

Auslandssemester an der Universität Bern (Herbstsemester 2023)

Erfahrungsbericht

von [REDACTED]

How did you prepare for your exchange stay?

The preparation began with the letter of motivation, which allowed me to apply for at least three universities (in my case Basel, Bern and Wroclaw). To make my selection, I first looked into the partner universities of my institute and then did some further research regarding what I could find out about those universities. I also had a closer look at their websites to see whether I could meet the requirements of the respective universities (language skills, bachelor's/master's degree, length of stay, etc.). That was mid-December, after which it was a case of waiting.

The preparation began when I received confirmation that I was going to Bern from my home university in February 2023. I signed the Code of Conduct and by that, committed to the exchange semester.

I prepared everything for the semester abroad by following the steps on the Mobility Online Portal of my host university. So first of all, in April, I started the process by uploading the application form on the website and also applied for the optional Green Travel Top-Up as I was planning to travel to Switzerland by train anyway. The Declaration of Commitment for the SEMP scholarship and the Learning Agreement followed in May and June. Both documents were also uploaded to the Mobility Online Portal.

To fill out the Learning Agreement, I looked at the institute's course catalog (in my case the Institute of Theater Studies) and decided on the seminars that seemed most interesting to me and that also differed from what was offered at my home university in order to learn about as many new perspectives and subjects as possible. When it came to the number of courses, I based it on the prescribed 20 ECTS.

It was important to me to have these essential university things taken care of first, to then start organizing my daily life in Bern. I started looking for shared apartments back in May (from September onwards), but in retrospect I can say that that was definitely too early, as sublet rooms usually become available more spontaneously. Ultimately, I decided on a room in a dormitory, to be honest, to cross that point off my to-do list, which seemed incredibly long because something completely new awaited me.

Looking back, I didn't really have that much to prepare. It was now summer and the only thing left on my list was a visit to my telephone provider to extend my cell phone contract for Switzerland

and shortly before I left I exchanged money so that I had some cash with me. Last but not least I wrote an over-ambitious packing list (the biggest challenge was that it still was summer when I arrived in Bern, but I knew it would become cold and rainy, even snowy at some point), to end up sitting on the train to Bern with two large suitcases. Whenever someone from home would visit me in Bern, they always asked me if I needed anything from home and towards the end I started to give them things I didn't need anymore (like summer clothes and books I've read already) to take them home with them. That definitely helped a lot, so I highly recommend not stressing too much about what to pack and how to get all your belongings back home, especially if you're lucky and friends or family from back home plan on visiting you.

Looking back, an additional e-Sim for the phone might have made more sense than changing the whole contract (because my provider didn't have options with more than 3 GB of mobile data available and a swiss cellphone number is quite handy anyway, for example for registering on certain websites like Ricardo, which is basically the swiss version of Ebay).

I hardly ever needed cash, except at flea markets etc., so it doesn't make sense to bring a lot of cash in my opinion (if any at all). I also made an appointment at my bank in Germany to find out about the exchange fees my credit card has and based my decision, whether I wanted to get a swiss bank account or not, on that information. The fees weren't that high for me and I was only staying for a few months, so I decided against an additional swiss bank account. The only downside of this decision was, that you need a swiss bank account to directly connect it to your Twint account (this is basically the swiss version of Paypal, everyone uses it and you can also pay via Twint at a lot of stores and cafés). Luckily one can still use Twint Prepaid with a German bank account, which worked well for me personally.

Besides those organizational things I also started reading into swiss history and general news on politics and society, so I would have a little bit of knowledge already prior to my move.

How did you experience your arrival?

I arrived in Bern by train on a Friday. Because of some delays it was late afternoon already and I was quite surprised to find out that most grocery stores (and also other stores) were about to close or closed already. This was probably the first thing I learned after my arrival: In Bern stores close pretty early on Fridays and Saturdays. Therefore I took the train to my dorm in Wankdorf and (with the help from a friendly student I met there), I got my keys from a pin secured key box. I immediately rushed to the supermarket to get a few things for dinner and breakfast quickly, right

before the supermarket closed. I had dinner while reading letters from my friends back home, which definitely made my arrival a lot nicer and less lonely.

