

Exchange to Ethiopia

First Semester 2015-2016

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is an interesting country, it is not only the 'cradle of mankind' it is also one of the most populated country in Africa and is the capital city of the African Union. There are more than 80 different languages and many different nationalities. The official language is Amharic, yet many only speak their local language. Not everyone speaks English, however in the big cities most people will. Ethiopia tried to remain their own culture as much as possible, though you can of course notice some western influences here and there. The currency used in Ethiopia is Birr.

The food is absolutely amazing, it's all organic and healthy which is always a plus. During every meal they will serve Injera, which is a sort of grey pancake that you basically use as cutlery. With the Injera they eat many different kind of foods, ranging from chicken in red sauce (Doro Wat) to vegetables and even spaghetti and rice. If you don't like the traditional food, it's no problem at all. They serve burgers, sandwiches, fish and chicken in almost every restaurant. During the meal there are some customs that you should follow, such as always wash your hands before you eat. People will share their food often and everyone eats with their hands from the same plate, so it's basically just gross not to wash them. Also, it's rude to lick your fingers (although you really want to) and to touch your mouth while eating. Once you're in Ethiopia, you should definitely go to a traditional music club, where you will see traditional dances that will blow your mind. Also try the Tej, a traditional honey wine that is quite strong but definitely worth trying.

Legally speaking, Ethiopia has a customary law tradition which is still practices by the many tribes and communities. It's interesting to see how there is an interplay between state law and customary law.

Good to know is that Ethiopia has a different calendar and also use a different time annotation. In Ethiopia they celebrate new year in September. In the end of September 2016, it will become 2009 and in September 2017 it will become 2010 in Ethiopia. Always ask if they mean Ethiopian or Gregorian calendar. And as I just mentioned, the time annotation is different. They start counting when the sun rises, at 6 o'clock. Therefore, 7 AM is 1 o'clock in Ethiopian time. And 1 PM is 7 o'clock. So you basically have to distract or add 6 on the European time and you will have the Ethiopian time. You will get used to it!

Some more practical tips:

Tips are often just 2-3 Birr, they do not count on the 10% as is the norm in other countries. Also don't let people overcharge you (which will happen, unavoidably). Ask people you know what the price should be for certain things. And lastly, just learn a few words in Amharic once you get there, people find it amazing that you know some words and they will always try to teach you more. Some simple words can also help you in situations when people don't speak English.

Bahir Dar

Bahir Dar is a city in the north of Ethiopia, situated at Lake Tana. The city is comparable to the size of Groningen and not too busy in comparison to Addis Ababa. It has palm trees, good restaurants and a vivid night life. It's quite easy to move around, there are bajajs (small taxi's, as those in India and Thailand) that drive you around everywhere. Also for the Bajajs, make sure that they don't overcharge you. Always ask for tariff and not a contract, unless you want to go somewhere quick and don't want to share with people. You will also see many people cycling, so you could get a second hand bike for around 2000 Birr (80 euros) and make your way by bike.

There are many great places around Bahir Dar, you can visit the Blue Nile Waterfalls, the Monasteries on Lake Tana and the Haille Selassie Palace. If you have a bit more time, try to go to Gondor and the Simien Mountains. Also worth seeing is Lalibella, which is a bit further north east. Be aware that there are many tour guides in Bahir Dar, who will always try to get you to go with them. Also these guys can try to rip you off, so be careful with whom you go. For instance, try to pay no more than 200 Birr for the Waterfalls and no more than 300 Birr for the monasteries. It can even be done cheaper, but as you are still a tourist you will most likely not be able to pay the Ethiopian price.

University of Bahir Dar

The University of Bahir Dar has many campuses, of which the Peda Campus is the main one. You will however not have any classes on this campus, yet on the Gebab Campus where the School of Law is located. The law campus is a bit further out of the city, but at the market you can get a taxi for only 4 Birr to the law campus.

Guidance

As we were the first exchange students ever for the Bahir Dar University School of Law, we were basically the Guinea pigs to try it all out. As there was no system for international students to rely on, the guidance was actually really good and very helpful. Melkamu, who is also an alumni of the RUG, was our main contact person. He basically helped us with every question we had and you could call him any time. Ethiopians are very caring and will help you when they can, and this also counts for the university teachers. Even when one of us got ill in the middle of the night and we needed to go to the hospital, teachers helped us and brought us to the closest hospital. That is just an example of how well the guidance is at the Bahir Dar University. Furthermore, Melkamu or someone else from the University will most likely pick you up from the airport or from place the Sky Bus (if you travel by bus from Addis Ababa – very cheap!) drops you off. He will probably also show you where to get the Bajaj and show you around in the city and the campus.

Courses

The law program at the Bahir Dar University consists of 5 years of studying, that also means that there are many courses to choose from. Some courses are, however, Ethiopian law specific (of which some are still interesting to follow!). There are still a lot of interesting courses to choose from that are also international law related! I took the following courses:

Introduction to the Ethiopian Legal System (1st year course, quite easy to follow)

Customary Law (1st year course, interesting as it focusses on African and especially Ethiopian customary law)

Federalism (2nd year course, can be a bit difficult and boring sometimes)

International Humanitarian Law (4th year course, super interesting!)

