

Report

My Semester Abroad at the University of California in Santa Barbara



Name	Mareen Rieck
E-mail address	mareen.rieck@yahoo.de
Home university	Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Stuttgart (DHBW-Stuttgart)
Area of study at home university	Management in Industry / Service Sector Management (2012)
Host university	University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB)
Area of study at host university	Business Administration
Stay abroad	Spring quarter: March until June 2014, 4 th semester

Motivation

Ever since I was a child, I simply loved travelling to new countries in the world, meeting people from different cultures and gaining unforgettable experiences. Consequently, I knew early on that some day I am going to live abroad for a certain period of time. Furthermore, I was really excited about organizing things completely on my own in a foreign country, which I believe is a great challenge and an essential experience in life. After a long conversation with one of my friends who did a semester abroad two years ago all my doubts and fears disappeared and I decided to apply for a stay abroad.

Preparation

As a first step, I had to decide between large numbers of potential universities within the exchange program. I quickly realized that I prefer English-speaking countries where I get the possibility to improve my English skills. Very soon the public University of California Santa Barbara, short UCSB, attracted my attention. The main campus of the university is located directly next to the Pacific Ocean in Isla Vista, approximately ten miles from Santa Barbara. As an active research university and part of the University of California system, UCSB enjoys a very good reputation as well. Due to the fact that I have never been to the west coast of the United States, I finally made my decision and contacted Ms. Süchting, head of the International Office of Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Stuttgart, to clarify the requirements for the application. She told me and Niclas, who also decided to apply for admission to UCSB, to hurry up since the seats at UCSB are always limited. The application itself included the Transcript of Records, which is a translation of my German grades, a copy of my Abitur certificate, a completed application form and the proof of financial resources of my bank. Luckily, I received the confirmation of UCSB quickly, so I had enough time to apply for the student visa F1 and to book the flights to Los Angeles. My preparations did not cover the search for an apartment because Mrs. Süchting recommended not to book it from Germany without seeing the housemates and the apartment itself.

The first days

Quite quickly it was March 12, 2014 and Niclas' and my plane started to Los Angeles. Except for little technical issues, everything went smoothly so we were able to fall asleep exhausted in our hostel beds next to the Walk of Fame. We stayed in Los Angeles for four days and did a lot of shopping and sightseeing. I can really recommend going to districts such as Venice Beach, Santa Monica and Beverly Hills because they point out the facets of Los Angeles, which vary from huge and impressive villas to beautiful and idyllic beachside promenades.

From Los Angeles we took the train to Isla Vista where the UCSB is located. Niclas already had an accommodation for the semester, so I was able to stay at his place for the first days. Those days were so unreal that I rather felt like being a tourist

and still didn't recognize that Isla Vista will be my home for the following three months. Soon a friend of mine from Germany arrived and we started to search for an apartment, which turned out to be less complicated and stressful as we expected it to be. We found a really nice one on craigslist.org, an advertisement website similar to eBay, and quickly arranged an appointment with two Korean girls who searched for housemates. Due to the fact that this off-campus apartment was so clean and tidy and the monthly rent of 600 U.S. dollars was not as high compared to other apartments in Isla Vista, we did not hesitate and moved in on the next day. Actually 600 U.S. dollars for a shared room is pretty expensive but the living costs like prices in supermarkets, university fees and the apartment rents are way higher in Isla Vista than they are in Germany or in other parts of the United States. Soon the Orientation day took place where we met Lili Byall, the Director of University Immersion Program & Open University and received information about the life in Isla Vista, leisure activities and how to choose our classes.

Course system

The course system at UCSB differentiates between Extension and Academic classes. Extension courses are meant for people who combine work and studies and therefore they usually take place in the evening. The number of students in class is relatively small and the whole atmosphere reminds you of the days in high school. The professors, for example, know their students by name and almost every task will be solved in groups. Furthermore, Extension classes can be booked in advance, so everyone has the safety to be able to attend the classes he or she prefers. Still in Germany, Nic and I decided to enroll for Financial Statement Analysis (ECON X118) and Elements of U.S. Human Resources Management (BUSAD X450.13). The former class dealt with analyzing financial statements of companies by integrating economics, accounting and other disciplines. Due to the fact that all our tasks were based on the financial statements of real companies, such as General Mills and Apple, the class was very interesting and diverse. The professor of Elements of U.S. Human Resources Management taught us about the principles of human resources management in the United States so we were able to identify differences to structures in Germany.