The next day I went to the student lodge office to get my contract for the dorm room and I also got a quick tour through the building by the house manager. I spent the rest of the day by myself, exploring my new home town. We were pretty lucky with the long summer that semester (or is it just climate change...). It was still incredibly warm even tho it was September already and I think it was the day after when I went swimming in the Aare for the first time. Some of my roommates were about to go there when I headed to the kitchen to have breakfast, so I went with them. It was really lovely to just float in the river and dry in the sun and I can highly recommend going swimming in the Aare. I also learned about those waterproof bags in which a lot of people put their belongings and just take them swimming.

On my first weekend in Bern I spent most of the time with two other exchange students who lived at the same dorm and met with other students in town. We also did a hike to Oeschinensee in a bigger group and went swimming there, which was pretty cold but also a lot of fun and a great refreshment after the exhausting hike in the midday heat. We got the Friends Day Pass for Youth that allows groups of up to four people under 25 to use the entire Swiss Railway for one day, so we could go there for not that much money. I used that for a lot of day trips to other towns in Switzerland so I can definitely recommend it as a way to travel affordably and see more of the country.

I arrived just a little before the introduction week and had a few really nice first days in and around Bern, so I can highly recommend doing so. It would've been smart to get a monthly libero ticket right away, because single ride train tickets are pretty expensive, so I finally got it after a short while. It definitely was worth it, as I noticed pretty quickly.

How and through which housing provider did you find your accommodation and how did you like it?

I stayed at the student lodge dorm in Wankdorf and had an overall good experience. The house manager was really friendly, showed me around when I arrived and always patiently answered all my questions during my stay. The renting process was pretty easy, I chose my room online on the website and everything from the deposit to the contract worked online as well, so I was able to do it all from home.

I lived together with 7 other students, we all shared the kitchen area and had our own bathroom with one more student. The rooms were big enough and pretty modern, just as shown in the pictures on

the website. There are busses, the tram and trains nearby and the city centre is definitely very fast and easy to reach, which is really great.

Nevertheless, Wankdorf is not super close to the centre and there are no night busses during the week, so I'd recommend renting a room closer to the centre if that is important to one. Also, there aren't really places for going out or things like coffee shops in Wankdorf, so you have to go to the city centre for pretty much everything besides grocery shopping. It makes the most sense to just stay in town after uni and get everything done there before going back home to Wankdorf in the evening.

Personally, even tho I got along well with my roommates, I felt like the dorm was a bit less personal than usual shared flat communities but that might just be my experience, so it probably makes sense to go for an alternative if that also matters to one. We as a floor community never encountered problems regarding cleaning responsibilities, but sharing a kitchen as a group of eight people can definitely be a bit messy and from time to time and it's a bit of a challenge to keep track of responsibilities. One must definitely be comfortable to share the bathroom and kitchen area with people you don't really know at first. I definitely appreciate the different people I got to know as my roommates and I see it as an enrichment that we all had different backgrounds, interests, studied different things and learned from each other.

I had visitors from home a couple of times and that worked really well. I would've felt a little more flexible without the student lodge rule that obligates one to give notice of guests staying overnight, but I simply wrote a short email to the house manager every time and that worked well.

One slight issue was the washing room in the basement. We had three washing machines for the whole building with multiple floors, so it was really hard to find a free slot for washing and also drying clothing and the prices were pretty high.

All in all I'd say that I had a rather good experience and didn't face any problems, but looking back the rent was really expensive and it might've been better to choose a less expensive room in a shared apartment closer to the city centre, because I slightly missed the sense of community in Wankdorf. A community space, like in the Bümpliz dorms (also from student lodge), would've been really nice.

What are your impressions of your host university?

