

Erasmus Experience Report

Name: Katharina

Country of Destination: Ireland

Receiving Institution: National University of Ireland Maynooth

Subjects: English and Biology

Duration of Stay: Nine months (Academic Year 2020/21)

1. Preparing

Preparing for an Erasmus Stay is definitely a large endeavour and there is a lot to keep in mind. In my experience, the International Office guides the students quite well through the academic aspects and all the necessary requirements so I will not go into detail regarding this because just listening to the IO and asking them if you have any questions is probably more insightful than anything I could tell you. Therefore, I will only touch on things that I wish I had known before coming to Ireland.

First off, you will need a credit card. I know this might be surprising but there are some things that just aren't possible without one. For example, if you want to top up your leap card via the top up app, you can only do so with a credit card (I will go into further detail of what a leap card is and why you'll need one later on). Furthermore, a lot of pubs will only let you order and pay through AnyExcuse which also requires a credit card. So if you don't have one, you might have to rely on friends who do and constantly having to borrow money could put a strain on any friendship so just get a credit card yourself. I know that a lot of banks charge extra for them but I ended up just opening up a new bank account with IngDiba which was free and they automatically give you both a debit and a credit card free of charge so you might want to look into that or search for similar offers from other banks.

Secondly, if you plan on travelling and exploring the country, I definitely recommend buying hiking boots. For most of the spots I mention in the travel section, a hike is involved, so investing in some good boots for it is definitely worth it. I didn't have any hiking boots and believe me, my feet suffered for it. Otherwise when it comes to packing you should obviously anticipate rain. It doesn't rain all the time but it does rain at least five minutes every day.

2. Housing

From what I've read in other people's reports, finding housing in Maynooth seems to be quite difficult. I'll be totally honest and admit that I had no issues finding a place to stay which is probably due to the pandemic. A lot less students were looking for accommodation.

Because of the pandemic, I decided not to live on campus because you have no control over who you live with and I did not want to end up risking my health by living with people who do not take social distancing serious. Therefore, I can't really speak on the booking process. Some friends of mine did live on campus, however, and they didn't experience a lot of issues and they said that booking was relatively easy. If you do want to live on campus, you should, however, keep in mind that you have to pay the rent completely in advance and not on a month to month basis. Furthermore, the kitchens aren't equipped with any cooking utensils, plates, silverware etc. so you'll either have to bring everything yourself or buy things there, which is quite inconvenient in my opinion.

I booked my accommodation over StudentPad, which is a portal created by the university to connect landlords and renters. I messaged four landlords very early on the morning that the site went live and was offered all four of the accommodations, so as mentioned earlier it was quite an easy process for me. I ended up living with one roommate in a small house, just

outside of Maynooth in Barrogstown. The house was on my landlord's property but completely separate from their house, so it was ideal when it came to social distancing. Furthermore, the house was fully equipped so we didn't have to buy anything like cooking utensil for example. My roommate and I also got along really great so the experience of actually living in Ireland was quite nice.

3. Finances

Ireland is definitely one of the more expensive Erasmus destinations. My rent alone was 575€ a month, which is on the more expensive end from what I saw on StudentPad but there were even landlords that wanted 600€ or more per month. So rent is definitely more expensive than in Germany.

Another aspect to consider when it comes to finances is transportation. Unlike here, you do not get a „Semesterticket“ but rather you have to pay for every single bus ride. In order to make this a bit easier you can get a Student Leap Card, which you can top up with money and then you won't have to pay with coins every time you take the bus. The Leap Card does cost 5€ or 10€ but it's definitely worth it because, first off, the rides are a bit cheaper if you have a leap card and the Card has a cap of 5€ a day so you will never pay more than that and I think there's also a cap of 20€ per week but I'm not entirely sure on that one. In order to top up your leap card you can go to some of the stores in town, give them money and they will top it up for you or you can use the Leap Card App but you will need a credit card in order to make a payment. Since transportation is so expensive, it's definitely an aspect to consider when choosing your accommodation. While living in Maynooth directly might be more expensive, you won't have to pay for the bus rides to university every day.

Another aspect you'll have to consider is that the cost of living in Ireland is quite high. Groceries are a little bit more expensive than they are in Germany but it's especially apparent when it comes to rent and when you're at a pub. If you do Erasmus, you will be given 450€ a month as financial support, which as you can probably guess from the amount I payed for rent, is not nearly enough to pay all your expenses, so definitely keep in mind that you will need to look into other options such as Auslandsbafög, familial support, savings or working in Ireland. It's also important to consider that you don't get the 450€ on a month to month basis but rather you get 80% of the money ahead of your stay and 20% after you have finished the „After your Stay“ Section on Mobility Online, so keep that in mind.

