

My preparation to an exchange program with a partner university of Heidelberg university started a long time before my departure to Delhi, India.

First steps were taken from Heidelberg itself, after I already knew where I would go for this international experience. After receiving a positive answer from the International dean in Heidelberg, I instantly started to look what I could do in order that my return would be as easy as possible.

First, I checked how I could achieve that all my courses abroad would be accepted by my faculty here in Germany (In my case, physics and astronomy). Therefore I contacted the Professor in charge for the recognition here and another student that have been there before me. This way I discovered which courses I should take over there, and it worked so well, that I even got "Pflichtvorlesungen" recognized over here. Another important bureaucratic step is to require a "beurlaubung" in Heidelberg, and prepare a second formulary for the second semester, which can only be handed when the "rueckmeldung" is open for the new semester.

The second part of the preparation was the health issue. I had to find the cheapest solution possible of having two health insurances at the same time, since I could not simply abort my German health insurance in order to keep my matriculation in Heidelberg, and find in addition an international one (care concept). Besides that, I took the precaution of having all vaccinations renewed and some additional ones on the "tropeninstitut" of the university.

Third point is probably the most important one, requiring a visa from the Indian embassy in Munich. On their website it is possible to see the requirements and after filling very funny forms and paying some fees, I sent my passport to Munich and it came about 3 weeks later back.

I also started to contact Delhi University before my departure, because I did not want to miss exams in Heidelberg and I would arrive already two weeks late for class. Besides, I wanted to get a place in the Students hostel to live.

"No Problem" – was what the international dean told me, and this is probably the phrase that I have heard the most from Indians. Nothing

seems to be a problem for this folk, and it is actually true. Just like “everything is possible, my friend”, it is.

Getting there was quite a shock. I arrived at night and had no idea where to go, and also had the feeling being tricked constantly. The problem in India is that addresses are very strange, so that even taxis did not know where I wanted to go, not to mention that Delhi is huge and there are many different campuses. So, I arrived at the guests students hostel, where I could only stay for a limited time, having food from the canteen and sharing a room with a French guy.

My worst experiences in India came in these first three weeks. Already on the first day I discovered what a bureaucratic mess India is. I had very simple tasks, like getting enrolled in my college, which already knew that I was coming and moving to an international students hostel. This two tasks took me about three weeks, since in India everyone needs one more document letter signed by someone else, who in most cases are never present or about to leave. It requires a lot of patience and a precise list of what to do, including strange requests like an HIV test from the university and very annoying registrations for foreigners. Basically, every bureaucratic step is difficult, even on the time to leave and getting deposits back.

After surviving the bureaucracy, the humid weather, the cultural shock of the two first weeks, I was sick for the first and only time. I went to the health centre of the university, which is amazingly for free and full of very kind people, but out of resources. I had typhoid, although I was vaccinated in Heidelberg not long time before. But nothing to worry, in India it is very easy to make friends and there were people taking care of me while I was sick, which lasted as one week of sleepiness. My mistake was using tap water to brush my teeth. Indeed, only mineral water should be taken into the mouth, nothing else. Within some time I could also drink filter water, but only after two months when my body already had adapted to the food and water. Funny fact about the food is how the Indians love their food and want you to try everything, being offended if you do not. All their restaurants have 1000 dishes on their menu, which in my opinion do not show big differences in taste one from another. At the arrival everything tastes quite strange, within some time it starts tasting better and better, but at the end of one year I could not see Indian food in front of me anymore. Besides the street food, which is

absolutely delicious. In the international students hostel canteen there was Indian breakfast, lunch and dinner, everyday.

After realizing how the university over there actually works, I decided to travel every weekend that was possible. I put in this way, because besides having classes even on Saturdays and having presence lists, many times the teacher did not showed up or arrived very late. Or even held the half of the class in Hindi. So I decided to take the classes as seriously as the teachers did, and mostly only learn for the exams and do the assignments. The result is that I have accomplished the equivalent of one semester in Heidelberg over there and I had to study for at least one semester longer in Germany.

I took the opportunity of being in a country that is culturally very rich and exotic, also within India there are so many different cultures that not even by living there for one year it is possible to discover. Travelling is very easy and cheap; mostly it goes even automatic with a group of friends that are usually going somewhere. By train or by bus, it is possible to cross India for few euros. Also regarding different climates and times of year, the offer of discovering somewhere new is huge.

It is important though to learn some tricks in order to not be tricked. Be fast at calculating prices, analysing offers and understanding situations. Learning a bit of Hindi over there helped me a lot of not paying the "tourist price" for many things and services. Being open for people is important, but understanding second intentions behind a simple conversation is crucial. I think the Indian experience made me a lot more street smart than I was before.

Or at least this is what I believe. To finish my experience in Asia I fell into some very cheap trick that I have already seen being done to a friend of mine. I decided to send a parcel back to Germany with some souvenirs, clothes and others, since I already had too much luggage. Wrong idea. Besides the fact that it was quite expensive, the parcel only arrived half full in Germany. And this after seeing the same happen to a friend of mine some months before, ignoring the fact that most postcards sent from India never arrived in Germany, nor the ones send to me.

All in all, it was an awesome experience that I would recommend to anyone who has some adventure spirit and courage of trying new

things. It is a quite different society than ours, so tolerance and patience has to be a crucial characteristic of yours to enjoy your time in India. The cultural shock should be taken as a challenge to your spirit, and only you can adapt it to the new, sometimes suffocating, environment. If these are part of your qualities in India you will have the potential of having the most amazing experience that an exchange program can provide; far, different, difficult, but awesome.