

University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

International Study Program (ISP), Spring 2011

I am writing this report further to my participation as an exchange student in the ISP program at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland during the Spring 2011 term. The ISP program is designed exclusively for international MBA students coming to the University of St. Gallen from a broad variety of countries all over the world.

It was definitely a unique and enormously valuable opportunity for me to live and study in the old town of St. Gallen which unites in one place both breathtaking scenic beauty of nature and over 1000 years of history. The academic broad insights into theory and practice of doing business in Europe together with the communication experience with so many new people I met here, added new perspectives to my vision and substantially enriched me both on professional and personal levels. It was one of the most interesting and fascinating periods in my life! I came back to Israel with lots of good memories and thousands of photos!

The City of St. Gallen

St. Gallen is the capital of the canton St. Gallen in Switzerland situated in its north-eastern part. It is located in very close proximity to Swiss borders with the neighbouring Germany, Austria and Lichtenstein. St. Gallen is a large urban agglomeration with the population of about 73,000 residents. It is one of the highest cities in Switzerland (around 700 meters above sea level) and has the highest railroad bridge in Europe. The town is located between Lake Constance and the mountains of the Appenzell Alps with the highest peak Santis Mountain at 2,502 meters, to which I paid a visit to see the fantastic views of the Alps from the top of Santis! I really enjoyed hiking in St. Gallen – Lake Constance region that reveals the most picturesque views and marvel Alpine panorama. In addition, there is also what to see in the town of St. Gallen which is unique due to the Abbey of St. Gall, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List that contains the renowned medieval library with its oldest texts dating 9th-century. The University of St. Gallen is situated at the top of a hill and though there are bus lines available that can take you up the hill, I personally preferred walking there by foot from the downtown through walking stairs or trails.

St. Gallen ISP program

The University of St. Gallen is considered one of Europe's top business schools. It organizes two rotations for the ISP program in the course of the year: one in autumn and one in spring. The ISP Spring 2011 Group comprised 28 students that study in United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, Chile, Israel, South Africa, Switzerland, and Singapore. The number of different nationalities represented within the group was even greater than the number of the aforementioned countries of study: United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, South Africa, Brazil, Columbia, Chile, Israel, Croatia, Nigeria, Greece, Ukraine, Japan, China, and Singapore. The ISP program that lasted 10 weeks was highly dynamic and intense. Along with the core and elective courses, there were many company tours and institutional visits organized which constituted an excellent supplement to the theoretical platform. During the program we visited different companies within Switzerland and Germany such as, inter alia, Nestle (Vevey), BMW (Munich), La Roche (Basel) and IBM Industry Solutions Lab (Zurich), as well as paid a visit to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Court in Luxembourg. The factory tours provided a wonderful opportunity to get first-hand insights into the internal world of a broad mix of industries and allowed an exposure to introduction presentations highlighting main activities of these multinationals.

The academic workload of courses, all conducted in English, was quite substantial however doable and offered a splendid opportunity to gain practice in both team and individual presentations. The program consisted of mandatory core courses and elective courses. The core courses included subjects as follows: European Corporate Governance, European Cultural History, Leadership in European Companies, Strategic Management, and Team Building: Leadership and Team Competencies. In addition to the above core curriculum, I accomplished three of the four proposed elective courses: Europe's Business Environment, European Business Law and Global Managerial Communication. The courses description can be found and viewed via the following link:

http://www.unisg.ch/~media/Internet/Content/Dateien/Studium/Austauschprogramme/Incoming%20Studierende/ISP/Einlageblatt_ISPBroschuereFall2011_Spring2012.ashx?fl=en

We had leading Professors of the St. Gallen University among our lecturers. I particularly enjoyed the following classes: Europe's Business Environment, European Business Law and Corporate Governance.

In parallel with the major program, there is also an optional German language class which I highly recommend to take despite the additional hours of studies. The course allows grasping basic language skills and the ability to better understand surroundings. Using such simple words as Grüezi ("שלום") or Dankeschön ("תודה") greatly facilitates and opens communication with local inhabitants.