4. The University

Unfortunately, all my courses were online due to the pandemic so I didn't get to see too much of the University but the campus is definitely one of the most beautiful ones I have ever seen and it's definitely worth to just go for a stroll here. If you decide to go for a stroll, please go and visit the Library Cat and give her a few pets.

Maynooth offers a lot of really interesting courses, especially in English Literature. I mainly took courses in this department because the credit points are transferable. I obviously cannot speak for

all your second subjects but in case any of you study biology, the university also offers a lot of really interesting courses for that and I was also able to get credits for them here in Wuppertal



Image 1: South Campus - Maynooth University

as well. Furthermore, the university offers the Irish Heritage Certificate, where you will have to take four courses on Irish history, culture, language and so on and in the end you'll get a certificate. If you are only interested in some of the courses you can also just take individual ones and not do the certificate. I, for example, took Irish Language 101 which was really interesting.

When it comes to studying, there are definitely some differences in comparison to university in Germany that you should watch out for. First off, most courses, especially in the English department, don't have a term paper or an exam at the end of the semester but rather you have midterms and finals. This means that you cannot just leave all the work and reading for just ahead of the exam but rather that you will have to work continually, otherwise the times around the midterms and finals will get very stressful.

As for the method of testing, you should prepare to write a lot of essays. I cannot necessarily speak on the difficulty of this because due to the pandemic the English Department changed all exams to assignments, so you could write the essays on your own time and while having all your sources accessible, it was basically like writing a small term paper similar to the one in Introduction to Literary Studies. In the Biology Department on the other hand, we had exams but all of them were online and open book, so Covid was definitely an advantage in that regard.

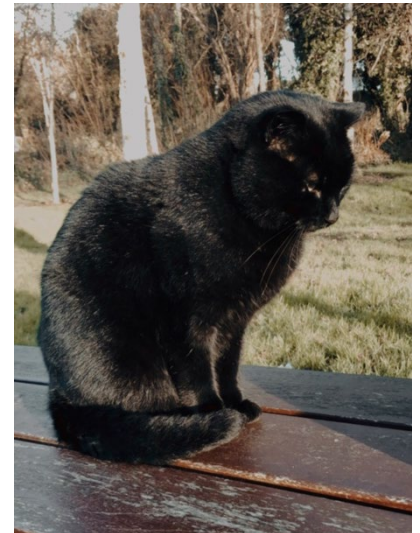


Image 2: The Library Cat

5. Free Time & Things to do around Maynooth

If you are not studying, there are a lot of fun things to do in and around Maynooth. If you fancy a stroll for example, you can either check out the South Campus or you can go to the Carton House Golf Course. This might sound strange but Golf Courses are everywhere in Ireland and often times they are the best spots for a walk. The neighbouring towns also have beautiful parks and gardens, I especially recommend Castletown in Celbridge and St. Catherines Park in Leixlip. Otherwise, if you want to do something in Maynooth, the pubs are great and definitely always worth a visit and a great place to hang out with friends, though you should keep in mind that it's quite pricey.



Image 3: Carton House Golf Course - Maynooth

In terms of finding friends, I definitely recommend joining a society or club in the University. They offer lots of cool sports and a lot of interesting themes such as Harry Potter, Disney, Creative Writing... basically they have everything you could think of and more and it's a great way to find people who share your interests. They also organise a lot of fun events such as game and movie nights and I think the Disney society even organises a trip to Disneyland Paris every year. Due to Covid, a lot of these things obviously weren't possible but the clubs and societies still did their best to offer online alternatives in order for people to have a good time and make lockdown life a little bit easier.

One of the great benefits of Maynooth is that it is just one hour from Dublin. You can take either the 66 or 67 bus right in the town centre of Maynooth and drive to Bachelor's Walk and you'll be right in the middle of Dublin. I won't go too much into detail about all the things you can do there because the possibilities are endless but I just want to quickly highlight some of

my favourites. I highly recommend going to the Phoenix Park Deer Field. They have a herd of deer that has lived there for hundreds of years and has, therefore, become quite accustomed to humans, which means you can pet them. Otherwise, I recommend visiting the Trinity College Library, it's just really beautiful and makes you dream about one day having a library



Image 5: Deer in the Phoenix Park - Dublin



Image 4: Trinity College Library - Dublin

like that yourself.

