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1. Visa (required documents and their procurement, duration of application process, costs, etc.)

Throughout the entire stay abroad I was in contact with a nice gentleman (Hamood) of the ICO (International Cooperation Office) of the SQU, who sent me the scan of my visa by email about 2 months before my arrival, so that I could show it to the visa officers when I arrived at the airport. This was a student visa for a short time of 3 months. He also let me know that the university would immediately take care of an extension for the following 1.5 months after the expiration of the first 3-month visa. The documents I had previously sent to the ICO by email (after a previous attempt by post was unsuccessful) were a scan of my identity card and passport, as well as a scan of my passport. I did not have to pay anything for the first visa or the second one, the procurement went through the university, so this was very relaxed and uncomplicated. The only thing to emphasize is the fact that this visa was only a 'single -entry visa' at a time, which means a weekend trip to the UAE was not possible during the semester (it was also not possible with regard to the workload to be done for the courses).

It was not until I decided to travel to Dubai for a few days after the semester had ended, that I had to ask how this could work in terms of visas, as I no longer had a valid visa after leaving because of the single-entry condition. Here, too, I found a great deal of helpfulness – an extremely strong constant that always gave me great pleasure during my stay abroad – so that on my return from Dubai, a staff member at the visa desk in Muscat gave me extensive advice and issued a new visa directly at the airport.

2. Arrival (notes on travel options, etc.)

I flew with British Airways from Munich with a stopover in London overnight to Muscat. This way I saved around €150 compared to a direct flight. After about 15 hours of travel, I was picked up at the airport by a university employee and taken to a car that was waiting for me at 7 a.m. at 38 degrees (Celsius) outside, and with which another gentleman took me to my accommodation.

The journey from the airport to the apartment took about 30 minutes. It should be noted that in Oman almost everyone drives their own car and public transport are not as developed as in other cities maybe (there are bus lines, but rather in central residential areas and not so much in the vicinity of a university/residential area). Therefore, it is definitely advisable to rent a car to not be as dependent on the school bus hours (7.30 am and 3 pm only). This costs around 170 OMR (approx. 360€) per month for most car rental companies and is relatively easy to organize. The country offers a lot of excursions into the green or sandy, both day trips and overnight stays. Here, too, however, a car is always necessary in principle, as taxis do not travel as far and there are no train connections. The proximity to the United Arab Emirates also offers a trip to the metropolis of the Gulf, Dubai or even to Abu Dhabi. As a European, you can immediately obtain a 30-day visa for free upon entry. For this it is almost worth flying, as return flights from Muscat are available for 50- 60 OMR.

3. International health insurance

Getting health insurance abroad is definitely recommended, as medical care in Oman is undoubtedly top, but could come at a high cost. I organized this through a private reference person still in Germany and was able to extend it immediately, when I determined that I would stay about 2 months longer than initially planned.

4. Accommodation

As far as the possibility of housing was concerned, there was a lot of confusion until the actual arrival. Hamood from the ICO had assured me from the beginning that I could get an apartment 'on campus' and since the rental price of 110 OMR was quite acceptable compared to European rental prices, I accepted the offer. On the day of my arrival, I found out that the building where the international students live is not located directly at the university grounds, but in the nearest town (Al-Khoud 6), about 2-3km away. There are two different high-rise buildings, one for men and one for women. The apartments in the building for women each have 3 rooms, one with a single bathroom, the other two share a bathroom. There is a fully functional kitchen with gas stove, oven, fridge (with freezer) and washing machine. The room itself has a bed, a bedside table, a wardrobe, a desk/makeup table and air conditioning. Usually, for repair needs (such as broken light bulbs), there is a contact person from SQU who replaces everything as quickly as possible. During my stay I had a permanent roommate from Sudan who did her master's degree in chemistry. The third room had different residents from time to time for 4-6 weeks each. All residents of the house either study at the SQU or do an internship at the university clinic as medical students.

5. Description of the stay abroad

For me, my stay turned out to be much more than just a semester at a university abroad. Rather, it was a period of my life that strongly shaped me. I studied topics that could be very connected with my previous seminars in Munich and to which I had previously had rather limited knowledge, as well as I got to know a culture that had been completely foreign to me up to that point. This sevenmonths stay in such a diverse society brought me more experiences than the everyday life of a few years at home. In addition, you are, in a sense, on your own, if you do not already know people on the ground, and once again have the chance to become more independent and self -confident. All in all, my eyes were opened and I appreciate that until today.

