

Erasmus Semester at the University of Ghent, Belgium

February – July 2017

Study program:

- at home university: Liberal Arts and Sciences (Governance, B.A.); Erasmus exchange through the department of Applied Political Sciences (Angewandte Politikwissenschaft)
- at host university: Political Sciences (host department: Political and Social Sciences)

Coordinators:

- at home university: Julian Schärdel/ Anke Wiedermann
- at host university: Dries Ledoux

Why Ghent? Why Belgium?

Being interested in Dutch language and culture, I initially wanted to go to the Netherlands. Ultimately, however, I made my decision for Flanders in Belgium. Not only could I also practice my Dutch there, but I could also learn more about this diverse country, which I did not know much about - except that it has three official languages and the European parliament in Brussels. I did not know anything about Ghent at all, really.

And know? What do I think?

First, some of the most basic stuff that I learned: Belgium has three official languages, Dutch in the North (Flanders), French in the South (Wallonia) and German in a tiny part in the East. I learned a bit about how this country manages to organize itself culturally and politically (it's complicated!), and this has been a great inquiry and experience. I have loved Ghent from the beginning: it has 260.000 inhabitants (around 30.000 more than Freiburg). It is very, very cozy, but also there is plenty of things to do – perfect! Ghent lures tourists in the summer, but there are locals on the streets everywhere at any time. I love Flemish architecture, which is like the Dutch one but even more unique, and Ghent has plenty of it. Also, the river and canals add to the city's character, as well as its many parks. And because Ghent is so nicely located within the country, you can basically discover any other city or region from there by doing day-or-weekend trips. Belgium has beautiful Flemish cities to offer in the North (Flanders) and great nature and countryside, great for hiking, in the South (Wallonia). I love it!

Before the exchange ... paper work, olé!

I got the place for the Erasmus semester as a leftover spot (Restplatz), which is why I did not have to write any application at all, just give some basic information. We (all Erasmus outgoings at the politics faculty) had a preparatory meeting with the coordinator (back then it was Julian Schärdel), which was very helpful to get an overview. I had to do the entire registration process via the new Erasmus+ online tool of the University of Freiburg; it had some bugs but these should be fixed by now.

During the application process and before my departure, I was in touch with staff from the University of Ghent. They sent plenty of information regarding the course catalog, course selection, housing and the welcome days, although not everything was completely up-to-date.

Personally, I had prepared for a stay in a Dutch-speaking place in general: I had taken three consecutive Dutch courses at the SLI, which were very fun and educational. I can definitely recommend this, however, it is not necessary. This was just due to my personal interest.

Studying at UGent ... great choice may come with great confusion

At UGent, I ended up taking the following courses: Cross-cultural psychology (EN), Media Economics and Media Structures (NL); Behavioral Economics (EN), European Union Trade Policy (EN) and Introduction to World Politics (NL). These courses added up to 23 ECTS credits in total, which was 3 above the minimum requirement and 7 below the recommended number for one semester. I could take all the exams in English, some as a default, some as a special agreement with the professor (just ask in advance!).

Generally, university in Belgium seems quite challenging. The workload is quite high. All the subjects that are taught as lectures seem to demand detailed knowledge of the material on the exam. At the end of the semester, there is a 4-week-studying-and-exams period: during this time, basically all students spend their days in the library cramming hard! (Getting a 20/20 is very difficult, so keep this in mind if you care about the grades you get during the Erasmus.) Some classes also have an oral exam in the end, however, I did not have to pass one like this.

Personally, I took classes that I was interested in and decided to go low on the number of credits to have time for traveling. I believe this was a wise choice and the workload was still demanding enough. Overall, I really enjoyed my courses. Credit recognition was easy for me, as Liberal Arts and Sciences has a wide electives area that can accommodate any university courses. This might be different in other programs, however.

The course catalog that was sent to me before the semester was long and confusing, however, it did have almost all the necessary information. It took my quite a while to make my choice and I had to make changes on my learning agreement twice. The courses all have different numbers of credits. Also, the fact that generally only Masters courses are taught in English makes it difficult if you do not speak Dutch. However, often, there is the option for material and an exam in English. I just e-mailed some professors to ask for this option as well. The "Studiegrids" show detailed information about any course offered (google!). Also, I took some courses outside of my exchange department, which gives greater choice but also a greater burden to choose.

UGent also offers a cultural academic program: the Low Countries Studies. It is a lecture series with one lecture per week over the course of the semester. It is completely voluntary. While it does not give any ECTS credits, a certificate can be earned just by attending regularly. Topics include the culture and history of the Low Countries in general, but also more areas such as music or geography. Some lectures were not presented very interestingly, but others were intriguing, such as original anthropological insight into Brussels' Molenbeek today.

Language ... een beetje Vlaams praten?!

In and around Gent (Flanders), people speak Flemish (which is the Belgian version of Dutch, basically). Only in the South (Wallonia) and Brussels, people speak French (so do not expect people in Flanders to be fluent in French or the other way around; the language communities are quite clearly separated! Except in Brussels, because Brussels is a whole different thing anyways).