Water Law (4th year course, can be interesting but also a bit dull sometimes)

Environmental Law (4th year course, make sure that the teacher speaks English and not Amharic)

International Trade Law (5th year course, interesting but difficult)

Refugee Law (5th year course, do it!)

The courses that I took were all quite interesting, I especially liked Refugee Law and International Humanitarian Law. The level of the courses were quite okay, the pace of the classes is just slower than in Groningen. All classes should be taught in English, however some teachers tend to switch to Amharic sometimes if they have the feeling that the students don't understand them. Once they

do that, tell them to translate it to English as well. It gets more difficult when they switch constantly. If you also have the feeling that the teacher doesn't explain it in English to the same extent that he does in Amharic, don't hesitate to talk to him/her or talk to Melkamu.

For every course they use the so-called Teaching Materials, that you can download online or get a hard copy from the Law Students Union president. You can also ask your teachers for a soft copy.

The means of examination is a bit different than the way it goes in Groningen. For every course you can get a maximum of 100%, they will then convert it to the A, B, C system. The 100% consists of a minimum of one assignment, a midterm, a final exam and your attendance and participation. This means that the workload for every course is quite a lot, however because the pace of the classes is slower, it is definitely easy to do!

One thing that is also different from Groningen is that the classes will not always proceed on the time/day that the class is scheduled. Sometimes the teachers are not in Bahir Dar or they have to schedule make-up classes because they have to cover more materials. Ask the teachers to contact you directly when the class won't proceed. They will probably tell you that they will contact the class representative and that he will contact you, however the class representatives tend to forget to tell you sometimes. So make sure that teachers contact you and make sure to get the phone numbers of all the class representatives.

Housing

In the first few weeks I stayed at a hotel until I could find a place to live in. Hotels can be cheap, such as 200 birr per night (8 euros) and then you will also have WIFI. First the university told us that they wanted to pay for the house, however they couldn't due to the contract with the RUG that states that we, as students, have to pay for our own residence. They will tell you that you could live on the Campus, however there are some difficulties that you need to consider for living on the campus. The water supply at the campus is not that good, at least that's what the dean told us. Furthermore, there are some rules that might affect your life at the campus. For instance, the gates close at 22:00, so if you want to party you have to get a hotel room as well. Also there is no alcohol (and sex) allowed on the campus. As the university told us that living on campus wouldn't be the best for us, we chose to live outside the campus. Me and Paulin (the other exchange student) found with the help of a friend a (big) house on a shared compound for 6000 birr per month (240 euros) that we could share with the two of us. As mentioned before, the University can also help you with finding a place! Remember to ask the University if the Kebele (neighbourhood) is a safe and good one. We were living in Kebele 16 (near the Adinas Hospital) which was a very practical neighbourhood, as both the campus and the market were easy to reach.

Ethiopian Students

Ethiopian students are mostly very hard working and you will notice that during the classes. They might be a bit shy in the beginning, but maybe that was just because we were the very first exchange students ever. I think they got used to it now haha! They are very nice and really helpful! Good to keep in mind is that some of the students will be partying during the weekend, but most of them will actually not, because of the time that the campus closes. There is also a difference in student life in comparison to Groningen and actually all other western universities. Where in western countries University it the time for partying and going crazy, in Ethiopia the time to party and going crazy is when you start working. But if you want to go out, the night life is a lot of fun and very good!

Internet

At the university there are only a few buildings where you will have internet. One of them is the administration office, where all the rooms of the teachers are as well. We could always use the internet there, so that was convenient. You can also get 3G on your phone, it is however only prepaid. Conveniently, they will sell 'mobile cards' for topping up your credits at almost every shop and every person who is selling stuff on the street. Getting a SIM card can be a bit more difficult – they want to have a lot of information and they will take a picture of you. So don't forget to bring your passport when getting a sim card.

For wifi it's very common that people go to the lobbies of hotels to use the wifi there. We also went to a hotel whenever we needed to write an assignment or just when you want some wifi. Good hotels for wifi are the Benmas Hotel, the Addis Amba hotel, the Rhanile hotel and the Avanti hotel.

Medical Services

At the university they have free medical care. But also the hospitals in Bahir Dar are okay and cheap in comparison to the Netherlands. Make sure that someone who speaks Amharic and English will go with you, to help when there is translation needed and so on. Whenever we needed to go the hospital (just happened to each of us once because of food poisoning) a teacher would go with us!

Keep Hope Alive Charity Association

At the Gebab campus they have a charity association called Keep Hope Alive. This association helps students with academic materials and basic needs such as shampoo, if they can't afford it themselves. Furthermore, they support children outside the campus and organize a Christmas (during Ethiopian Christmas in January) program for those living on the streets in Bahir Dar. So if you have any space, try to bring some pens, A5 noteblocks and A4 paper for the KHA and give them to Yemesrach, Getahun or Abraham (all 5th year students next year). That would be super helpful for them!

Conclusion

Ethiopia is definitely a country that is worth going to! Not only is the legal and governmental system interesting, it is also an amazing experience to live in such a different culture for half a year! Of course, some things you have to get used to and you might get annoyed when there is a blackout, but you will (and this sounds super cliché) appreciate everything you have so much more and you will learn a lot from the other students and the people that you meet. Therefore, I can definitely recommend you to go to the Bahir Dar University!