

Erasmus exchange – Jagiellonian University, Krakow

Being a Notarial Law student at the RUG, my Erasmus exchange was not mandatory; I went on an exchange because I've been wanting to add a period abroad to my studies pretty much since starting it, and Krakow did not disappoint! Krakow was my first choice, I'm super happy that I got to go there, and I can't recommend it enough!

Study programme

The Jagiellonian University is the highest ranked university of Poland, alongside the Law Faculty, which also enjoys the highest rank. The course offer at the Jagiellonian University is quite big, so you will have no problem finding courses that you will enjoy in English. They even offer courses in German, if that's something that you would be interested in. When choosing courses, you decide based on information that's published on their website before. However, when it comes to choosing/registering for the courses once you're in Krakow, you'll find that some of the courses won't be given anymore, or that there's an overlap in your schedule. This means that you will probably end up having to change some choices, but that's no big deal since there are plenty of other nice options to choose from.

In general, the level of English of my lectures was pretty good and the lectures itself were very interesting. For your exchange, you will need to pick 30 ECTS worth of courses; I ended up getting those credits in a total of 6 courses. This is a lot more at once than I'm used to in Groningen, but because the level at the JU is generally lower than at home this shouldn't be a problem at all. I'm not that great at multitasking/balancing multiple subjects at once, but I had no problem getting great grades on all the exams, while considerably less than at home.

The courses that I followed were: Legal English, American Constitutional Law, American Contemporary Constitutionalism – Rights and Freedoms, Refugee Law, European Private International Law and Introduction to Chinese Philosophy (as my non-law course). Three of those exams were oral, two were written and for one of them I wrote a paper of about 15 pages (together with another student). All the exams were held near the end of January/start of February, but the professors were very lenient with your planning, so if you really needed to switch something up during overlap, that was no problem at all. In general, you had multiple examination days to choose from, which is something I really like for my planning. As stated before, the level at the JU is quite a bit lower than at home, which in my opinion is perfect for Erasmus students, since you also want the time to travel around and engage in plenty of social activities. This resulted in my examination period being a lot less stressful and time consuming than at home, and in very good grades!

Language

There is no official language requirement to study at the JU, therefore the people/lecturers don't necessarily expect a high level of English, although they will really appreciate it if you speak English well! As said before, the level of English of the lecturers/professors was quite good. The level of English of staff at the university could be a bit challenging from time to time, but there's nothing a little Google Translate/using your hands won't fix. For me, Polish was very hard to understand because you have practically no point of reference when it comes to speaking/understanding it, so I chose not to follow a Polish course and use my time elsewhere.

Finance and other conditions

All in all, Krakow is quite a cheap city to live in. Your rent will be lower than in Groningen (depending on your choice of housing) and the cost of living is also much lower than at home. You should get the semester ticket for public transport, for about 40 euro's, which will allow you to take all the trams and buses for free. A great place to get groceries is Biedronka, or even Lidl; both are very cheap.

Cafés, bars and restaurants are also much cheaper than at home and as a result of this you will probably find yourself going out for drinks/dinner with your friends a lot. The average 0.5L beer will cost you about 1,50 euro and you can get a good meal for around 3-4 euros for sure. So, it's a lot cheaper all in all, but since it's Erasmus and you will probably be doing fun stuff all day long, I ended up spending a bit more than at home (which was totally worth it).

Preparation/contact with faculty abroad

The faculty abroad is very helpful and super responsive when it comes to answering your emails. They get a lot of exchange students every year and it really shows that they're used to it. They answered all my questions super quickly in a very detailed manner! The lecturers are also quite responsive, but it might take them a few days to respond to some of your questions. If you can, just go to them in person for your questions. You will probably also end up in some WhatsApp groups with fellow Erasmus students for your university, faculty, etc., so if all else fails you can also ask them, since they're all very open and helpful.