A few things to note about university: First, at SQU, there is a strict gender separation in every respect (in the classroom and in the library, in the corridors, sidewalks and in the canteen, partly even during the seminary 'discussions'), but it does not affect the quality of the classes and teaching offered. Secondly, the procedures are very American (non-European): compulsory attendance with a grade deduction in case of unexcused non-appearance, task-like examinations and mid-term examinations, almost every week. Contrary to Germany, where most students are stressed about their exams towards the end of the semester, here you have to be on top of your tasks every single week for the entire semester. On the positive side, however, the semester is truly done after the last day of lectures is over. Unlike in Germany, you do not spend a few weeks with writing research papers. On the other hand, I realized how in Oman, everything is approached a bit more relaxed and the strong warmth of heart every Omani shows you is a clear sign of honest hospitality.

6. Leisure time

In terms of leisure activities, it must generally be noted, as in point 2, that for any “getting out” of Al-Khoud Six – where, unfortunately, apart from restaurants and a few grocery stores, not much is offered so far, as it is a new housing area (state of spring 2018) – a vehicle is necessary. But as soon as you drive towards Seeb and Central Muscat, there are some malls with a lot of shops and also the beach for strolling, or commercial zones with cafes, restaurants, shops or other entertainment options (cinemas, bowling halls, escape room games, etc.). Many activities take place for young Omanis outside, such as squad riding in the dunes, jet skiing or canoeing). The Royal Opera House also offers weekly shows and performances to those interested in culture. For the adventurous, it is also worth making trips to more distant villages or areas on weekends, such as Nizwa or Sur, to name just two popular examples. In addition, Oman offers an incredibly beautiful and varied natural scenery: beach, sea and desert, but also – and I did not know this before my stay – several mountains, oases ("Wadis") and historic castles. So, everything from swimming to hiking and sightseeing to dune surfing and camel riding is possible. Snorkeling on certain beaches is definitely worthwhile, as the sea is extremely clear and warm on the one hand and offers a breathtaking view of an untouched underwater world on the other. Corals and fish can be observed as if you were in one of the world's most famous reefs – magical! The differences to life in Munich quite large. One cannot imagine a 'city' in itself under the name Muscat. There is no centre like Marienplatz or Viktualienmarkt, no small alleys with cafés offering organic food or things like that. (For those coming from a non-muslim country and who do care about it: there are of course no bars or clubs as this is haram in Islam. I did not mind it at all.) Also: for vegetarians or even vegans, a stay here would probably become a famine, since a) neither common restaurants nor supermarkets in the area (except Carrefour in the big shopping centers) are prepared to offer a variety of substitutes like tofu or soy and b) the local population is rather meat-eating. The main foods are usually chicken, beef and lamb (but also camel meat if one is curious), rice or bread, fresh fruits, and karak tea (delicious!). Once you feel the hospitality in this country, any type of shortcomings are quickly forgotten. Moreover, going abroad should be about getting to know completely different living conditions than the ones at home, right? In any case, I was not bored one second and felt very well taken care of from day 1. Ever since I returned back home, I very much miss the warmth and helpfulness of the Omanis.

7. Individual intercultural experiences

Unfortunately, I was asked in advance by a few people if I would feel comfortable there, because there might be difficulties as a woman in a Muslim country. Such generalizing impressions and ideas of discrimination against female members of Islamic society still exist in many minds, to my greatest sadness. I would just like to say that I have never been treated badly in any way by anyone. Quite the opposite: hospitality is highly valued and foreigners are warmly welcomed. It is important to Omanis to bring their culture and country closer to others and to make your stay as exciting and impressive as possible. Therefore, they organize trips at weekends with great pleasure and invite you to extensive lunches or dinners. Generally, Omanis are the most generous people and offering them money in return for something is always denied, no matter how often you offer them to pay. I can only recommend a certain basic behaviour – especially when it comes to understated clothing style – because then no one feels disrespected. This is a significant point, especially for women. Covering shoulders and knees is really a should (no must, but a big should). Respect for other nationalities is a matter of honour, so the locals would never say anything if they felt uncomfortable, but when meeting them, one is well advised to simply consider such things.

8. Personal conclusion

Doing my semester abroad in Oman was, in my view, one of the best decisions in my life and I can only recommend to anyone to travel to this country – whether academically or privately. Hopefully the Sultanate of Oman will inspire others just as much as it did inspire me.

9. Other information

If anyone would like to know more, I am always available via my above e-mail address.