I had a really great time at the University of Bern. I studied at the department of Theatre Studies, which is located in the Building at Mittelstrasse. The library there is amazing and the perfect combination of calmness (with cozy armchairs for long reading sessions) and a place to really focus

– and it's usually not that crowded. There are great cafés (like the vegan *Bakery Bakery* and *Tingel Kringel*) and other little shops around and the neighbourhood seems incredibly friendly. The cafeteria was quite expensive but they had really nice vegetarian offers and there is also a supermarket right across the street as an inexpensive alternative.

My institute was really small and everyone was extremely polite. I really liked that everything felt so personal and how great the communication with the professors was. Whenever I had questions or concerns they offered solutions and support and I got all the answers I needed.

I attended for different seminars, two of them were research seminars. We don't have a seminar conception similar to that at my home university (as far as I know), so I definitely underestimated the work load a little. The idea is that one chooses a research subject related to the general topic of the seminar and develops a research question and thesis to work on during the semester, alone or in a group. One presents the progress and struggles during the attendance time (every two weeks). There isn't really one task like reading a certain text or answering certain questions, so it's hard to know when to stop working, especially when you're very invested in the topic you're working on.

In my seminar on Diaries and Theater Historiography I worked on short comments about the Biography of one actress and an actor at the court theatre in Weimar under J. W. Goethe's direction. The starting point of my research was the diary of the young member of a Bernese patrician house, Albrecht May. I took a lot from that seminar and working in a small group of three students in total gave us the time to reflect on each others research results and thoughts in detail. We also went to the municipal archive to look at the original diaries, which was a very memorable and impressive experience.

In my other research seminar on Historiography on Stage I was lucky enough to work in a great group of four on a topic we all were very passionate about – The self staging of the great performance artist Marina Abramović across different (digital) media.

I learned so many new things in all my seminars, especially about postcolonialism, postmigrant theories, swiss and german history and historiography on stage and also the importance of space as a component of performance art and its production.

We went to the theatre a lot as a part of the seminars, which I really enjoyed, because it added another layer to the theoretical aspect of theatre studies. The classes were really small (I experienced groups between 3 and 11 people), so the learning space felt quite personal. Instead of written coursework we often had graded presentations and group work, which I personally wasn't used to before coming to Bern, so I definitely had to adjust a little. Looking back, both (working in groups and presenting subjects and results) are really useful skills when working in research and I

took a lot from that experience, even tho (or exactly because) presentations aren't my biggest strength.

On a more general note, the variety of libraries offered by the University of Bern is great. There are different locations for studying spread all across town, which makes it really easy to find a place to focus on your work basically wherever you are. I didn't expect that many libraries in a rather small town, so I was pleasantly surprised as I discovered the different libraries over time. It was a bit hard to find a free place in the main building library sometimes, so I didn't go there that often. My favourites were the Unitobler library and the one in the Mittelstrasse, because they weren't too crowded, so it wasn't a problem to find a spot. I also found most literature I needed in those to libraries.

I also really liked the variety of Unisport courses offered. I decided to go to the beginners ballet lessons and definitely enjoyed that a lot, it was great to get some movement free of charge to compensate a little for all the time spent sitting at university and during studying.

How did you experience life and your free time during your exchange?

Looking back on my time in Bern, I definitely made some great memories. During the weekends I was able to do a lot of short trips and discover other cities in Switzerland like Geneva, Lausanne, Sion, Lucerne and Zurich, which was a lot of fun. We also visited the small Italian town Domodossola once and with the Friends Day Pass for Youth we could always easily split the travel costs and travel on a low budget as a group.

While the good weather lasted, I really enjoyed going swimming in the Aare and the beautiful Rose Garden is a great place for picnics, reading or just enjoying the view over the city. Even in winter it was really nice to go on walks on the Aare shore and discover the Tierpark there. I really enjoyed going up the Gurten Hill and trying out the summer toboggan while it is still warm and summery.

Coming from a rather big city I definitely noticed a difference regarding the night life. Most bars are either closed or close pretty early during the weeks, but on weekends there are definitely nice places for going out like Gaskessel, Turnhalle or Lehrerzimmer.

