

Liberal Arts and Sciences / Bachelor of Arts / September 2018 – Mai 2019 / University of Wisconsin / USA-2018-555BW-m

I arrived on the 27th of August in Chicago and took the Bus to Madison. After three hours I saw the great Capitol of Madison and the Lake Mendota. The roommate I would be living with was waiting at the bus station to pick me up. After a few hours of sleep in my new room, I tried to open the window, however, since I had not seen American ACs before I did not know that the AC in the window was not fixed. When I opened the window, the AC fell out of the first floor and smashed on the ground. That was basically the first thing I did in the US. I was actually laughing since I could not really believe what just happened and luckily my roommates and the landlord were laughing about it as well. What a start...!

During the first week, we had a few events organized by the International Student Service. An introduction event with some general information about the University, a student organization fair at which student organizations presented their work and a scavenger photo hunt. At those events, I got to know a lot of other people and I became good friends with most of them throughout the semester. It was relatively easy to get to know people because most of the students did not know anyone in Madison yet.

I found my room in a Facebook group and just sent them a message. I sent out about 30 messages to people, some of those already had leased the room, were looking for female roommates or did not answer at all. I had a quick Skype call with my future roommate so I could see the house and his father (the landlord) sent me the contract afterward. I read the contract about 20 times to be sure everything sounds right, signed it and sent the deposit. Sending a check rather than sending money with online banking was new to me but it worked out and my landlord received the check including the deposit two weeks afterward. I chose my classes already a few months before I went to Madison. Since I am an exchange student, I had to text the professors to be able to enroll in the class online. All the professors were happy to have me in their class. When I arrived, I did not have any problems regarding the class selection.

In the first weeks, I realized that life in Madison is actually more expensive than expected so I applied for a job on campus. UW has a website with all job offers, most of them pay \$10 an hour. I applied for a job at a restaurant (a German Rathskeller obviously) to work at the grill. The UW human resource department helped me to fill out all the needed documents and I had to apply for a social security number. The employer was very flexible concerning the working hours, so I did not have to work too much and still had time to study, meet friends and explore the city.

The highlights in the first weeks were definitely the football games. The whole city celebrates before the game on the streets, nearly every second house has a tailgate (get together before the game), everyone dresses in red (the colors of UW) and then 80.000 people go to the stadium (located in the center of Madison) to support the Badgers.

To be honest, I did not experience a culture shock. One reason is that many things were simply pretty similar to Germany. Another reason for that might be that since I spent a lot of time with other international students from Austria, UK and Netherlands I was surrounded by European people. So, the transition to the American culture might have seemed

smoother and was not a cut from European to American friends. But there were of course some differences: The streets are wider, the cars bigger, vegetables are more expensive, when you leave the bus you say “thank you” to the bus driver, when Americans say “lets meet at the first floor” they mean the ground floor of a building and the second floor would be the first floor. Americans are very enthusiastic about everything, they “love” a lot of things – people, music, clothes and a lot of things are “amazing” and “insane”. When in Germany someone says that he/she loves a person then that person really is his/her most favorite person. I was surprised how many people Americans said to “love” someone but spend relatively less time with that person. Furthermore, I was surprised by the immense use of plastic – at events of the University, in the restaurant, supermarket or at home, the people I met use mainly plastic bags, plastic plates, and plastic cutlery and throw it away after using it. During the semester I noticed something which I already heard before coming to the US: People consume a lot. If you need something you just buy it. I never heard an American saying “I do not have money”. It might be that I just met people who always have the money or that people actually put such a high value on money that they would feel embarrassed to say that they do not have enough for a certain activity. But all in all, I met a lot of very nice Americans so far and I am happy to spend one more semester with them.

A typical weekday:

Monday: Wait for the third alarm on my phone (8:45 am), try to get up, shower, breakfast, bike five minutes to class. Lecture: Terrorism (50 minutes). Take a seat in the big lecture hall, talk to your friend and leave right after class (I never got to know someone new during a lecture. Students go there, listen and leave right afterward). After the lecture bike to Grainger Hall (Business school), sit in the study hall and try to study 30 pages in one hour (never made it) before the next lecture starts at 12 pm. Go to the International business Lecture (50 minutes) and bike 800 meters to the Terrorism Discussion (50 min). Get involved in discussions on how to prevent terrorism and think about why Guantanamo still exists. Afterward, bike (yes, a lot of biking but Madison is very biker friendly) to the next lecture, Politics in South East Asia (50 min). Bike to the Rathskeller, order a Mushroom Swiss Burger and enjoy free time for an hour. Then work from 5 pm to 9 pm at the Rathskeller at the grill. Bike home, cook something, talk to your roommates and fall asleep at 11 pm. Yes, Mondays were quite stressful in the first semester.

BUT the other weekdays were more relaxed and Fridays were always free. Between or after the classes we went to the Lutheran Campus to enjoy free coffee and cookies, had a drink at the memorial terrace with a view on the lake, had hockey practice or went to the gym. On Thursday evenings we always met with a couple of people at someone’s house and went to a Bar afterward, at which we met nearly every week with other students. The nightlife, in general, is great in Madison, there were always events on the weekends.

The difference to the class schedule in Germany is that most lectures and seminars are only 50 minutes long in Madison. That is very helpful because I can focus for 50 minutes straight whereas I had difficulties with 90-minutes-lectures in Freiburg.

The schedule for my second semester will look pretty much the same. My classes start at 8:50 am and I will work on Mondays and Wednesdays for 4 hours at the restaurant. I will not have any classes on Friday.

One event I will not forget was Thanksgiving. Me and two friends were lucky to get invited by a friend to join her and her family on Thanksgiving in Chicago. The family was very kind, the dinner was quite impressive, and we had a very nice Thanksgiving weekend at their house. It felt like Christmas – just without presents. Our friend and her siblings sang a few songs, and everyone joined when they started with “amazing grace”. After a few drinks, her mother who is into drumming gave us all drums (our friend already warned us that there might be a drum circle) and we did our best to not completely mess up the rhythm. Other impressive events were the weekend trips we did to Chicago, Toronto or to the Niagara Falls.

“I miss...”

First of all, I obviously miss my family and friends back in Germany. It is quite a distance so it might be kind of difficult to go home for the weekend. But I do not regret spending two and not just one semester abroad and it is not that bad that I think about going home every week.

Some other things that I miss: Cheap food (something like Döner), clubs that do not close at 2 am, techno music, soccer, German punctuality, fewer assignments in classes.

One more thing I would like to say:

Temperatures in Madison vary greatly. When I arrived it was very warm – we jumped into the lake, stayed outside until late and went to class by bike. Also, it has rained not more than 15 days in the first semester. Since January, however, it is very cold. Right now, January 29th, we just received a mail that class got canceled for tomorrow because it is so cold. So cold that it is going to be even warmer in Antarctica tomorrow... -33°C and with the wind, it is going to be more than -43°C . Yes, that is unbelievable and happened the last time about 20 years ago. I obviously never experienced something like that. But the atmosphere in the city is still great as well as the humor of UW students – students come to class with skiers, suggest to move to Antarctica for tomorrow to enjoy the warm weather and pressure the University to finally cancel class because it will be so cold and after the University finally announced that class will be canceled everyone will go out tomorrow evening because no one has class the next morning... Also, the sun is shining, and the sun shines a lot in Madison!