they are being held in an enourmous full-golden box. Just some meters away from the Dom, there are 2 Museums really much worth to visit: Römisches-Germanisches Museum, for 5 Euros
which tells the whole history of Cologne in a frame of an interactive exhibition; and Museum Ludwig, for 8 Euros, which is an interesting art museum. Next to Ludwig Museum you can visit the building of the Orchestra of Köln, they sometimes held concerts for free, its really-really worth it to search for informations about their concerts. The inner city provides also really great sights, besides these. Next to them, the bridge next to the train station, the many neogothic churches of the city, the Stadium of 1. FC Köln and the Telecom Tower can worth a visit.

In hospitality Cologne is No. 1. You can finds places of enjoyment everywhere. A lot of quality restaurants (some with cheap prices), many great, distinct Café places and a lot of pubs and „Kneipen“ are available inside the 2-3 kilometer radius of the city centre. Apparently, they are providing first-class services. These are the places, where the life in Cologne concentrates. And the overall life of Köln is really flowing, because 10% of the population is made up of university stundets (!), there are a lot of tourists and the people with foreign origin make up 30% of the population. Therefore Cologne is undeniably the most pulsating city, what I have ever seen.

In Cologne you will never get bored, tons of great parties, cultural happenings and other events are organized every day. I lived together with a German family in Cologne and the father there used to be the town councillor of Culture, and he also said to me, that Cologne is extraordinary in the quantity and quality of events. To summerize, the city is really beautiful, comfortable to live in, and there are a lot of green areas throughout the city. And everyone speaks English, not just German.

University of Köln

University of Cologne is the 3rd largest University in Germany, with 50.000 Students. It is a University of Sciences, which means, the whole spectrum of sciences is covered in the education. They have a really good international rank and the education there is really good, although the quality of the lessons largely depends of the teacher. The buearorcracy is well-built, its not a miracle, because they need to oversee more than 100 separate buildings of the university, spread throughout the city. There are many exchange students and people know how to treat them.

From the first moment of the exchange, we got all the help from the International Office, and our coordinators informed us about everything, what we needed to do and about every event. It was quite convenient for us, because they summerized in a page called WEX everything what you need to do during the exchange. WEX was filled with guides as well, about how to find accomodation, which courses you can take. Every administrative work was smoothly done thanks to this big caring of the International Office. Be careful though with the special wishes, what you say to them from your own head, because the administration is really slow in those unusual cases. Otherwise, they are really helpful and they have many
connections. WiSO (the name of the faculty) have a group called PIM-CEMS, which organised really great social programs for us, for example, a Welcome Week for a whole week in October, which was the best and most thrilling week probably in my whole life.

Besides, you can take part in German courses, but be careful and apply early in the summer, otherwise you wont get places for the Wintersemester. Next to these, you have a variety of courses and lessons available in English and in German as well. You will have a wide variety of courses to choose from. In Cologne you get a certain, but not significant handicap if you cant speak German, in the eyes of the native people (for the Germans, nationalism equals demanding the partner to speak the language perfectly), but you can improve really much while being in Cologne and they are really good English-speakers as well and they gladly use it with you.

The University is big, but the main buildings you can find in a radius of 500 meters. There are special places for studying as well, quite a lot and their atmosphere is really good. The University has an agreement of the City Library of Köln, which is 500-600 meters away from the main building. You can borrow books from there for free and also order them. You can study there as well, even for the whole day, if you want.

Besides the International Office and the PIM-CEMS group you can have even more, personalised help from your buddy. Everyone gets an official „buddy” who is on exchange, that person is usually an older student. They are really helpful, but usually you have to ask their help, they will not ask besides the first 1-2 weeks if you need anything. But they gladly help if you ask them.

Accomodation, food and living costs

It's really hard to find accommodation in Germany, but especially in Köln. The costs are high and the demand is really great for rooms. You can apply for a room in one of the dorms of the Kölner Studierendenwerk, an organization bounded to the Uni, which provides nearly 10 000 rooms. But usually this is not enough: just one in every three applied student can get a room. Some of my friends, who didn't just wait after their application, but pushed the Studierendenwerk via emails, usually got a room. So with that agile behavior you can be successful, but still, you should count with it that you maybe will not get a room. I myself was looking for other alternatives. It is worth it to look for accommodation 3-4 month before the exchange to get quality rooms. I was lucky – through my university connections I get to know to a German family who were living in the southern mansion-area of the city, where I had a separate, quite large room and a big bathroom, what I only needed to share with the other (also Hungarian, by luck) student, who rent the other room next to me.

On internet there are 2-3 sites, which help you a lot in finding accommodation in Cologne – on these pages, contacts of the landlords are also available. Usually you can get a room for circa
300-400 Euros per month. That's good in German prices. If you manage to apply for a dorm room, you can maybe pay as „little“ as 180-200 Euros, but your room will be quite small as well. The landlords in Cologne usually want to see you, when you apply – you can counter it with providing more information about yourself, to ensure them that you are reliable.

Maybe you can send a picture about yourself as well. Some landlords are tricky, only stay in contact with those, who are not so suspicious, but also don't want to sell you the room just after you said „Hi“. Care about finding your accommodation, but don't worry too much about it – even those, who arrive without a room can find one in days somehow – it happened with others whom I knew as well. But try to be prepared, its much safer to get a room month before you arrive.

The food costs are not that high – compared to the Hungarian prices, it is like 115-120%. You can find quality products and usually 200 Euros is enough for you for the food in one month. German loans are really good, but the food usually is cheap – that means also as well, that next to the cheap (and good quality) food you can also find more expensive ones, so you can find any speciality what you want. They lay a great emphasize on bio products and healthy food. In a supermarket you can shop quite cheap, and really tasty and healthy food.

