

*Report of Experiences*

**University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**

Oct 2013 - Feb 2014

## **Accommodation**

My friend and me, we shared a room in a big house of a family with one young child. The contact was made through their friends in Germany so that we did not have to search for an apartment or rooms. The house was huge and we had enough space as we could also use the living room and the kitchen and had our own bathroom. I can definitely recommend to live with locals. It was nice to get into contact with different aspects of American everyday life that we would otherwise not have touched e.g. school. And in addition to that the family was very welcoming and always helpful with any problems.

The house was located in a quiet living area next to a little park and two supermarkets which could be reached by foot. There were other shops as well and we could even walk to the mall. That was very nice because we did not have a car and although the bus system in Ann Arbor is not bad it was good not to be depending on it for grocery shopping.

We used the bus to get to work which worked perfectly well once we figured out the system and the time range in which the buses arrive at the stops. We could use the bus with our university ID and did not have to pay for it. For longer trips outside of the town it would have been nice to have car. I can understand that most people have one as the ways seem to be longer than in Germany and everything is arranged mostly for cars. We were often the only pedestrians outside the downtown area and sometimes could not go where we wanted to because there were no sidewalks. But from all I heard about other cities in the US, it is far worse in other places and it was only a minor problem for us.

## **Everyday life and spare time**

The everyday life was dominated by work. But there was still some time left to explore some of the many bars, restaurants and cafes Ann Arbor has to offer. There is big variety of food styles including vegetarian restaurants and breweries. Ann Arbor also has movie theaters, museums, a farmer's market and a lot of small shops that sell local art among other things. The usual clothing stores like "H&M" and "Forever 21" are located in the mall outside the city center, so that the downtown area is reserved for more unique shops which I liked a lot. I often walked from the downtown bus station to the medical campus with my lab and always enjoyed it no matter which route I took. It is different from German cities in that sense that there is more space. Houses often stand alone and have a garden although they are close to the city center. And there are a lot of squirrels and chipmunks to entertain you! I always felt safe in Ann Arbor but I generally avoid lonely places when it is dark.

The International Office of the university organizes a lot of activities not only but especially for foreign students. That includes trips to an outlet center, to Chicago, to Detroit or to a football game in the famous stadium of the university in Ann Arbor. By that it was possible to leave the city without renting or having your own car which I really appreciated.

It was always easy to talk to people and most of them were friendly and helpful. We got to spend a typical thanksgiving with another American family. I felt like people were welcoming and in general more polite and positive. Sometimes I missed the directness in the communication but if I was there for a longer time I would probably also better understand what people say indirectly.

### **Preparation for the visa**

I sent my application at the beginning of January 2013 for the internship from October 2013 through February 2014. In February/March the preliminary work for the visa application began and I was glad that I started so early. I did not have to assign a Designated Sponsor Organization (DSO) with issuing the forms that I needed for the visa application as the University of Michigan can do that. The whole process took some time but I could always ask when I was unsure and I was always told what to do and what to hand in. In May I made my appointment at the embassy in Berlin and only after receiving my visa I booked my flights. I was a little nervous about the appointment and the questions I might be asked but in the end there was nothing to worry about and everyone was very friendly. The website of the embassy gives detailed instructions for how to get a visa and if you follow them and start early there should be no problem.

### **Practical work**

My lab consisted mostly of master and PhD students and one lab technician (who also has a master's degree) and the principal investigator (PI). My project was part of the work for the PhD thesis and was about creating a specific viral construct following a similar already published protocol which had to be adapted. The project contained different aspects of virology and always had clear steps and goals. I liked the project a lot and I could work relatively independently on it after a while. I might have been even more independent if I had insisted on it because especially in the beginning they were not sure how much I can do alone and I could have been a little more clear about that. Overall the supervision was very good. I could ask questions at anytime and everyone was willing to help.

The lab was very organized and well equipped. I enjoyed working there a lot and I was more than happy that I had chosen this lab. It was a very friendly and constructive atmosphere where people talked about their work and helped each other out for example if someone could not be there on the weekend but something had to be done. We also met a couple of times outside the lab.

The working hours were flexible, some people came early in the morning and left earlier and some came only late and stayed longer. But they all occasionally worked on the weekend which I also did every now and then, although I would not have had to do it.

There were regular lab meetings with other virology labs where results were presented and discussed. In addition to that there were a lot of seminars about a variety of topics in the field of immunology and microbiology with interesting and renowned presenters from other universities. I especially liked this a lot. It was good to hear people talking about related but different topics and I got some ideas about what I might be interested in doing in the future.

There was also a number of non-scientific get-togethers in the department which was nice to meet and talk to people from other labs.

### **Conclusions**

I had very good time in Ann Arbor and I learned a lot about the USA and Germany. Although Ann Arbor is not representative for all the US I think it was the best place for me to go to. My lab was great and as was the university in general and the city. From traveling during my stay and conversations I learned that the USA is more diverse than I had expected. I feel like I can understand this country better than before and at the same time also appreciate some things in Germany more than before.