

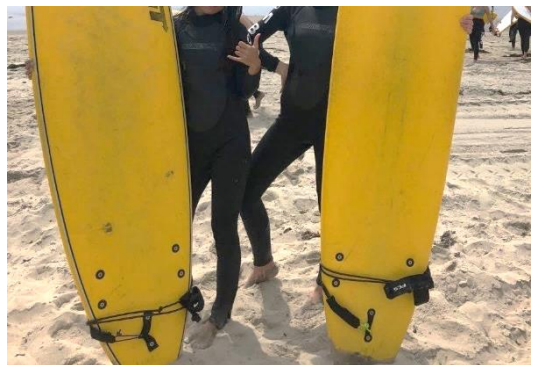
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REPORT ABOUT MY ACADEMIC YEAR AT SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY (SDSU)

All my life I was surrounded by pop-cultural references in T.V. and movies circling around California. I was very invested in U.S.-politics, in awe of the progressive movements that was inspiring academia worldwide. I thought that I knew this country, I understood the culture and that I would be spared from a culture chock – but far from it. My culture chock, the estrangement I constantly felt in San Diego, never quite left me and it turned out to be the most challenging year of my life so far. Still: Everything I hoped or came true, too.

Consider going? Take this advice

In years of slightly lowered interest in the United States by exchange students due to its political leadership, I felt an additional need to understand this complex country that is oh-so-present in medial, cultural and political discourse. How can the United States be the ground for earthshattering research and activism as well as uniquely backwards-thinking ideologies? Politics are not just my major but also my passion which is why I wanted to experience the United States hands-on.



1 Surfing is obligatory

Further I seemed to have developed an emphasis on migration and was attracted to one of the most discussed borders at that time, the Mexican-U.S.-American one. San Diego was therefore surely the best pick as it has one of the most crossed border passages worldwide. And finally, California seemed and is an amazing place to live in. Known for Hollywood and the good weather it offers amazing natural sites as the desert, the ocean or National Parks.

After having passed the *selection* at the International Office in Freiburg I had to apply with my preferences at the head quarter of the Baden-Wuerttemberg-California-State-University Exchange Program in Tuebingen. Consider what your budget is but also which college fits your interest.

I was lucky enough to be selected for my dream university, San Diego State University, but after that I had to dive right into preparation.

- My big advantage was that I was already receiving a scholarship which was increased over my study abroad. If you know you will struggle financially, make sure you are going to apply early enough for scholarships which seem not at all impossible to win. My biggest surprise financially was – besides the housing costs – what I had to pay for even before my study abroad. The visa was around 300\$, the insurance around 1000\$ and I had to pay 800\$/semester because I was

coming in over a broader exchange network and not through a bilateral exchange program. This means you should already be prepared to have saved up some money for the time before you will start receiving a scholarship or other benefits.

- Traveling within an exchange program gives you the advantage that it is very certain that you will receive a *visa*. After filling out the online formulas in June and paying the fees, I was able to get an appointment the week after to officially apply for a visa at the consulate in Frankfurt which is a necessary part of it. Do not forget to apply on time as your passport takes approximately a week or two to be sent to your home address.
- It pays off to book both your *flight* there and back in one go as this way cheaper than the one-way tickets. As I was unsure of what I was going to do after my year abroad I did book two one-way tickets in the end but that was good enough. I flew over San Francisco into San Diego but flights to Los Angeles LAX are probably cheaper. You could take a bus into LA downtown and a Flixbus from there on if you want to.
- All international students had no real choice which *health insurance* they wanted but we had one offer we were meant to take. The only possibility to bypass this rather expensive offer was through being supported by the DAAD which offers a cheaper offer as far as I know.
- Do not stress over the *accommodation* search: It will always be ridiculously expensive. Funnily enough I had the feeling that it was not hard to find a place to live when regularly checking on the housing groups that are on Facebook. The downside is that you will have a hard time to find a double room under 700 and a single room under 800 Dollars. In the end I settled for a private apartment complex close to campus with random strangers I meet over Facebook which turned out to be a terrible decision. The rooms had cockroaches and the house management was reacting and helping very little. Further, I was sharing a room with someone which can be very challenging. In the first semester I shared the room with someone from San Francisco, later with someone from Hong Kong. Surely it had benefits, especially in the first semester as I always had someone sharing their thoughts and experiences and you were never alone. Move into a shared house of which there are plenty but don't let yourself be ripped off by these private companies (I think you can also have a positive experience in those as long as there is nothing wrong, but they are pretty pricey for the quality).
- The *transportation system* is the worst I have ever seen in my life. You want to go to the beach? Great, it will only take you one and a half hours with the bus for a twenty-minutes car journey! The US (but NYC) is not made for public transportation. My biggest regret is not getting a car sooner instead of wasting money on Uber and Lyft which (transportation apps). Naive as I was, I bought a bike in my first week, eager to explore San Diego by it as I always did in Europe. Sadly, I must admit that I gave up on that. It was too dangerous for me as the streets are not appropriate for cyclists and car drivers are not too much in love with