However, Dublin is not the only fun spot close to Maynooth. If you fancy a hike I recommend doing the Howth Cliff walk or the Wicklow National Park. I would just advise that you book seats for the bus from Dublin to Wicklow ahead of time because it can be quite full on days with good weather. Otherwise, you can also visit the National Stud and Japanese Gardens in Kildare if you like horses or beautiful gardens. There are also a lot of beautiful beaches in an around Dublin. I cannot speak for all of them but I know that Bray is a very popular one. I personally only visited Portmanock Beach in Dublin which is quite nice and definitely worth a visit.



Image 6: Howth Cliff Walk



Image 7: Wicklow Mountains

6. Travel

Ireland has a lot of beautiful places to offer. Luckily, I was able to visit a few of them despite the pandemic when things opened up again in May and June. I do want to point out, however, that my experiences of traveling around Ireland might differ a lot from yours. Due to the pandemic, there weren't a lot of tourists around and everything was relatively empty which was a huge benefit. But a lot of things were obviously not possible due to Covid, so everything has its upsides and downsides.

One of my first destinations was Belfast. My friends and I took a bus there, which I would personally recommend because it's quite convenient and with the student discount also relatively cheap. Other friends of mine rented a car which might be beneficial if you plan to do stuff outside of Belfast itself and want to be more flexible. If you do go to Belfast, I highly recommend doing a Black Taxi Tour, where a driver will take you around the city and show you some of the famous murals and memorial gardens and the Peace Wall and explain more about the political conflicts that are still going on there today.



Image 6: Bobby Sands Mural - Belfast

I also recommend going to the Ulster Museum which has an exhibition on the Troubles, as well as other interesting topics and the admission is free. If you have the money, I would also recommend visiting the Titanic Museum. It's a bit pricey but also highly interactive and very well thought out. You get to learn about everything from how the ship was built to the cultural impact of the Titanic today.

If you want to explore Northern Ireland further but don't want to rent a car, I recommend doing a Game of Thrones Tour, which will take you around County Antrim to see some of the filming locations as well as the Giant's Causeway. It's really beautiful but be cautious when it comes to which company you book with. The one we ended up with, didn't really pay attention to social distancing guidelines so I spend the tour worrying about catching Covid.



Image 7: Titanic Museum - Belfast



Image 10: Pyke Harbour – County Antrim



Image 11: The Dark Hedges – County Antrim



Image 12: The Giant's Causeway – County Antrim

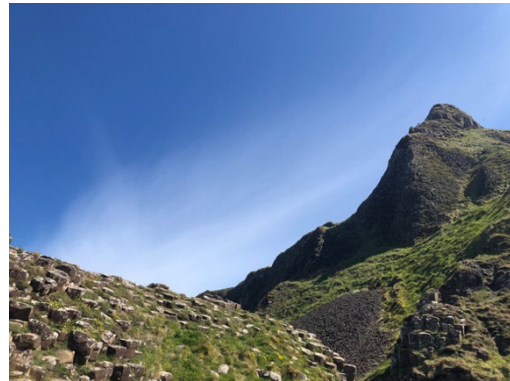


Image 13: The Giant's Causeway – County Antrim

Other than that, I also went on a road trip around the country with two friends. We rented a car for eight days and drove from Dublin to Galway and then along the coast to Limerick, Killarney, Cork and back to Dublin. When it comes to renting a car, there are a few things to keep in mind. If you want to rent with a company such as Sixt or Europcar, you need a credit card, be over 21 and have had your driver's licence for a least 4 years or more. If you can't fulfil these requirements, you can also use carsharing such as GoCar. Friends of mine did this for their road trip and it worked really well. Or you could do what we did and rent through GrünInsel.de which lets you rent a car even if you are aged 18-21, have only had your licence for 2 years and don't have a credit card (though as explained earlier, you should get one). Furthermore, with GrünInsel.de your deductible is only 250€ if you are under 25, with other companies it was usually around 1000€ so I highly recommend them. Everything worked really well and we even got our 250€ despite the fact that the car definitely had some new scrapes when we returned it.

As for driving on the left side, it's definitely not as scary as it might seem. I got used to it quite quickly and so did my friends. Granted, however, we had all already been living in Ireland for nine months at that point so the traffic wasn't entirely new to any of us.

But planning aside, let's get back to the actual travelling. While in Galway, we visited the Latin Quarter which is great for going out and has a lot of pubs (which were all closed due to Covid when we were there), the famous Cliffs of Moher, Connemara National Park and the largest of the three Aran Islands Inishmore. I can recommend all of these sights but there are some things to be aware of. When going to the cliffs, watch out for the ticket office. If you go there, they will charge you 10€ and you will think it's for access to the cliffs but it's not. You are paying for admission to the really small museum which isn't worth the money in my opinion.