Germans are really green – they are collecting the trash selectively usually. Also, for an empty bottle you can get 10 cents – so if you want to get some extra money, you can collect them and change them back. Actually, a lot of people are doing this for a living!! All right... usually the poorer ones, but from daily 4-5 Euros you can feed yourself for the whole day – and it takes only 40-50 bottles 😊 Therefore, the street are really clean as well and you can live in a great environment.

I need to mention now something really important: at the beginning of your exchange – when you are still home – you are asked to pay for the university an amount of 271,5 Euros, which is not a tuition fee, but rather a social fee. This social fee seems for the first sight as a big money, but it really pays back. Thanks to this fee you get a so called „UC-Card“, which enables you to use public transport FOR FREE for THE WHOLE SEMESTER! The card is valid in the city of Köln and besides that the whole state of Nordrhein-Westfalen! The costs of public transport are otherwise really high, so just with this discount you get back, what you lost with that 271,5 Euros, at least 10 times!! This UC-Card also enables you to eat cheaper int he Uni Mensa – this is where students eat their lunch. A really great place with good food, and a friendly environment. You shall totally eat your lunch (or even other meals) at the Mensa, it is really quality food there, cheap and really diverse at the same time. You have to keep your UC-Card by yourself always – it is really importnat in the Library and int he Uni as well, but its two functions with the free public transport and the discounted mensa food plays a really large role in your money-management! It helped me to spare a large amount of money.

In Köln you shall try out Kölsch beer which is really famous int he region and is available in many forms. It is quite cheap. Other alcohols are not that cheap, but there are really great places, where you can have fun and party with your friends, and also you will not empty your
purse. The best place is Roonburg, where you can consume an infinite amount of beer for free on Tuesdays between 9-11 o’clock if you payed 5 Euros at the entrance. That place is just absolutely great! The cocktail-bars are usually more expensive, but they provide really good drinks and other facilities.

For entertainment you couldn’t find a better city – besides this opportunities mentioned above, you can go to museums, theatres, cinemas and wonderful restaurants, café places. Cologne is really up-to-date in those areas of life.

To enhance your life quality, you can take part in experiments, where usually you just have to sit in a computer room and do some online test and complete a task in 15-20 minutes. I got more than 40 Euros with just 5 experiments, altogether I spent 2 hours with these occasions – they were pretty interesting and at the same well paying. Visit the side of lab.uni-koeln.de to learn more about these experiments. You can also develop in German really much while taking part, in reading.

**Sport and social life (about the German people as well)**

There are two organizations which are organizing sport events throughout the semester – UniSport Köln and Hochschulsport Köln. The first one provides really quality sport facilities, but you need to pay for it. Hochschulsport does it for FREE and you can get access to many sports through them! Ball games, gym exercises, water sports, martial arts and everything else – at least 100 different kind of sport. I tried out Volleyball, Football and Table Tennis, I can tell you that these programs are really great! And you dont need to pay for it anything, only registering 3 hours before the trainings via Internet. The trainings can take place in any corner of the city, but they are usually near to the university. Next to the Unit there is a great Football Pitch and also a Gym.

About socializing you dont need to worry. The whole environment of the city is really extroverted, you will find your likes at the Uni quite early on. But note something: most Germans are really welcoming, they treat you with respect and help you – BUT they are not open for longer friendships!! Usually Germans have German friends, they care about you but you can never cross their intimate line. I didnt have one good German friend, just acquaintances. Another thing: on the welcome week I experienced that the German students, who were with us, were really friendly, open minded, careless and big party-people. But the same guys later, when I met them int he Uni, were really concentrated and cold, when it came to the school. Through my experiences I can say that the coin has two sides – Germans are party animals, but after partying hard, they work and study really hard as well. Maybe because of this inconsistence you can only maintain friendship with them really hard.

There are a plenty of exchange students in Cologne – those from the Central or Southern parts of Europe are usually over-represented. But you can find any nation there, really. My closest friends were from France, Spain, Greece, Russia, Checz Republic, but also from the USA, Japan and China! I met also people from Venezuela, Singapore and Kenia as well – they
are not hard to find. So it is a really international city, and usually the exchange students in Cologne are really open-minded but they are also hard working, because the University of Cologne requires it!

**Destinations and tourism**

In the last part of my report I want to tell you about the greatest destinations near (or not so near) Köln. Thanks to the UC-Card you can travel for free in the region, which means, that you can visit cities, like

- Dortmund
- Bonn
- Münster
- Düsseldorf
- Aachen
- Mönchengladbach and many more

for free. Also, in the international context, Cologne is really close to major cities in Belgium, France, Netherland and in Germany itself. For 30 to 50 Euros you can reach cities like

- Paris
- Brussels
- Amsterdam
- Luxembourg
- Hamburg

- and Frankfurt.

Also, in the local area there are places to visit. From personal experience I can recommend:

- Castle Drachenfels
- Monschau and its National Park
- Eschersee and its sand-beach
- Königsforst in Cologne.

Also: there are two carnival periods in the year: on the 11th of November and almost a whole week at the end of February. For these carnivals a lot of tourists visit the city. The
atmosphere is really-really wild and you can have the greatest parties of your life – usually on the streets as well, with 100 000 people next to you in costumes.

I would certainly recommend you to choose Cologne as your exchange place: the city, the education, the atmosphere and the events are 100%. You can get one of the best moments in your life, in a safe and international city. For the end I want to summerize the attitude of Cologne with some lines of a local, well known song:

„Da sind wir dabei, das ist prima!

Viva Colonia!

Wir lieben das Leben, die Liebe und die Lust

Wir glauben an die liebe Gott und hab auch immer Durst!”