In contrast to Extension classes, "full-time" students attend Academic classes where lectures take place in huge halls, which typifies the exemplary student life. However, Academic courses can not be booked in advance instead you need to "crush" them. This means you have to attend class and afterwards convince the professor why you should get the allowance to stay at the particular class and that you meet the prerequisites. After a little back and forth, we luckily enrolled for our favorite classes: Global Media (GLOBL XSB157) and Managerial Economics (ECON XSB106). Global Media dealt with the development and role of the media in connection with the contemporary phenomenon of globalization. In the class of Managerial Economics on the contrary, I learnt a lot about the economics of organizations, market structures and the perfect competition model. In general one can say that classes at UCSB do

not differentiate enormously from classes in Germany.

Nevertheless, it became obvious that the university system focuses a lot on the effort during the whole semester which means that unlike in Germany you do not have one final test which is 100% of your final grade. Instead, you are faced with various tests, graded homework, papers and a midterm that influence the grade as well as the final at the end of the year. I definitely prefer this model although you have to study constantly; the dependence on the final isn't that high. Initially, I was very afraid classes would be too difficult since English is not my mother tongue and especially mathematical classes have always been challenging to me. Indeed, in Financial Statement Analysis and Managerial Economics it was pretty hard to understand all the financial terms in the beginning because they can not be translated directly into German. After a while, however, I definitely got used to the language and it became easier and easier. Furthermore, other students were really helpful and as a result I was really satisfied with the choice of my classes and can highly recommend them.

Living in Isla Vista

Although I never felt foreign and got used to everything very quickly, my life in Isla Vista, commonly known as I.V., was indeed very different from my life in Germany. Isla Vista, with its approximately 17,000 residents, is a student village consequently neither families with children nor older people are living there. The whole atmosphere in the unincorporated community is really easy-going and not at all comparable with the strict and well-ordered culture in Germany. In Isla Vista sometimes ten students share one small house and there is barely an apartment that has its own washing machine. As a result, we had to wash our clothes in self-service laundry facilities and unfortunately they even got dirtier after washing them. The food in Isla Vista is as everyone expects it to be in the United States: high-calorie, greasy and unfortunately delicious. It is no fairytale that healthy food is much more expensive in restaurants and supermarkets than unhealthy junk food. A large-sized coke, for example, is cheaper than a small water bottle, which is ridiculous. However, I felt that the students from Isla Vista and in general people from California are very motivated to stick to a healthy lifestyle. They go to the gym very often, pay much attention to their appearance and do not fulfill the prejudice of overweight and lazy Americans.

Besides normal lectures, UCSB offers a lot of great leisure and sports opportunities, for example the concept of the Excursion Club. This club, founded by students, offers its members a lot of activities for a small one-time amount of money. As members, we joined a lot of hiking trips, beach picnics and got the allowance to rent surfboards, canoes and the necessary equipment. Another possibility we made use of, was the recreation center at UCSB. By paying a monthly membership fee, we were able to use the gym with its fitness machines and the related swimming and whirlpool. Of course, UCSB also has a huge stadium, called the Harder Stadium, where all the big events in Isla Vista or Santa Barbara take place, such as the great Extravaganza musical festival. We watched many sports competitions there as well and the

sportsmen and women of UCSB, called Gauchos, always did their very best, which made every game so exciting and thrilling.

Another thing that surprised me was the grocery shopping in supermarkets. In Isla Vista there is one supermarket, called Isla Vista Market, where all the students buy their food. However, as I already mentioned, it is very expensive there. Mozzarella cheese, for example, costs five euros and can be bought in Germany for 80 cents. Due to those high prices, we often went to Downtown Santa Barbara for grocery shopping. Although the University of California Santa Barbara itself is not located there, I spent a lot of time in Santa Barbara since it is one of the most beautiful cities I have ever been to. The Spanish and Mexican influence is reflected in every part of the city. Palm trees along the streets and the pretty houses with red tiled roofs point out the reason why people often call Santa Barbara "The American Riviera".

