

# International Exchange 2012 – Kalmar, Sweden (by Anneke Heins)



My name is Anni, I am 22 years old and 2012 I spent five months in Kalmar (Sweden) for an exchange to study biology, improve my English, get in contact with other people from all over the world, and to become more independent. For me this was the first exchange in my life, and the longest time I spent in another country. Therefore everything was thrilling and exciting, and even the planning was an adventure for planning and organization weren't exactly my favorite during that time.

I got the idea to go for an exchange from a friend of mine. She was close to go on an exchange herself and helped me finding the responsible people for international affairs and exchange with ERASMUS. I talked with many representatives, and every new information was a piece in the puzzle until finally my exchange was decided, planned and supposed to start in a few weeks. About that time I was a bundle of nerves. When I decided to go to another country this decision was at first totally intuitively like "I should eat pancakes today". I was sure that I wanted to go, but everything else wasn't reconsidered at all and the idea was more or less last minute. Additionally, after everything was planned already, I started to think about several different things. I actually started to worry about nearly everything:

In Germany I just spent a wonderful time with my friends, we took a vacation to France, we met nearly every day, and we went to the city or to festivals together. My older sister told me that she was pregnant and would give birth to my very first niece when I would be in Sweden. My boyfriend and I had problems and we were not sure if we could keep the relationship sustainable for half a year without real contact. My timetables from Sweden and Germany crossed pretty much, and I had to leave nearly two month earlier before my German semester was finished. There was so much work to do before leaving Germany that I couldn't imagine how I could possibly finish all of it. Well, maybe all of this doesn't sound too scary, but in my emotionalized way of looking into it, it was like this: *Oh my goodness, if I leave my hometown right now, I am definitely going to lose all of my precious friends and we*

*will never have such a great time again! I will miss the birth of my first niece, what if she remembers, and will hate me for this selfish decision of mine for the rest of her life. And even worse, I should be by my sister's side when she gives birth to her first child! I am a horrible sister, aren't I? And don't forget my totally stable, wonderful and joy bringing relationship with my totally wonderful boyfriend. If we break up now it is completely because of the exchange and not because of the other dissensions! And when I start to imagine my university work load...it is impossible to finish all my work before I leave! All in all: what a horrible idea to go right now with all these things unsettled! Maybe I'll try later, maybe next year that sounds good. Then my sister is already a mother, my friends are maybe leaving the university as well and go to travel around, maybe I wouldn't have as much work as at the moment...etc.*

Well to come back to reality, of course everything happened differently than I made it up in my mind. Most of these problems were not even in the slightest as big as I made them up. And luckily, ignoring all my exaggerated thoughts, I decided to go to Sweden anyway and I felt good with this decision. Something you should keep in mind, when planning an exchange and worrying about the perfect time to go: there is never the "perfect" time, when your life awaits you to go and see the world. There are always friends and boyfriends and pregnant sisters (or at least similar situations 😊) and there are always uncertainties. But these uncertainties shouldn't hold you back. Maybe they make you come back after half a year, though. In my case, I was aware about my uncertainties, but I wanted to go! I wanted to go not later but right now. And I never regretted this decision, not a single time. I was in Sweden, met several people from literally all over the world, learned more than ever about my precious, most awesome subject in the world (biology), improved my English, and gained memories I'll never forget. And for my problems: My (ex-) boyfriend and I broke up, two months before I left, not because of the exchange, of course, but because of ourselves and a change in interests during our relationship. We are friends now, and once in a while we drink coffee together. For five months I had a long distance relationship, anyway, with my freshly new boyfriend I met one month before I left Germany. This was strange at the beginning, but turned out to be totally fine in the end. He visited me twice in Sweden and we talked everyday via Skype. The weekend after my sister gave birth I took spontaneously a flight back to Germany and surprised her and my beautiful little niece. And even though it was only for a weekend, that short trip was a very great and memorable time. When I finally came back, my friends awaited me already in the middle of the night, standing in front of my apartment with self-made food, presents and a big fruit basket to welcome me back.

