

## **ERASMUS semester at the University of the Aegean, Greece**

**WS 2012/13**

I made my first ERASMUS experiences in the fall of 2012, when I applied for a semester abroad at the University of the Aegean located in Greece. As it was mandatory, the choice to go abroad was less contesting, but rather the choice of country I would fulfill it in. Greece was one rather unpopular choice at this time, the financial crisis from 2008 had totally entangled the Greek economy and public resentments arose, nonetheless it was the European country I was most familiar with. Also my interest in learning more about one of the oldest cultures of Europe, finally taking the chance to learn another language and also the chance my "German view" into a somewhat more European, gave reason for this decision. Generally, the number of partner universities at the BTU Cottbus is quite high for the European region, but for Greece, there are only two, and only one of them was offering environmental courses: the University of the Aegean in Mytilini, Lesbos.

The application procedure was unproblematic, thus in the preface of my semester everything was organized easily. Thanks to the international offices of the both universities, which have an efficient communication, the organizational part was well managed. I also applied for the EILC in September to have an acclimatization phase and learn the basics of the Greek language. Sadly, the language course is not accepted at my university so I could not get credit points for it.

In the end of August, I arrived at the island. Mytilini, the capital of the island is with its 30.000 residents the most populated "city" in the vicinity. As I am from a city with several million citizens, this was quite a de-acceleration for me. For the language course, a hotel was organized, thus accommodation for the first month was granted. The price for the stay was, nonetheless very expensive: three people shared a room, a kitchen and a bathroom for 300€ per month. Later, when I started to live in a flat, together with other ERASMUS students that stayed at Lesbos, I paid half the rent for a huge flat. The language course itself was awesome. Four hours a day plus homework was quite a work load, but it packed me up with a good basic knowledge of the Greek language as well as about the Greek culture. I would recommend it to everyone following me to Lesbos for ERASMUS. After one month I was able to read Greek and hold an informal conversation.

After the EILC was finished, the trouble started. The organization of the flat was quite the easiest part; an ex-ERASMUS, who stayed at the island after his semester, was helping us a lot to get in contact with the community of Mytilini, the island's capital. But since the financial crisis hit Greece very hard, courses could not be guaranteed, lectures were spontaneously cancelled or were blocked by strikes in the first weeks of the semester and I had to almost totally rearrange my Learning Agreement. The support by the university staff was good in my opinion, but I heard from my flat mates, who came from other faculties, that professors did not answer their requests and paper work got stuck in the process. Also an ongoing education in the Greek language by the university was not possible as there was no money to hire a replacement teacher, which made it difficult to keep up with the language learning. This was somehow typical for Greece: the "do not worry, we will do something about it" attitude, combined with the easy-going mentality, made it difficult to organize things, at least in time.

But ERASMUS is also about adapting to new environments! While the university stuff became of secondary concern (although I could not fully follow the courses due to my lack of Greek language profession, the professors gave me the opportunity to pass their courses probably), I took the chance to explore the secrets of the island. I have to admit it was a special luck with this ex-ERASMUS. The community he introduced us to, was a mixture of national and international people of all types: fishermen, on-field ecology students, globetrotters and thus various trips around the island were done (I can definitely recommend caving (cave explorations) with an evening sit-in at one of the hidden *tavernas* on the island (i.e. *Lefkaria*), but one has to find or know them!). Lesbos is the most enchanting island I ever visited, and at least from the cultural part I can say that it was a totally satisfying trip.

After two month I found my daily rhythm. One has to note that food, shopping times and evening behavior of Greece, as a Mediterranean country, is quite different to the north European ones. Even if I stayed for the winter term, it was quite warm (but rainy), thus over midday there is only few activity. Generally, on Mondays, Wednesdays and the weekend, there are only few shops open, but if one wants to get good cheese or fresh meat, one has to know the schedule. Quite often I stood in front of closed shops because I mixed the dates, but only in the beginning of my stay. Due to a lack of fast food stores, except the permanently present *Koutopoulo Pita* (the Greek Döner), I had the opportunity to increase my cooking skills. I, generally, got more self-contained during my stay, but I also got to know ERASMUS students, who were not capable of staying abroad. This should be clear before leave, as travelling around and living cost are higher than the support one gets from the ERASMUS pot.

All in all I would repeat that trip over and over and I can just recommend the ERASMUS program to any student. The trip improved my skills and gave me more the notion of being a European citizen. The University of choice has to be thought over well. As I experienced it, the socio and economic and political situation should be taken into account as well as the location. I had some troubles to speed up to the German standard and I had first difficulties in travelling with public transport, as I reached all my destinations for over 6 month by myself. Especially these differences gave me opportunity to see beyond the German way of live, which is not as deeply cultural and political as the Greek one.



Pic. I.: View from the harbor of Mytilini, Lesbos





Pic.II: View on Mytilini from one of the seven hills



Pic. III: Lesbian fisherman, Mytilini harbor





Pic.IV: Delicious sea food, Sto Kastro Taverna, Mytilini



Pic.V: View on the Petrified Forest, a highlight of Lesbos, if you see it