Therefore Santa Barbara attracts a lot of tourists every day, whereby it became a very wealthy city and place of residence for famous people. Places of interest like the Courthouse, the Botanic Gardens or numerous museums can be recommended and are definitely worth a trip. Obviously, Santa Barbara covers everything from a colorful culture and great shopping possibilities to lying on the beach. Thanks to all those offers in Santa Barbara, Isla Vista and at UCSB, I can not remember one boring day during the semester and consequently I didn't stay at home very often but besides studying, enjoyed my life to the fullest.

Travelling

After the end of the semester we stayed in Isla Vista for one more week and just enjoyed not having to study, before the little journey around the United States began. Three of my friends and I took a plane to Hawaii, where we stayed at the north shore of the main island O'ahu for the first days. In our small beach house, we woke up next to a turquoise ocean, a white beach and the beautiful sunrise, which reflected my typical picture of Hawaii. The rest of the week, we spent in Honolulu, the capital of Hawaii, in a hostel in the area of Waikiki. Compared to the north shore, Honolulu is more like a bigger city where you can go shopping, go out for dinner and share the beach with a lot of tourists. Nevertheless, I really enjoyed the time there and especially the trip to Pearl Harbor, the former naval base of the United States Navy. Next stop of our trip was Las Vegas, in Nevada, which was the complete opposite of Hawaii. Actually the whole city consists of huge and impressing hotels with adjoining casinos. The heat was barely bearable and because of the air conditionings in the hotels we all got ill. Nevertheless, Las Vegas was definitely worth a visit mostly due to the great shopping possibilities and the parties there.

From Las Vegas we travelled directly to San Francisco, another great city. We visited a lot of sights, for example the Golden Gate Bridge, Lombard Street, Alcatraz Island and the world famous Cable Cars. What I will never forget are the great dinners we had at Pier 39, such as Lobster and Fish and Chips. In San Francisco we took a rental car and drove down the highway number one to Los Angeles. On our way, we had breaks in amazing little towns and stopped at the frequent viewing points to take

a lot of pictures. Arriving in Los Angeles we spent our last day shopping in an outlet center before returning to Germany. Travelling to so many places in such a short time was literally a gift. On top of that, it was not as expensive as expected since the domestic flights in the United States are cheap and having breakfast, lunch and dinner at restaurants is inexpensive as well. Furthermore, I did not know whether and when I will return, so I took advantage of this opportunity.

Personal result

As a result, I can say that I am so thankful that I got the possibility to do the semester abroad. I had an unforgettable and amazing time in Isla Vista. Until now, I am still blessed by the culture and the open-minded and friendly people I met and with whom I became friends. We literally shared memories that last a lifetime. Besides, I really learned a lot about my own personality and behavior. Since I still live at my parents' house in Germany, it was an enormous challenge to coordinate everything on my own and of course to not give up if something turns out differently as planned.

In the beginning, I was afraid to suffer homesickness or to miss my family and friends too much that I would not be able to enjoy the time. However, I didn't have one single moment where I wanted to go back or where I regretted the decision I made.

American people are really hospitable, helpful and warm-hearted, so it was easy to meet new people and make friends. Therefore, I can not confirm the prejudice that Americans are superficial and don't have true friendships. Another reason, why I did the semester was to improve my English to develop good job prospects for my future. However, I feel that I didn't improve extraordinarily, but what I believe is more important than learning new vocabulary or expressions is to lose the fear of speaking a foreign language. Before the semester, I was way too shy to speak English and often felt uncomfortable while using it. But if you are living in the United States for three months, you become braver to really use it. In the meantime, I know that I am able to express everything I would like to in English by using my own words. So I definitely got a better feeling of the language during the three months.

Since I am only able to sum up positive aspects, I can highly recommend a semester abroad to everyone and of course especially at UCSB as host university.

Nevertheless, everyone should be aware that in a foreign country far away from your home, culture, habits and attitudes of people are very different. But if someone is open enough to accept and may overlook unusual things and does not stick to the familiarized habits – a great experience and time will happen.

Appendix



Photo 1: Campus of UCSB.



Photo 2: Pier of Isla Vista.



Photo 3: The Harder Stadium.



Photo 4: Sunset in Isla Vista.



Photo 5: Typical American food.



Photo 6: Beautiful Hawaii.