So just go around the ticket office and directly to the cliffs and then try to see if you can spot the Harry Potter filming location. (They try to do the same thing at the Giants Causeway, don't go into the building just go directly to the Causeway).



Image 14: Latin Quarter - Galway



Image 15: Cliffs of Moher

Connemara is really beautiful and I definitely recommend checking it out, just drive slowly while you're there because you might encounter some sheep on the road. There are a lot of hiking trails, we did the Diamond Hill one, which is honestly more of a climb than a hike at points, but the view is beautiful. We also went to Kylemore Abbey while we were there. We did not go inside so I can't say whether or not the admission fee is worth it but it's definitely worth checking out. If you are a good driver and not easily frightened, I would also recommend driving the Sky Route but just to warn you: the roads are very narrow and in my opinion it's frightening if you have oncoming traffic.



Image 16: View from the Top of Diamond Hill – Connemara National Park



Image 17: Kylemore Abbey - Connemara

If you want to go to one of the Aran Islands, you can either go by ferry or by plane, which actually isn't as expensive as one might expect. We took the ferry and once on the island, we

rented bicycles from one of the many rental shops. Though exhausting at times, I would definitely recommend it.



Image 18: Inishmore

On our way to Limerick, we made a stop at the Burren National Park. Compared to Wicklow, Connemara and Killarney, it's relatively unknown but definitely worth a visit. But keep in mind, the terrain is quite uneven so wear good shoes.



Image 19: Burren National Park

Killarney and its National Park are quite well known and rightfully so. The town is charming and the national park has a lot to explore. Furthermore, Killarney is also the starting point for the Ring of Kerry, an approximately three hour long scenic drive along the coast of County Kerry. There are lots of interesting possible stops such as the Ladies' View viewpoint, Derrynane Beach or the viewpoint for the Skellig Islands, the filming location for Luke's island in Star Wars Episode VII and VIII. But beware when driving: you might encounter sheep on the road.



Image 20: Ladies' View – Ring of Kerry



Image 21: Ring of Kerry



Image 22: Killarney National Park

Cork is one of the larger cities and also definitely worth a visit. I went there twice. Once on our road trip and once on a day trip. If you just want to walk around the city a bit, a day is definitely enough but if you want to stay there longer, I would recommend also checking out Blarney Castle and the Rock of Cashel, which are relatively close to Cork. Blarney Castle has beautiful gardens and on the top of the castle you can find the Stone of Eloquence, which is rumoured to make people more eloquent if they kiss it. A friend of mine did it and I'm not sure if it had any effect but due to Covid she wore a mask while doing so, so this might be why.



Image 23: Rock of Cashel



Image 24: Cork University



Image 25: Blarney Castle

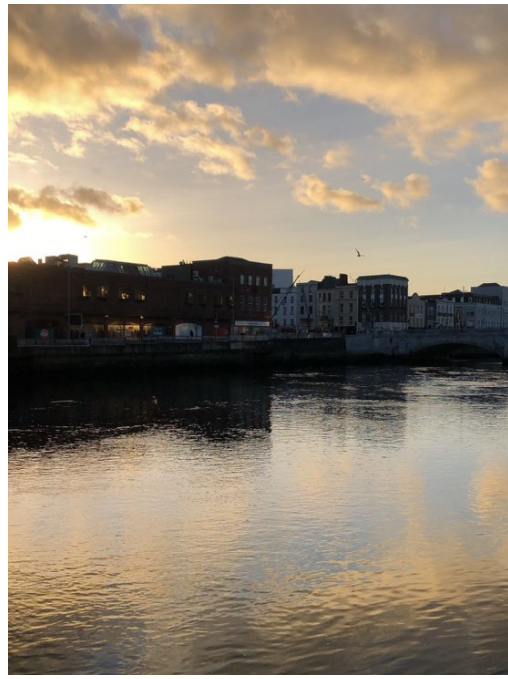


Image 26: Cork

All in all, I can just say that Ireland is a beautiful country and there is so much to discover so I recommend perhaps spending a bit less in the pub and instead using that money to travel, you'll definitely won't regret it.

7. Conclusion

If you're even slightly considering doing an Erasmus, I highly recommend that you do it. I was also apprehensive in the beginning, but these nine months were one of the best times in my life and I would definitely do it all over again, even if there is pandemic going on.

Also if you have any questions or something like that, feel free to reach out to me.