2 The typical US-street. Here: Convoy, a "Little Asia" in SD.

having to share the streets. Buy a car (e.g. over Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace), rent a car, but at some point, at your life there you will need it.

- Many friendships on U.S.-campuses seem to start over being roommates. If you have a nice roommate that could be worth a lot. I nearly had a seemingly nice U.S.-roommate I met through the roommate-match maker of my university but sadly I opted for the safe option with my terrible roommates. Perhaps this could be a useful tool though to meet people who you have something in common with.

The International Student Center was an important resource for help. They kept us informed about what to pay, what to do and sent out a weekly newsletter with fun events on and off campus. The university hosts many events: I saw famous comedians, drag queens and politicians talk and perform which was truly amazing and made me learn a lot about the country. Facebook was further a great resource for events. Through Facebook, I found out about protests and festivals around me which were some of my highlights abroad.

As a political-enthusiast, living in the United States has been truly fascinating in times of high public polarization. When now-Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh was reunited despite the allegations and the controversial process, I was in the protests and was able to see first-hand how the United States



3 My greatest new love: Drag Shows (here: Mayhem Miller, 2019).

struggled in a paradoxical state between progressive activism and political reality. I could hear their reports from my fellowships, many of whom lived in Mexico or near the border, when the border was closed due to the Caravan movement in winter.

In addition, university politics at US universities is far more professionalized compared to Germany. Although I joined the student advocacy group for only one year and was an international student, after successfully completing my application, I could speak to politicians with nine other students in Sacramento, the capital of California, and promote our interests.

How to organize advocacy in the US, and how different identity groups work together for their rights and are networking across the country, acting politically, and working academically, has been eye-opening.

It helps that California is beautiful - at least as far as the natural landscape is concerned. Every Friday I went to my surf course which was only twenty minutes by car from my apartment. I was in the desert and saw the rare natural phenomenon that thanks to exceptionally heavy rain the whole area was in full bloom. Natural parks such as Yosemite Park, Yellowstone Park and Joshua Tree Park are only a few hours' drive away. Contrary to that, the cities really challenged my aesthetic understanding.

Work hard, play hard

San Diego State University is one of 23 colleges of the California State University System. One of the biggest advantages of the university is the great social mix due to its proximity to the border. Nevertheless, the university is dominated by "fraternities" and "sorrorties", which are not so unlike the cliché.



4 Feeling the bern. Always amazing: Election seasons.

Professionally, I was very satisfied with my experience. The lecturers have several office hours a week where you can simply drop by and they are ready to help with any problems or questions. One of my professors even asked me how I felt about San Diego and gave advice and insight on how to feel more adjusted in this city. In addition, there are resources on campus, such as a writing center to help with any written work, or the Career Center, which helps to write a CV or choose a job. However, there is also a lot to do: There are often several homework assignments that are graded every week, and instead of one exam phase, there are two. Basically, it is intellectually much less challenging than my courses in Germany - but more work. In principle, it is highly recommendable to use the diverse range of lectures and seminars and to think outside the box. In my first semester, I attended "Politics of Race," "Immigration and Border Politics," "Introduction to American Politics," and a Women's Studies lecture, "Self-Image." Especially for the latter two, which were listed as introductory events, I had to pay a lot of money for the literature. Partly the substance is checked with online quizzes, whose access code you must buy through the books. If you really want to save, you should look at the syllabus which lists the required book list before the end of the course change phase. But I enjoyed every single event and was able to add a US-American perspective to my thinking. Especially "Politics of Race" was educational and eye-opening. I can only recommend challenging yourself with a specific topic the host country is known for or differs a lot with your background on. Especially this seminar has helped me a lot to understand the USA in its history and present, as well as global contexts.