Housing

As you might expect, Poland is quite a bit cheaper to rent in than Groningen. It's possible to rent a room for around 100 euro's a month in a dorm (but you will live quite far from the centre and share a room). My rent was around 225 euro's a month in a shared flat, which was a 10-minute walk from the centre. Some of my friends spent around 300 euro's a month and had great, spacious flats (which were perfect for parties), so it's kind of up to you what you're looking to spend. There are several organisations (e.g. Laborooms, Rentsellers) and a lot of Facebook groups that post rooms, so you should have no trouble finding a nice place. Some of my friends even spent their first week in a hostel because they didn't bother finding a place beforehand, and had no trouble finding a good place to stay even then. I ended up staying about a 4-minute walk away from the Galeria Krakowska, which was a very useful place to stay. However, if I could do it all over again, I would try to find a place either in Kazimierz (the Jewish quarter; great for dinner and drinks) or somewhere in between Kazimierz and the Old Town/inside the Old Town (where you will probably spend a lot of time; university and clubs/social stuff).

Guidance/reception

As mentioned before the International Office of the JU is very responsive to all your questions, so don't hesitate to contact them about anything university related. On top of that, there is an opening ceremony on the first day of the ESN Introduction week which will give you pretty much all the relevant information that you need. You can also choose to sign up for a mentor, who will be able to help you out and let you meet some people straight away. And for the social part: absolutely join ESN! This is a must in my opinion! They will host an introduction week in which you will do plenty of fun things, go out to party and most importantly meet a lot of cool people, who will end up being your best friends for at least a few months, and most likely afterwards as well. They continue to organize fun events until the end of the semester; if you don't join ESN you will miss out on a lot!

Culture/free time/travelling and other tips

Krakow is a beautiful city and you will enjoy walking around in it for the entire semester for sure! Krakow has a lot of history, culture and plenty of amazing things to visit around the city. I would recommend watching Schindler's List before going, if you haven't already; you might recognize some things around Kazimierz! I'm sure you will find all of the 'main attractions' by yourself, but a good tip would be to check out some of the free walking tours around the city; the one of the Old Town and Kazimierz are really great! Kazimierz is just a lovely place to wander around in, make sure you also check out some of the old synagogues and book stores. Krakow is a city that has a very vibrant bar/café/restaurant culture, so make sure you enter plenty of different ones as well.

I really enjoyed Spokoj and Pauza for a relaxed beer, but there are really too many cool bars to mention, so just walk around and join your fellow Erasmus mates as much as possible. Blossom and Wesola have the best coffee in Krakow and are great for breakfast/lunch. Gossip has the best granola for breakfast; make sure you try it. Gospoda Koko is a very cheap, but nice, polish restaurant and they have very nice pierogi (also a must!). Make sure you also go to Auschwitz and the Salt Mines and take a trip to Zakopane for a hike (up to Morskie Oko), or even skiing if you want to. As mentioned before, during your Erasmus you will have plenty of time to travel around. Since Krakow is so centrally located, make sure you take advantage of this. My biggest regret of my Erasmus is not travelling around more, since it's not a big deal if you miss a lecture or two to do so. Warsaw, Gdansk, Wroclaw and Poznan are all very cool; if you're travelling inside Poland go by train or use "Polski bus", both are very cheap. Also, when you make use of Ryanair (including the discount you get from ESN), this is a very cheap option to discover neighbouring countries. FlixBus is also a valid option to go to closer cities like Budapest.

For general life tips in Krakow: download the app called 'Jakdojade'. This is the public transport app that's very useful for picking out your tram/bus on a daily basis. Another useful app is Pyszne, to order food with.

All in all, going on Erasmus has been one of – if not the – best decisions of my life, and I seriously can't recommend going to Krakow enough. The city is vibrant, has a lot to offer, houses many international students and the nightlife is great and cheap. You will not regret going here for a second, and it will feel like your second home in no time! If you have any questions at all, feel free to contact me!