So in the end I didn't lose anything, neither the time with my friends (we are making up for the time I was gone at the moment), nor the love of my boyfriend, niece, or my sister. The workload was sometimes a bit claiming, but seriously, it is not necessary to try and study a full semester in half the time and additionally a full semester (45credits) in your exchange country. You can do that without getting crazy like I did, but I noticed, you don't have to stress yourself that much. I for myself like to work under pressure and took every knowledge I could get (I really love biology), and at least for me it was worth the sweat. In those five months I learned more than in every other semester during my study. In one course we were only five students, and the teacher was really good. During the time I was there he was just writing a short article for the Nature journal. For all the non-biologists: That's something really nice and worth some respect! And that very man taught me biology, from time to time even in private when the other three or four students were ill. Those are chances bachelor and master students don't have quite often.

Because of our low numbers in students and the high quality of the courses, we had enough time for regular and daily Fika, one of the best inventions ever. The Swedish invention and tradition advises you to take a break from time to time during each day, meet with others and enjoy a coffee or a cup of tea. And don't mistaken this with a normal coffee break! The company of others is crucial. Just grapping a coffee and then go back to your computer doesn't count ;)

During Fika break you can chat and I was told that the best ideas come during this time. Is there a better way to be successful? Finding answers or getting good ideas while enjoying the sun on your face with some cake and coffee and lovely company? That's something I would like to see in Germany more often!

Talking about the sun reminds me about the Swedish weather. You might be surprised that I talked about the sun while talking about the cold North. But don't misjudge it and be sure to bring two crucial things on your trip or vacation to Sweden: First sunglasses, and second - and even more important - sun lotion. During the winter I was nearly blind riding my bicycle over the high and shining layers of snow, in the summer I looked like a boiled shrimp after a day on Öland, the big island next to Kalmar. At least I came back to Germany tanned, sun lotion would have been better, though, but like I said, I misjudged the sun (a mistake I'll never do again).



I could write hundreds of pages about my exchange, for it was one of the most important chapters in my life, with something special happening every week, but I think that nothing is as good as your own experiences. The only thing I can do is to encourage you, and to tell you that an exchange is worth every confrontation with every problem you might fear. For me I had a lot of worries. Not only those I named in the lines above. I was also worried about myself, to not be brave and self-organized enough to be on my own for five long months. I was afraid that my English wouldn't be good enough and that I couldn't deal with the demands of the courses. But all those worries were unnecessary once I came to Sweden. First of all I wasn't on my own. I had a buddy to ask for help and to speak with, I had the German and the Swedish Erasmus and international exchange office employees, and I had approximately 250 exchange students with the same worries, problems, and fears I had, who became one after the other my friends. And I noticed that I am much more independent than I expected. I even drove a department car from my exchange university over 400km through Sweden to listen to seminars (and this car was really unrealistically big, which put me through twice the stress, to first, drive through a foreign country and second to drive this warship of a car). But I managed, without a problem (or accident), I spoke with big companies in order to organize projects and to ask for fundings and I held presentations in front of many students and professors without freaking out (...completely).

I already made plans to meet friends in Hungary, the Netherlands, Latvia, and America, and generally, after this exchange I, and everyone else from our group, feel at home all over the world.



I had a wonderful, interesting, and adventurous time in Kalmar, the city surrounded by water from three sides, with green fields, forests, free barbecue spaces, and conservation zones everywhere. One highlight was the big bridge connecting Kalmar and Öland, another the Swedes, which are able to speak English perfectly even in the youngest ages. It was amazing to chat with so many people from different sites from nearly everywhere, to talk about their interests, to laugh and to cry together, and to get to know myself and my own strength. An exchange is a chance you have only during a short period in your life, and I bet you'll regret it if you miss it. I certainly would, and am convinced to go on an exchange a second time. There are many places on earth, worth a longer visit, Sweden is one of them and for me it was a perfect start to recognize our amazing world and the opportunities our time provides! The only thing I regret is that the exchange was too short, it felt like a couple of weeks that I spent my time there (another reason to go back to my second homeland at some time in the future and to get to know other countries as well).