In my second semester I completed "American Political Thought", "Border Studies (Chicana*o Studies)", "Conflict and Conflict Resolution" and Introduction to Psychology. In addition, I completed an internship at the LGBTQ department which offered anti-discrimination training for university employees and students. Finally, I took a surf course for beginners for two ECTS. Since the university has a fitness center by the sea, you can learn for discounted prices various water sports and credit them, which of course offers in Southern California.

You cannot possibly measure the benefits of studying abroad. Although I already grew up speaking English, I improved my writing through the many homework assignments. The teaching staff was excellent and passionate about teaching students something. Unfortunately, there were few discussions happening in the class room which I found odd as everyone had to read the literature. But if one does their homework, it will not be too hard to have very good grades.

Best Coast!? – How California isn't *just* sunny

Unfortunately, there are downsides to living in the supposed paradise. Because of the high rental rates, I shared a room with someone for the entire year, which is doable, but sometimes not so fun. After all, being alone can be soothing at times, and the person I shared the room with was nobody I knew, let alone with whom I got along perfectly. Furthermore, there is simply no usable public transport network. Instead of 20 minutes which it would take by car, it takes one and a half hours by bus. There is still a trolley but this is only really practical to drive from the campus to Down Town. Although all this was quite usable, but alone I would never have driven with the public. All others who do not have a car use the apps "Lyft" and "Uber", which offer relatively safe taxi services. In the long term, however, this can be expensive - and who likes constant drives with strangers. In no scenario would I have ever imagined that I would want to own a car once. Ultimately, it was the only alternative for me to buy a car which I then did relatively cheaply over Craigslist. But drive carefully: Almost every journey takes you over the highway, some of which are six lanes and where you can overtake right and left. The speed limit is always exceeded by all drivers.

You should also make sure that you have a good accommodation for these high housing prices. In fact, it turned out that our apartment had a cockroach infestation, a roommate without any questions moved in with her boyfriend who was barely willing to pay the extra costs and, to take the cake, we lived opposite to an unofficial nightclub. Unfortunately, landlords in San Diego can get away with almost anything and we received little support from the property management which did not even hand over the apartment properly cleaned. Here it is certainly worthwhile to search locally and to not sign a lease for a year immediately.

And finally, I was lonely at times. I hoped to make good friends in interesting organizations and groups. I took part in a midterm election campaign, attended many events, organizations, etc.: But it was almost impossible to meet people outside of that, there are very few



5 The Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in rare bloom

places to hang out around campus, left alone uncommercialized venues where you could meet or casually go together. If someone then says, "We should totally hang out sometime!" it does not mean anything in my experience. The biggest gatherings happen in "fraternities", "sorrorties", sports groups and possibly church groups.

In short: Go for it

Should you take this leap and study in California? Absolutely. Your personal growth will be so extraordinary, facing the challenges and the differences of another continent. And cultural differences will be there for sure: South California could not be more oppositional to Europe. If it is financially possible for you and you are ready to live a very different life from home, this might be just right for you. I see academic and personal issues more dimensional and am assured of who I am, and that I will just do things that are good for me, a very U.S.-American lesson (even though Californian students tend to cancel their friends a little too soon for minor mistakes in my opinion). My biggest fears concerning living and being alone turned out to be right but: This, too, I survived, and it made me even stronger. What I would do differently though is to not be ashamed to make more German friends: You will speak enough English anyway and you will have a common understanding of what friendship means with those. Be fearless and don't forget: It's only a limited time, anyway.