The ESN organized great events like day trips and hiking weekends and even tho it was hard to get tickets for those events before they were sold out (depending on the activity), I made great memories on a weekend ski trip to Gimmelwald and also visited smaller events like a pub crawl, a neon party and a bowling evening.

I really enjoyed the cultural offer in Bern and went to the Museum a lot. The Paul Klee Centre had a great exhibition on Hannah Höch as an addition to the permanent exhibition during my stay in Bern

and I also liked visiting the Art Museum Bern and the Kunsthalle. There are student discounts everywhere, which makes museums relatively accessible.

I went to the theatre at least once every two weeks. There's not only the city theatre Bühnen Bern, but also the Schlachthaus Theater where I saw a lot of great productions as well. I also went to the Festival Tanz in Bern at Dampfzentrale and a short film evening of the Be Movie Film Festival at Reitschule. The prices for those cultural events were relatively high, but I don't regret spending money on those experiences.

One of my favourite weekend activities in Bern when it got a little colder was strolling through the many Brockis with my friends and finding cute clothing for little money. We also went to the big flea market at Reitschule and the atmosphere there is great, there is always music and also a little bar where you can get food and drinks.

Another fun winter activity is going to the Christmas market at Waisenhausplatz or Kleine Schanze and having mulled wine or warming dishes like raclette.

What I really like about Bern is the great amount of free time activities also in the winter months, so I still had a great time once it got colder, even without going swimming in the Aare and spending a lot of time outside.

How is your general impression of your exchange stay?

Thinking about my time in Bern I'm very grateful – grateful for being able to leave the life and town that I am so used to behind for a little while and also for getting to know Bern and learning about life in Switzerland and also for all the new experiences I was able to make, by myself and with people who own a special place in my heart now, because they became close friends in such a short time.

I didn't only learn a lot about a country I haven't visited before (except for the airport on Zurich, while waiting for a connection flight and a short break at a service station on a bus trip to Milan with a friend), but also formed friendships with people I wouldn't know otherwise and grew as a person, at least a little I'd say. I learned to step out of my comfort zone and attend events, address people and groups I don't know (because I literally knew no one and didn't have a choice really).

I learned to spend quality time by myself, quickly followed by understanding the importance of allowing new people into my life and to actively be part of their lives as well.

For the first two weeks I felt a little lonely at times, I definitely met really nice people in my dorm and also at the different events of the introduction week. Despite that, I didn't really feel like I had a lot in common with them and I missed the deep connections I've formed over years back at home.

When I met two girls (I already briefly knew from the Introduction Week) at a pregame before a clubbing night and we met for a picnic again the next day, I already knew that I'd probably see them a lot in the future, which turned out to be true.

I'm not only very grateful for facing the emotional challenges and university struggles together, as group, but also for having found people I truly appreciate and love and with whom I can look back on months of shared core memories and experiences. One of the hardest parts of going back home was probably leaving the shared day-to-day life behind and only seeing them a few times a year now.

I can't really say that I underestimated the amount of time and effort that went into studying and preparing for seminars in general, but I can definitely say that I worked a lot and definitely not less than at my home university. I didn't attend that many seminars, but the work load was still high and even tho everything worked out and I didn't miss any classes or had to compromise by not preparing for certain seminars at times, I definitely felt overwhelmed at times.

I think I experienced this feeling of pressure mainly because the way seminars etc. worked was different from my home university. I really like routine, certainty and simply knowing how things work, so it took my some time to accept and appreciate that things simply worked differently at my new university. Sometimes I felt like I literally had no clue about how university works, despite almost being at the end of my bachelors.

Once I knew and accepted all the differences, for example that I wouldn't write that many term papers this semester and that my grades would mainly reflect the way I worked during the semester and the way I presented them in class, it got a little easier. As I mentioned before, I'm not necessarily the best at holding presentations and I still prefer articulating my thoughts in written words, so I definitely felt quite challenged and overwhelmed at times.

