Zeyu, Spring 2012 [EPFL]

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Major: Science of Natural and Environmental Systems
EPFL
Spring/2012

“I really liked Switzerland and Europe. This was my first time in Europe, and I hope that I can visit or even work in Europe again in the future. I think Switzerland is a very special place, not only because it has beautiful sceneries, it is also a place where different cultures and languages come together. When I first came to Switzerland, I could not get used to the tranquil lifestyle of the Europeans. But as I spent more time in Lausanne, I started to like the way they live because that way I can spend more time on travelling than shopping. The last semester in Switzerland was a wonderful experience for me, and I’m already planning to go back to Europe to do internships or find a job.”

Practical Information

Visa
It’s better to apply for the visa as early as possible because it usually takes about 3 months. Upon arrival in Switzerland, you must report to the immigration office within one week, and apply for an identity card and enter your biometric data. The identity card and biometric data cost a little bit more than 200 CHF.

Packing
I didn’t pack too much stuff because the weight limit was 32 kg (it should depend on your flight). If you live in one of the seven dormitories (FMEL), I suggest you not to bring any kitchen ware, because chances are that you can share with other flat-mates. However, I do recommend you to bring some medicines or prescriptions as suggested by the Exchange office, since it is more expensive and less convenient to obtain them in Switzerland. If you don’t want to spend too much money, you should also bring an adapter. I think even if you forget to pack something, it is possible to get it in Switzerland, but be warned that everything is expensive here. Another option is to shop in France or Germany because things are much cheaper there.

Getting There/Orientation
There were several orientation activities. All international students were required to attend a meeting where the international office staff explain all you need to know about the school, including course selection, library registration, etc. There was also a city tour led by the volunteers in ESN-EPFL, it was really fun and a good way to get to know the city of Lausanne. All the exchange students were invited by email to a welcome dinner. Before the dinner, there was a couple of presentations given by the international office and the volunteers from ESN-EPFL. The dinner was the well-known cheese fondue of Switzerland. If you have successfully registered for the intense language course, then you have a chance to attend more activities before the school starts, such as the first Pub night (yes, you can go even if you are under 21).

Academics

The University
EPFL is one of the Swiss federal institutes of technology located in Lausanne. There is a centralized campus. Though it is not very big, it is easy to get lost because some entrances of some buildings are difficult to find. There are many restaurants and cafes on the campus, and they are usually very crowded at noon.

Computer labs can be found pretty much in every building (or major, since there is a building for every major). The library is located in the Rolex Learning Center, known as the “le fromage”, which is an award winning building designed by a Japanese architect. There are many tables set up in the library and the learning center, but you can hardly find a space during the day because students at EPFL study a lot from the beginning of the semester to the end. To set up the wifi and library account, you can follow the instructions on EPFL website, the brochure given to you during the orientation meeting, or just ask the staff at the library.

Classes
The course enrollment could be confusing if you don’t follow the instructions. The exchange office will teach you how to do it during the orientation meeting, but if you have some time before that, you can explore the website a little bit just to get familiar with it. Here is the website (isa.epfl.ch). I took five classes including one language course. Unlike the classes at Cornell, the classes at EPFL are usually two or three hours long, but the classes only meet on one or two days. Most of the classes I took have both lecture and discussion, but they are usually on the same day. For the fluid mechanics class, the discussions were led by the TA’s, and the attendance was not taken. For my other classes such as Air Pollution and Ecotoxicology, both the lectures and discussions were taught by the professor, and the discussion sessions were sometimes used for lectures. For second year classes, the homework was given every week or every other week. For other higher level
classes, homework was not given at regular intervals. The amount of homework was normal, but the actual amount of time needed to complete the homework depends on what and how many classes you are taking. For the classes I took, the exams that were given were written, but if you take higher level classes you might have to take oral exams. This information is given on the website and you can check the type of final exam there first. It is possible to take the final exam early, but you have to ask the professor early in the semester. However, some professors don’t like to give early exams, for example, the professor of the Air Pollution class emailed me the exam when I was back in China.

Living Abroad

Language
EPFL is located in Lausanne, which is in the French speaking area. Although many classes at EPFL are taught in English, it is highly recommended that you can speak some French or take the intensive course before the semester starts, because French speaking people in Lausanne prefer not to speak English. I couldn’t take the intensive course because it was not offered at my level, but I took French classes both in high school and college so it was okay.

Banking
I would recommend you to open a local account because withdrawing is free everywhere in Switzerland. I opened a student account at Credit Suisse, and I received two free movie tickets as a gift. You can also try UBS or La poste finance.

Housing
EPFL arranged housing for all the exchange students, but if you don’t like to share a flat with dormitories, you can also look for housing on your own. On the EPFL website, there are many resources that can help you with it. I shared a flat of FMEL with four other people, I think it is a good way to get to know people and ask for help because they tend to be more familiar with the town than you. The rent was 580 CHF a month, in which 100 CHF for utilities. If you are used to eating out at Cornell, I suggest you learn to cook before coming to Switzerland. While the food at school is still affordable, it is quite expensive to eat in restaurants (the average is 20 CHF or more). For chocolate lovers, I recommend the pain au chocolat in the Rolex Learning Center!

Transportation
There are many bus lines and two metro lines in Lausanne. Since single trips are expensive (usually more than 3 CHF), I would recommend buying the “abonnement”, a monthly pass that costs 45 CHF with student ID. You can buy the pass at school or in a selling point of t-l (the bus company). There is spot check once in a while, and if you don’t possess a valid pass or ticket you will be fined 100 CHF.

Communication
I used my own cell phone and didn’t buy a sim card because my friend in Switzerland lent me one. My friends bought sim cards, and they said that it was easy to get one. There are many providers, the most common ones are orange, Swisscom, Lebara, Sunrise. Since I was at EPFL for only one semester, I could not buy the year-long plan, which is more economical.

Social Life
Switzerland is a very diverse country and at EPFL, a large percentage of students are not from Switzerland. I lived in the FMEL dorm with other students studying in Switzerland. I also got to know people in class, but there was not much communication because I couldn’t speak French well. There are many clubs at EPFL, but again it would be better if you can speak French well. The ESN-EPFL I mentioned above is an international organization that provides help and organizes events and parties for exchange students. An ESN card is available if you want to have discount on the events and parties, but I didn’t get one. In Europe, shops are closed early and on Sundays, so from my own experience, most people have parties at home or barbecues in the park. The pubs are the only places that open late, and you don’t need to be over 21 to go there.

Health and Safety
Switzerland is a safe country, and Lausanne is also safe and very beautiful. As mentioned before, just remember to bring some medicines and your prescriptions, but in case you forget to bring something, there are pharmacies in Lausanne that are open 24/7.