

Could you introduce yourself please?

I am Ronja, and I am 26 years old. I am studying international information management with a focus on information sciences in my first master's semester. I went abroad to South Korea in the winter semester of 2019 because it was compulsory in my bachelor's degree. But besides that, I always had this desire to experience something new, so I decided for South Korea. I thought: if I ever get the chance to get to know something new, then I want it to be completely new and a culture that I do not know or with which I have not had much contact.

How were your first days abroad?

My first days abroad were very exhausting. There was an 8-hour time difference, that was a huge change. What also bothered me a lot was the different climate. I went in August to be there early and realized that summers in South Korea are very hot and humid. Therefore, I had to get used to everything for the first few days.

The South Korean International Office made the first few days very easy for international students because they organized a lot for us beforehand. We are very lucky with this partner university. We were picked up from the airport by a large bus and taken to the dormitory at the university campus. The accommodation was also organized for us by the International Office. But I have to mention that in South Korea you don't have a room to yourself in the dormitories, you share it with another person. It was exciting for me. At first, it was unfamiliar because I was used to have a place for myself. Luckily, my roommate also turned out to be a German exchange student. She also studied International Information Management with me in Hildesheim. We had the same background, which in my opinion, made it easier to come to agreements, for example: who uses the bathroom, when do each of us return, when we go to sleep. We have spent a lot of free time together. But we also made sure to give each other space and allow the other to do what they want.

I also got a buddy from the partner university, who helped me deal with things and find my way around. It was a pity that there were not many Korean language courses and that they overlapped with my other courses. I would have liked to take a language course in Korea.

Is it easy to communicate with just English in South Korea?

It is better not to rely on English in South Korea. As exchange students, we often had to use Google Translate. Fortunately, there was WiFi almost everywhere. It was possible to photograph restaurant menus and have them translated instantly. We could then show the waiter or waitress what we wanted from the menu. We also mostly had dinner with Korean friends, who explained a lot or ordered for us.

How do you find courses in South Korea?

The courses in South Korea meant a lot of work. You had to do a lot and I would say it was a different kind of learning. You had to memorize a lot and attend many lectures in which we did not discuss much like we know it from Germany.

I noticed that both Korean and German learning styles have advantages and disadvantages. What I found very exciting is that there were other perspectives on how technical topics are perceived. I think that is what contributed the most to my studies.

Did you experience a culture shock?

I would not say that I experienced a real culture shock because I went to South Korea with no expectation. I told myself: I do not know the culture and I will just wait and see what comes my way. There were small things that were unfamiliar and which I had to get used to and adjust to, for example, how certain gestures work, certain linguistic things, or how to behave correctly in certain situations. For instance, when I walk into a shop, I bow and say hello. Those were rather small things, which were not that shocking.

What one should pay attention to in South Korea?

In any case, one should make sure to always behave in a friendly and polite manner towards older or higher-ranked people, to show the interlocutor enough respect, and to appear friendly. It can also happen that you get invited to a dinner by professors or by older students; you should not refuse such offers. In South Korea, the relationship between professors and students is completely different. You have to be careful not to step on anyone's feet and behave as politely as possible.

What is the cost of living?

The cost of living is comparable to Germany. However, eating out and cafes are much cheaper than in Germany. That is why I went out to dinner every weekend and got to know South Korean cuisine better.

The Korean cuisine was sometimes very spicy but delicious. What I always found delicious was fried chicken. It is completely different from what I know from Germany. It is really tasty and is served with different sauces. Korean cuisine was also very rich in fish and meat, which can be a challenge for vegetarians.

What fascinated you the most?

What is interesting to see in South Korea are the strong traditional ties. You can see many old traditional buildings next to super modern high-rise buildings with glass walls. It is very exciting to see this combination of tradition and modernity.

The course in Korea was very special for me. We had the opportunity to attend a traditional Korean school. We were allowed to try traditional instruments and wear traditional clothes. That was a very good experience.

What did you do in your free time in South Korea?

I did a lot in my free time. I have been traveling around for the past month visiting many cities with friends in South Korea.

We also spent a lot of time sitting quietly in cafes. Our favorite café in Tanju was on the side of the street, where we often studied. You could look out the window onto the street and watch people go by. It was really nice. Unfortunately, I heard from friends the other day that the café is closed. That is a bit sad.

Is there anything that you have taken over from the foreign culture and have been able to see Germany through different eyes after your semester abroad?

I used to like to say my own opinion in conversations. I also learned that I can hold back and listen to others better.

When I came back to Germany in February, the first thing I noticed was that it was incredibly dark in Germany in the winter, because the sun goes down so early. In South Korea, you have many flashing advertising signs and light everywhere. In Germany, this is not the case at all, which I learned to appreciate. As exchange students, we were lucky not to have to pay for university. But Korean students have to pay high tuition fees. I am happy that unlike in South Korea, in Germany there is an assessment of individual people's strengths and weaknesses.. We are really lucky when it comes to financing our studies.

Would you repeat your studies abroad and why?

Yes, I would definitely do it again for multiple reasons: on the one hand for the academic experience - to be aware that there are other types of learning at the university level - and also personal experience, because it brings more appreciation for your own and other cultures. You also get to know many different mentalities because you spend a lot of time with international students. You realize afterwards: there is not just one, but many different ways of thinking.

What do you recommend to students who also want to do a semester abroad?

I would recommend to not plan too much beforehand. Just let the whole thing come to you. Be spontaneous and just do what you feel like doing in the semester abroad. Simply enjoy the time there in a relaxed manner.