I also joined the “Buddy System” that the St. Gallen University offers for the exchange when each incoming exchange student is assigned a local student to welcome and coach you in Switzerland and help you with any query you may have in the course of your studies. The “Buddy System” ensures your integration in the social life at the University during your stay in Switzerland and mediates contacts to other local students. The “Buddy Community” organizes plenty of social events and tourist trips where you can meet with the local Swiss students and other exchange students studying in St. Gallen. Among the Buddy System initiatives were: trip to the Lake Constance and Thermal SPA, Lucerne, Lausanne, Visit of the oldest bank of Switzerland - Wegelin Bank, Ski weekends, Ice-skating, Fondue evening and Bowling night.

I most definitely recommend using this tool and joining the “Buddy” network which allowed me to get to know Swiss students and acquire precious friendships.

Accommodation

You may search for housing in St. Gallen on your own but that requires time and being familiar with the region. It is also worth to keep in mind that most apartments offered for rent are generally not furnished. I chose to arrange housing through the service of the University Housing Office which locates furnished housing for exchange students in advance for a one-time fee, taking into consideration special preferences and requests (private studio apartments or flat with roommates, location, non-smoking/smoking, etc.). Students of our group were located mostly in apartments for 5 persons while each student has their own room and other facilities (kitchen, bathroom, etc.) are shared, or alternatively in individual studios. As my preference was to live close to the center and with other students, my apartment was situated in the downtown, just 5 minutes walk from Marktplatz in the city center, 15 minutes walk from the main train station and 20 minutes walk from the university. Other students that preferred living close to the University were located up the hill. The apartment I stayed at was for five students providing five fully furnished individual rooms containing bed, writing desk, chair, cupboard, washbasin, shelves, plus shared shower and two toilettes, large kitchen and living room. We had wireless Internet connection from every room in the house. There was also a separate laundry room within the apartment. I would advise using the assistance of the Housing Office, as the other exchange students who used their services were also satisfied with the apartments they got.

Travelling

Upon my arrival to Switzerland I purchased a half-price card, “Halbtax Abo”, which allows train, bus and ferry trips within the country for half price and also entitles you to a 25 per cent discount on travel from Switzerland to Germany and Austria. This was definitely worth it because I traveled a lot! Besides, there were numerous train rides for company visits organized for the ISP group during the study period for which we received a reimbursement but according to half price expenditures. The Swiss train system is very efficient and punctual. It was very convenient to travel by train and the views are so beautiful. I managed to travel all around the country including: The Alps and Santis mountain, Schaffhausen and the Rhine Falls (Rheinfall), Zurich, Lucerne, Montreaux, Lausanne, Geneva, Appenzell, Bern, Basel, Davos, etc. Since you can get all the needed info on the railway site (www.sbb.ch) it is possible to plan precisely one day trips for skiing or hiking. In addition to Switzerland, I also traveled to Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein.

Visa

With Israeli passport there is no need for an entry tourist Schengen visa to Switzerland and EU countries with multiple entries as long as your stay is less than three months (90 days). As the ISP program lasted 10 weeks there was no need for visa arrangement and registration at city hall in St. Gallen upon arrival. Any visa extensions beyond the program duration are at your own responsibility.

Weather

The ISP Spring term falls mainly on winter months starting in early January and ending in March. Nevertheless, we were fortunate to have great weather for a quite long period in January and February! It was plus 10 and even 15 degrees Celsius. What struck me most is that when snow melts, you can see green grass everywhere around! There were also cold days and snowing but the winter is mild with bright sky and often sunshine and no winds. We had only two rainy days in late March but most of the time enjoyed sunny days. During the last two weeks of March the spring arrived and it was very warm, up to plus 21 degrees Celsius! So while coming to St. Gallen don't forget your sunglasses – you might need them in St. Gallen as well!

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