

Erfahrungsbericht Auslandsstudienaufenthalt in Sofia an der UNWE

Report of my Erasmus at the UNWE in Sofia

Preparation

I did do some research about the country and the city and gathered lots of information about the course program from the University's website. I was eager to apply for an Erasmus semester in Sofia also because this part of the European Union would be completely new to me. Furthermore, the geographical location was a decisive factor as well – I do not regret anything. I defiantly had the warmest fall and the sunniest winter semester by far, but don't get your expectations wrong – Sofia also expects some snow in winter and skiing in Bulgaria is quite convenient. After getting accepted by the University in Oldenburg I had to formally apply at the UNWE and it took a very long time for the Bulgarian University finally send me a letter of acceptance in June. I did not do further research and preparation after applying for the semester abroad except of the necessary requirements for the Erasmus semester university wise. I was eager to find out and get the full experience upon arrival in Bulgaria.

Transportation

It was very clear to me right from the start that I would go to Bulgaria by bus as flying in Europe is not necessary. There is a direct bus from Hamburg or Hannover to Sofia run by Union Ivkoni, a Bulgarian bus company, every 3rd day. Unfortunately, I only found out about this direct connection on my journey back. Taking the bus is also worth the cultural experience you might get during the many smoking breaks, despite that, the landscape in the south you are travelling through is very beautiful in my view, especially Slovenia and Serbia. If you have the opportunity to book a long time in advance taking the train to Vienna and then the night bus (AIR KONA, also a Bulgarian bus company offers a student discount and a direct connection over night) was the most convenient and fastest option for me, despite the long break in Vienna, I took that route to go home for Christmas. Travelling only by train is also possible but takes way longer since you can't go through Serbia by train. There is a connection through Romania, but it will take about 10 h longer than the direct bus ride since it is a big detour, and trains tend to be slower the further south you'll go. Keep in mind that you can get some extra Erasmus founding for travelling 'green' if you take the bus or train.

Accommodation

Well, finding accommodation turned out to be a rather difficult topic but in the end, we did all find a place to stay. You can take the dorms; they are very cheap and offered by the university. Unfortunately, some rooms appear to be renovated, and some don't and those are not very appealing. Furthermore, as far as I know the UNWE dorms do not have kitchen facilities. Since I did not hear a lot of good things about the dorms from a person,

that stayed in Sofia before me, I decided against taking the dorms. I did connect with to French Erasmus students over the internet and we wanted to search for an apartment for the three of us but we were very much unsuccessful to find an apartment with so many rooms and they decided to search for their own. I spontaneously got a little Studio for 10 days over flatio (that's very similar to AirBnB) shortly before my arrival and intended to search for a place to live once I'm in Sofia. The studio was not as nice as it looked on the website and the area is also not the nicest (about 10 minutes by foot from the Central Railway station). I did connect with a Belgium Erasmus student over the Erasmus chat, and we searched for an apartment together and that's how I met one of my best friends here in Sofia. I can definitely recommend taking a look at the apartments in person since some are in a very bad condition and dirty, so you can avoid ending up with one of them. On the other hand side, it was a bit stressful to search so urgently for a room, but in the end I was very happy to end up in an apartment with three other Erasmus students, only seven minutes away from Serdica, which is the central metro station in Sofia. I can highly recommend living somewhere around the center since most things (meeting with friends, ESN events) happen to take place in the center and the metro only runs until 12 pm. There are night buses but usually only once an hour, so it is quite convenient if everything is within a walkable distance. We had to pay rather western European rent prices compared to Bulgarian rent prices; however, it is hard to find an apartment for only 4 month and compared to German rents it was still quite cheap. Many of my friends just lived in long-term Airbnb's, that's also a considerable option and comparable to German rent prices. Generally, be very careful not to pay your rent before you've seen the apartment and have a contract since there are a lot of scams happening here.

Studying at UNWE

The Erasmus Coordinator at UNWE is great and the contact is quite personal. Generally, courses are small and there is a very close contact to the teachers. Some courses that I wanted to take weren't offered, so I had to choose lots of them again, but that's not a problem as long as you don't rely on them to be offered. Nonetheless, the first two weeks felt a bit unorganized, oftentimes the room where the course was supposed to take place was wrong or they didn't take place at all during the first week. It was also unclear, whether the Bulgarian Language Course would be offered, but after 4 weeks it finally started. The lectures already end in December, January is exam time but, in many courses, you take some tests and do presentations during the semester. So, I ended up taking only one exam in January. If you would like to get information about the course requirements and exams just ask the teachers once they started. Otherwise, you might not get the information. And maybe ask a second time after 4 weeks when the exams and tests will take place. Don't worry about the courses, the content is little compared to the University in Oldenburg and it generally feels more like school since there is more interaction in the course and lots of presentations were hold. If it is very important to you to improve your knowledge in Economics, I would not recommend to go to the UNWE. At least the courses I took where very basic knowledge and progress was very slow.

The ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Sofia is very active, organizing lots of get togethers and parties especially during the first 4 weeks. It's been great to get to know other Erasmus students and make some friends and also some trips were organized to cities in Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, although financially you are better off organizing it by your own. However, it's also a good opportunity and fun to connect with some more people.

My life in Sofia

Since University was not very time consuming, I had a lot of opportunities to explore the country. I love hiking, so in September and Oktober we did some 3-5 day hiking tours in Rila and Pirin, both are very beautiful mountain ranges not too far away from Sofia. Vitosha, the mountain right next to Sofia is also very recommended for day hikes and walks and it's reachable by public transport. The Central Balkan Mountains are great as well, especially in fall I highly recommend to go for a hike to Karlovo by train!

You can easily rent a car and explore Bulgaria, but most of the time we went by bus especially for the multi day hikes. There are lots of buses within Bulgaria that cannot be found in the Internet, so check the bus station. Istanbul, Thessaloniki and Skopje are easily reachable by bus within a couple of hours and are defiantly worth a visit if you'd like to see some of the surrounding countries as well.

So, yess, my daily life contained a lot of travelling. Apart from that Vitosha is always a great experience and you can even go skiing there in winter. Sofia also has many very big and nice parks and lots of very cute coffee places and the board game bars were also very popular among the Erasmus students.

Conclusion

Bulgaria is a beautiful country, especially fall is stunning. I did have a great time in Sofia and learned a lot about the country and it's culture. Thanks to the many Erasmus Events in the first weeks, I felt very comfortable and surrounded by great people right from the start. However, the university was a bit disappointing and if you are staying in Sofia for two many weeks in a row it might become a bit boring at some point since you have just so much free time. I would certainly not recommend the UNWE if you are looking for an academic challenge.

For me it was nonetheless a great experience.