Initially, my ambitions regarding learning the language and exchanging with locals was quite high: I wanted to speak Flemish and make Belgian (Flemish) friends. Ultimately, I ended up befriending many international students (none of them Flemish!) and did not improve my language skills much. I spoke Flemish with my roommates a bit or when grocery shopping, for instance. But I did I enjoy this a lot.

To live in Flanders, you do not *need* to know Flemish. Most people speak English. However, it is recommendable in my opinion, in order to appreciate more the place that you choose to live in. UGent offers several language courses, which I did not take because the dates were awkward (late in the evening). But they do have some enjoyable beginners' courses, which some of my friends took as well (just make sure to sign up early!).

Administration and coordination ... all the help you need

During the Welcome Days, I got loads of information regarding the UGent, my faculty and stuff that is relevant to international students. The staff was very eager to accommodate and welcome everyone. The coordinator at our faculty took individual care of everyone. Additionally, there was a buddy system in place for Erasmus students, which coupled me with a student from UGent who could help me with any questions or just hang out.

In and around Ghent ... fietsen en klimmen (bike riding and climbing)

Getting around in Ghent is easy and fun by bike. There are plenty of bike paths and the center is car-free. I rented a bike at studentenmobiliteit.be (now called fietsambassade.gent.be) for around 60€ for 5 months including insurance. It was 100% worth it (seriously, get a bike! Everyone has one in Ghent!). Otherwise, the bus is the way to go (the rates are decent with a 10-ride-ticket or a monthly ticket).

Getting around in Belgium is very easy and very cheap by train. The train company Belgian Rail offers a ticket for young adults called GoPass 10, which includes 10 rides around the whole country for around 55€ in total. I used one of them during my stay and some single train rides, which are very cheap on the weekend.

I did trips to all the beautiful cities in Flanders, including the sea (Oostende, 45 minutes by train), Bruges (30 minutes), Brussels (45 minutes), Leuven (1-1,5hours). I also did some trips to Namur in Wallonia, where there is small mountains, forests and smaller towns. It was exciting to discover both parts of Belgium: Flanders with its cozy and beautiful cities and Wallonia with its great countryside and nature (do lots of trips!).

In Ghent, I went wall climbing with three other exchange students twice per week. Ghent has the biggest climbing gym in Europe, which was very fun to go to regularly. (Whoever wants to do this as well should check the location when looking for accommodation as the gym is not located centrally. I rode my bike 25 minutes to get there every time. But it was worth it!). Also, at the end of our stay we rented a car and drove to the gigantic bouldering spot Fontainebleau close to Paris (around 3 hours from Ghent). It was an amazing trip!

Transportation to Ghent ... DB did the job – wow!

I chose to go by train (DB) from Freiburg to Ghent, a ride of a good 7 hours. If booked early enough, the price train ride can cost as low as 30€. There is not direct Flixbus connection from Freiburg to Ghent. However, the bus company Eurolines offers night busses from Karlsruhe to Ghent, for instance. The next airports are Zaventem (Brussels) and Charleroi (close to Brussels; be aware of transportation to/from the airport!). Brussels is only 45 minutes and a cheap train ride away from Ghent.

Accommodation ... living in a bubble?!

Most Erasmus students apply for a room in the residence "Kantienberg". This big building complex is very functional and modern; the rooms include an own bathroom and the shared kitchens are cleaned daily during the week. The rent is 410€ per month, which is in the upper price range. Everything is around (supermarket, gym, kebabs), as the residence is located in the bar area "Overpoort" (but these are *not* the pubs that non-student locals go to! They are cheap but not very charming. The "real ones" can be found around Sint-Jacobs-Kerk). The residence is, where most Erasmus activity like partying happens.

I personally chose to rent a room in a private shared flat, with which I was very happy. I had six Dutch/Flemish roommates and was a 15-minute bike ride from the residence, so I still hung out in the residence a lot. I paid 320€ for my room everything included; the building was a bit old but charming too. I found this room at kotatgent.be (this website is certified and recommendable). Other offers can be found on Facebook in the two groups called "Te Huur: Kot in Gent". (If you want to be able to escape the Erasmus bubble every once in a while, get to know some locals, but also take part in the exchange-related stuff, I can recommend finding private accommodation.)

Other stuff ... insurance and stuff

I booked an extra health insurance (Krankenversicherung) for my stay in Belgium specifically (this should definitely be done in addition to the normal (gesetzliche) insurance). I chose HUK-Coburg for around 190€. I compared different plans on the internet and booked this one a few days before my stay. Ultimately, I did not need it, but it would have been extremely helpful in case of sickness or emergencies.

It was not necessary to open a new bank account in Belgium. I had a Mastercard and EC-Cash, however, I noticed that some stores do not accept either of them (at least not foreign cards). Therefore, it was helpful to be able to withdraw cash from any ATM for free (I would recommend getting this option!).

Regarding phone and data, I used a Belgian SIM card (Orange) and a cheap data plan, which was no problem (however, as data roaming in the EU does not exist anymore, this should not be necessary anymore).

To end this testimonial...

... please do consider going to Ghent! It was amazing.