What I take from that experience is definitely a little practice when it comes to presenting thoughts and results in front of a group, but I still have a long way to go. I see my time at the University of Bern as a first practice that already taught me a lot about the way universities can differ and how it is possible and also enriching to learn how to adjust and work in those differing environments.

I experienced my department in Bern to be very personal; conversations always took place on eye level and everyone basically knew everyone, because the institute is quite small.

Knowing Switzerland only through the lense of one of my favourite authors Christian Kracht, I was beyond excited to live there for a while and experience the country myself. I never really had the one answer, when friends and family asked me, why exactly I chose to do my semester abroad in Switzerland (a diffuse, partly literary interest and fascination doesn't really count, I guess), but I

definitely made a great choice. To be honest, I don't think that there is something like the one and only right choice when it comes to going abroad – I'd say that doing an exchange semester itself is a great choice and that all places can teach and show you different things about the world we live in, but going to Bern definitely was one great choice.

Not knowing that much about Switzerland allowed me to experience Bern with curiosity and interest. I learned a lot about local festivities, traditions and also dishes and even tho there are some similarities to (especially southern) Germany, I would still say that I learned about so many entirely new things. I can't really disagree when people say, that Switzerland and Germany have a lot in common, but I don't really think this is the most productive way to look at things – or at least stopping there doesn't really do those two countries justice. Generally spoken, I'd always go for pointing out the similarities all people across the world have and how we're all connected in certain ways, but it can be important to think about differences as well, from a view point of equal appreciation.

During my time in Bern I met a lot of people from literally all over the world. With one of my swiss roommates, I mostly talked about how different we are in many ways (not on purpose, it's just what happened) and even tho we didn't have that much in common on a surface level, despite our shared language, we still connected well – mostly by asking each other questions and genuinely being interested in the answers and different interests and realities.

I also remember sitting at a bar once, talking about different books with a girl from China and a guy from the US, both exchange students as well. The fact that we had this very defining common ground, despite growing on three different continents wasn't really a surprise, but I still remember it vividly, because it instantly created a sense of community.

Nevertheless, differences are also something to be embraced, celebrated and appreciated. I remember being speechless and shocked in a way, when a girl I knew from class asked me, if it's true, that germans tend to forget about Switzerland and mostly see it as this tiny country that's basically another version of Germany. We were sitting on a bench at the train station, eating McDonalds veggie burgers after seeing a Performance at Dampfzentrale, because everything else was closed already. I was quite happy to have some time to think about her question, before replying, because I was still chewing anyway. I don't remember what exact words I chose and I don't think that I could do her question justice in the short time before her train to Zurich arrived, but I said that this is definitely not true. I never thought that there's any truth about this thing some germans might or might not say about Switzerland (I haven't heard anyone saying something like that myself) and I still don't think so after having lived in both countries now. I had the privilege to

get to know another country with all its advantages and also its flaws and I appreciate both countries in different ways.

My time in Bern definitely also taught me something about Germany. Growing up, I only learned standard German, despite living in a place in southern Germany, where a dialect is spoken, for the first few years of my life. Afterward I moved to Cologne. The Rheinland is known for its own intonation and there's also a dialect. I never learned anything besides standard German, simply because it wasn't really appreciated (in my family or generally, I can't really say anything about that, but I do remember a teacher of mine making fun of a classmate who had a quite strong rhenish intonation). Growing up that way, only knowing standard German and knowing that this is what my environment appreciates most, living in Bern really changed the way I perceive language. Not only did I learn how different and beautiful Swiss German is (even tho it was quite a challenge for me to understand it at first), but I came back home with a curiosity and new interest for the various dialects besides standard German. I learned to question that weird, subliminal hierarchy of standard German in my usual environment – only because this is different in Switzerland.

Looking back on my exchange semester, I didn't only learn so much about friendships, myself and various things related to university, but I also learned so much about Switzerland and even about Germany, the country I grew up in.