

Marshall Plan field report of Atlanta, Georgia.March to August 2016

The following 2 pages try to summarize a very special semester abroad in Atlanta and Savannah USA. It was full of new experiences, new people, different ideas, new perspectives, travelling, amazing cuisines, new friends, fun, laughter, but also education, hard work, and hopefully satisfying results.

First, I want to address briefly the special situation about this semester abroad. Secondly, I would like to talk about the work related facts, about expectations and reality, about the benefits for my current education and my future carrier.

Finally I would like to address all the facts beside work related ones. I would like to talk about the actual stay, comprising housing, living costs, entertainment, possibilities for sport and gatherings with fellow students, impressions of culture, believes, differences and an overall judgement of the stay.

Contrary to a standard semester abroad, that only revolves around one place, I had the special situation that I lived and worked in Atlanta in cooperation with Georgia Tech, while writing and analyzing a project for the City of Savannah. This project was not only for the city of Savannah, but is also located there (The reason for this special situation is a complex matter, that shall not be discussed further here, as it would breach the frame of 2 pages for the field report, - also there are other more interesting matters to address). I just want to mention that this special situation created some difficulties at first, as the next paragraph will show. Once solved however, the situation of being situated in 2 different cities gave me lots of benefits (both work and leisure related) and thus I don't regret it at all.

The first work related challenge about working in Atlanta for the City of Savannah was to get ready to work on my project, the calculation tool I should design and eventually the thesis. For all this I needed obviously information from Savannah, so some basic arrangements had to be made in the first videoconference (skype interviews, weekly updates, first visits, data acquisition, etc.). The soon we had arranged everything we went down with a bus to Savannah, to meet our boss, who was very excited that we were finally here. We also met project specific places, talk to project relevant persons, but also to get to know the city and my coworkers. Whenever we came to Savannah, our boss offered to host us in his own house, which made these trips very nice and convenient. In total we went 3 times to Savannah.

The general work was done in Atlanta. An office space was provided at GA tech, however since we were students on J-1 intern status there was no money available to provide also a desktop computer, so we continued working on our personal notebooks. We had weekly checkups with Savannah via Skype, and were in addition included in the electrical research group of our host professor Lukas Graber. He and his research team showed deep interest in our projects, despite or maybe even because their field of research was electrical engineering while ours was sustainable energy engineering. Further advantages of living in Atlanta were the library, and that I was able to arrange plenty of work related meetings in Atlanta.

Summarizing work related issues, the final situation to be located in Atlanta had positive influence on the overall quality of the thesis, even though it made the start harder and less productive.

Also in the leisure time Atlanta has a lot to offer. It is a very busy city, you can feel the energy. During my time there I saw plenty new restaurants and bars. It is a melting pot for all the surrounding the states, thus communication was sometimes funny and also a bit more difficult thanks to strong southern accents.

In Atlanta there are many international students, it is easy to make friends and fun to go out and explore together the numerous bars existing. For example the craft beer scene of Atlanta, which offers wide variety of tastes, starting from induced coffee and blueberries to beer with cilantro and salt or pineapple flavor. Not all of them are suiting my taste, however it is definitely worth giving them a try.

Each trip to Savannah was, besides working, also filled with some time for leisure activities. Our boss for example took us to a weekend canoeing trip into a national park, which was an amazing experience. Next time we had time to watch a concert, see a baseball match, and swim in the Atlantic Ocean. Third visit was used to get to know the History of Savannah and also to spend time on the beach again.

Georgia Tech Atlanta offers for students special trips to various occasions. I was able to see a baseball match with them, go rafting and hike through a state park. All of these events were offered for little money only (which is a nice change of routine to an otherwise very expensive country (thanks again to Marshall Plan foundation for the generous support).

For sport freaks there is a really big fitness center located at the Campus, even though I am not sure if fitness center is still the right word to describe a five story building that is equipped with an Olympic pool, whirlpools, slides, basketball fields, soccer fields, dancing rooms, a climbing hall, a cardio field, fitness gears and finally a section meant for outdoor, hiking and backpacking. With the last one I went on a 2 days advanced overnight backpacking trip, that lead along a river (22 crossings of it in total) to a waterfall. On this trip I saw a water snake, a water spider, yellow jackets (wasps), plenty of poison ivy and finally also bears! It was both enormously thrilling and scary to stand close to a mother bear with her 2 little cubs. For sure an experience I won't ever forget.

We also made some trips on our own with a rented car, because public transportation is by far not good enough in the USA. Even though Atlanta shows with actually having a metro system somewhat of an exception (however Metro runs on 20 min schedules and busses only every 40 minutes on weekends, something I never experienced in any European city I have been to). We used the car to visit several state parks, rock climbing areas, hiking mountains, lakes and even a small canyon are in day reach.

Summarizing my stay I can say that I am very happy I had the courage to do this exchange. I had lots of fun, met many new Friends, had some time to travel together, learnt many new things, helped the city of Savannah with sustainability considerations, and I finished a good thesis. I recommend any fellow student to do semesters abroad. Of course it is harder than a regular semester at your home university, just thinking of all what you have to organize for. But that is what makes it so great, with all the additional effort comes a lot of additional learnings and understandings. What you will bring back from such an event, it pays easily off the effort and is totally worth it.