

Erfahrungsbericht Auslandssemester an der University of Alberta

Winter Term 2022, Dominic Kraus
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Preparations

My preparations for the exchange semester started during COVID in 2020. I planned to go to Canada in the Fall 2021 term, back then I was optimistic that the world will get over this whole pandemic pretty quickly. As it turned out, I was wrong. Summer 2021 approached, and the situation hasn't gotten significantly better. After a lot of discussions and considerations I postponed my exchange in agreement with the U of A and the Centre for Canadian Studies at the University of Innsbruck to the winter term 2022. Everybody involved was very helpful and understanding regarding my concerns, for which I am still very thankful. My motivation for rescheduling was that I guessed that a higher vaccination rate would mean a more normal student life. This seemed to be true until December, then the Omicron wave hit the world. Again, I was wrong and my exchange seemed on the brink to cancellation. I booked a flight anyways, at the end of December, which I missed due to illness (not COVID). I scheduled another flight in the first week of January, which I missed due to illness (COVID). My next try at the end of January turned out to be successful, I guess "third time's a charm" proved itself to be right. During January I attended classes online, which was quite challenging given the time zone differences.

Arriving in Canada

The itinerary of my flight was Innsbruck-London-Vancouver-Edmonton. As I just recovered from COVID I was excluded from arrival testing and quarantine, I still had to have a Quarantine Plan ready, as the Border Officer decides if my documents are sufficient to prove my claims. I created my own Quarantine Plan, as the prepaid ones were incredibly expensive. I stayed in the Varscona Hotel for three nights, which was nice as the On-Campus dorms are completely empty. This gave me enough time to rent a car and drive to IKEA to buy everything I need. Quick tip: if you plan on saving money, only go to IKEA to buy blankets, pillows, towels, etc. Stuff where you just want to be the first person to use it, and buy cooking utensils at a thrift shop, such as Goodwill on Whyte Avenue. They have a lot, and it's super cheap. I bought a fondue set just because it was 15\$ and used it twice for parties, great deal. Starting off to explore Edmonton from Whyte Avenue is great because everything vital is in walking distance, such as great restaurants, nice bars, etc. Also on the top of the bucket list for the first views of the city: Highlevel Bridge, great downtown and river valley view.

The best housing possible

I always wanted to stay in On-Campus housing, as I live quite far away from the university in Innsbruck and I wanted to experience as much of the North American way of studying as possible. I chose International House because there you have a bedroom and bathroom to yourself, which is nice if you want some privacy, and kitchens are shared for the floor. Honestly, I didn't like the idea of a shared kitchen, until I arrived. On the first day a super nice guy from Lebanon named Karl invited me to try his Pasta while I was cooking, so we ate together. The following days I got to know a nice Mexican girl named Laura which showed me some proper Mexican dishes. It turned out to be a hotspot to meet new people, try different kinds of food, overall it turned into one of my favourite

spots in I-House. I didn't get homesick, although I had some concerns before I left, because I was constantly meeting new people which became friends I spent a lot of time with. The first month just went by in a blink, and I felt as this is my home now. I couldn't even imagine not being in I-House anymore. The community in this housing is very active, so a lot of trips, activities, and parties. And these people know how to party. There are also several more introverted people in I-House, but be prepared that there will be parties happening in the Lounges or Meeting Rooms, often during the week just because, you know, life is short. I got to know so many people from different nationalities, but my closest friends are from Mexico, Netherlands, Finland, Egypt, Germany and Hong Kong. That's the thing about I-House, you won't meet a lot of Canadians. If you want to live together with Canadians, you got to rent somewhere off-campus.

Studying in Canada

I was enrolled in the Graduate Program of Electrical Engineering. I took three courses, one of which also had a laboratory. Usually, you're only allowed to take 9 Canadian credits, but I was allowed to take 9.8 as one course was rated 3.8 credits, whereas the others were 3 credits. I know what you're thinking, why do 0.8 credits exist and how should this be noticeable. This course was one of the best courses I had in my life, but also one of the most challenging. We had lectures for two hours twice a week, weekly assignments, a three hour laboratory with challenging tasks which took at least another three hours of time to solve and a big project at the end of the term. The second course was also very interesting, and fortunately took a little less work, although it became very stressful at the end, but that was mainly my fault to be honest. The third course was really not my cup of tea, especially since it was basically a three hour online presentation without any interaction on a Friday afternoon on an extremely difficult topic. I ended up failing that course, as I directed my motivation towards the other two (and "extracurricular activities"). All in all, I really loved the campus, I loved the lecturers of my other two courses as they made it extremely interesting and interactive and were very keen on students understanding the underlying principles. It was definitely one of the best studying experiences I had so far, the U of A is a great university and you should visit it if you get the opportunity to do so.

What to do in Canada except studying

Canada is huge. Everybody knows that, but as a European have no clue what huge means. It's just ridiculous. In the Reading Week I went on a road trip with a few people, one of which I met twice and he immediately invited me to join them. I didn't know the other ones at all and I didn't know the itinerary of the roadtrip. That turned out to be a marvellous experience. I was surprised at every stop because I didn't know what was planned, and Canada has such a diverse landscape. We saw canyons, prairie, mountains, and a lot more. We relaxed in Lussier hot springs at -15 degrees Celsius air temperature, we walked on frozen lakes in the middle of the night to stargaze, and so much more. Make some friends, rent a car and do a road trip, it's so worth it. We did 3500km on my first road trip, and we didn't even leave the province. As comparison, that's the distance from Innsbruck to Yerevan, Armenia, which means seven different countries. It's just incredible. I was so happy with the first road trip that I went on a second one after the term, on which we did 9200km, although I only joined for 5000km of them. It's was just amazing. Plan for extra time after the term to travel with friends you made in Canada. I stayed over a month longer than I had to, and every second was worth it.

In a nutshell

Fill out the application and go to Canada. The experience is great, the University is great and the country itself is just awesome as well. They really live up to the stereotype of being extremely friendly and kind. I'm definitely going there again, probably as soon as next year, then in Summer and Fall, as I have seen Winter and Spring now. And I almost forgot to say it: Bears, lots of Bears. I always thought of them as aggressive animals, but in real life they look extremely huggable (please don't though) and behave more like cows than predators. Literally every bear I have seen was eating grass at that point. Just bring bear spray (and know how to use it). I didn't have to use it, but I was happy I had one on me while hiking.