

IMIS Winter 2018 semester as Erasmus at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University

As part of International Management and Information Systems (IMIS) program, IMIS students, as part of the blended learning methodology, can participate of one semester abroad. This option immediately brought my interest. Fachhochschule Südwestfalen has a list of partner universities that simplifies the application, exchange and post exchange processes. One of the things that I liked the most was that, even not being European, I was able to participate of this program and, therefore, I received the Erasmus scholarship and all the support required to successfully complete the exchange.

Why VGTU?

After receiving and analyzing the list of partner universities that applied to my program, I came to the fact that Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VGTU) was one of the top ranked. It's between the 2.1% best business schools based on QS University Rankings. Additionally, I felt attracted to live in a post-soviet country. Lithuania was part of the Soviet Union but also was one the countries that first became re-established and one of the first post-soviet countries to become part of the European Union. Therefore, even for a small country there was so much story that I was going to be exposed and involved while studying and living in Vilnius. Also, although I finally didn't do it, I wanted to travel to other Baltic countries and to Russia. Finally, the low cost of living made Lithuania an excellent choice to expend 1 semester abroad. But, for my surprise it is not as cheap as most Europeans students were thinking. It is definitively cheaper than Germany and you can save some money to enjoy the city and other activities around it, like the Erasmus trips.

Arriving to Vilnius and VGTU

1 month before arriving to Vilnius, the local Erasmus team already contacted me to provide me with information about accommodation, mentor, important dates for VGTU and official communication channels like Facebook groups that would be relevant while living in Vilnius. My arrival was smooth, my mentor arranged to have someone picking me up at the airport, which is just 10 min from the city center by bus, as he was abroad. I decided to travel 2 weeks before starting classes to find accommodation. This task took more than what I was expecting as many people does not speak English or they wanted at least 1-year contract. But finally, I found one flat near city center as I decided not to stay at the student dormitories. Just for personal preference.

The introduction week was well planned, and VGTU explained important facts for international students including Erasmus exchange norms, some local laws, Lithuanian culture and language, among other topics. That day we also got the ISIC card, a nice VGTU Erasmus t-shirt and other university marketing material.

As students we get a public transportation discounted fare. It's just 5.99 to use public transportation in Vilnius for 1 month. But even if you don't use this fare. Each trip in the bus is just 1 Euro. Additional discounts are available in the city as student. Other good discounts will be available, such as 50% off in trains, with the ISIC card.

Lithuania and Vilnius

Although is a small country, Lithuanian culture is very old, and Lithuanians are extremely proud of it. With a population under 3 million inhabitants, Lithuanian language is one the oldest Indo-European languages that still been spoken. Is even older than Latin! Many people might thing that Lithuania culture is more alike to Russian, because it's proximity and previous Russian influence in the country. But Lithuania has its own Baltic culture shared just with Latvia and Estonia which is very fascinating also.

One thing that I enjoyed in Lithuania was the variety of food and low prices. Honey and mushrooms are definitively a thing in this country, and I enjoy the quality of them while I was living in Vilnius.

Another big surprise for me was the music culture. In the first month there, as it still summer, there was a festival almost every weekend with a variety of Lithuanian and international artist playing. Lithuanians enjoy dancing and listening to music for sure. And, I am glad that I was able to discover new local music and artists while living and going out in Vilnius.

One of the topics that was always on the table was: how cold can it get in winter? Well, although most Lithuanians are used to an average of -20 degrees in winter, I have to say that probably I was lucky as it was -10 in average while I was living there. It was snowing since late November which made the city looks amazing. On the other hand, although there were many days of -10 or even below, it does not feel that cold and I feel like this winter there was quiet mild. I would also say that winter was a great experience, considering I am from a country where does not snow. Vilnius is a city surrounded by the forest, and in winter it is for sure beautiful walking and seeing the forest cover by snow. To summarize winter, many Lithuanians said that this winter was more like spring and it was not really cold. I guess that for me the most difficult challenge in winter was the low amount of sun you can get. Between November and December, I am sure that I didn't see the sun. The sunrise was around 9 and the sunset was around 3:30pm. But in January sun starts to appear and days start becoming longer and it feels like everything is going back to normal.

But even if the days are cold and dark everything continues working and I was not bored at any time. We continued studying and hanging out with other Erasmus students and enjoying holidays as me and other people decided to stay in Vilnius.

Lectures and Student Life

Since the beginning, I was wondering how the education methodology would be in Lithuania. As I studied before in Colombia, USA and Germany and it was a surprise for me that the lectures were taught more in an American style. I mean, more as a dialog-based than structured and pre-defined as in Germany.

There were less students than I was thinking, as in Germany we were around 80 master students. There we were around 20 people per class. Which, compared to their population, is a fair number of students. Furthermore, as the number of students was manageable, I had a closer contact with the professors, and I believe they were also more interested to talk to students participating of the Erasmus program.

I had lectures with 2 invited professors. One from the USA for the International Business lecture and the other from Czech Republic for Risk Engineering class. Having professors from different

countries was an enriching experience as we got to talk about different countries, politics and economics which increased the cultural awareness in us and in the lectures as well.

As many Lithuanians start working after finishing the bachelor. The lectures for Business Management master students are typically scheduled for the evenings, between 6pm-9:30pm. I didn't know this till I was in Vilnius but at the end I think it was a good option. As I had 3 additional virtual lectures in FHSWF, I had time to work on assignments, read material and advance in other school topics and, of course, to prepare for the lectures at night.

Conclusion

To summarize, I really liked my semester abroad in Vilnius and VGTU. I met so many welcoming, nice and friendly people that made my time there even more enjoyable. The exchange process was easy, nothing to stress, more than normal management stuff. I wish I would have done something like this for my bachelor but definitively worth the experience in my master.

After the exchange I feel more confident talking to more people as I was able to increase my cultural awareness about countries such as Iran, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Palestine, and many more. I think I have a better understanding of the Baltics, the impact of the Soviet Union in human history and countries like Lithuania, the current challenges that many eastern Europeans have in term of decreasing population and labor force as young people are seeking for better salaries in countries such as the UK and Germany.

Finally, I accomplished most of my initial goals while being there: studying in another country in the EU, living in a post-soviet country, living a real winter (maybe I must go back to feel -20 Celsius).