

# My experience report from the IISER, Pune

At the computational neuroscience lab with Dr. Suhita Nadkarni

September till December 2015

## Preparation

Not having done any stay abroad after school or Bachelors, I was very keen on the opportunities for a foreign exchange during my Masters studies in Göttingen. After attending the presentation of Dr. Anke Schürer and 2 alumni on the possibilities to go abroad given by the Biology Department, I found India to be very tempting. So I teamed up with a fellow student of my batch from my master in 'Developmental, Neural, and Behavioral Biology (DNB)', who was also very interested in the idea of going abroad, to organize the stay together. The approach of planning and organizing the whole undertaking together was quite comforting to me and helped against the culture shock at the beginning.

Since the DNB master is rather a research master, we decided to do an internship at the IISER (Indian Institute for Science Education and Research) rather than course work at Pune University. I applied for a position in Suhita Nadkarni's Computational NeuroBiology Lab. The mail with the acceptance and letter of invitation came fast, so that I could easily apply for the DAAD fellowship 'A New Passage to India'. The fellowship was granted and I received around 2200 € of funds in multiple parts before the start of the internship in the beginning of September 2015.

The most tiresome part of the preparations was the application and grant for the visa. All visa for residents in Lower Saxony have to be processed by <http://www.igcvisa.de/>. We applied for a student visa, which required tons of documents (e.g. copy of your birth certificate, scans of your parent's IDs, declaration of suretyship from the parents, ...). Also, on a central website for all visa applications, an online form has to be filled in. Those questions were also quite annoying and some fields not clear without explanation. [This document](#) helped me in clicking through the form. After all documents and the passport photos in the weird format of 5x5cm (it costs 10 € to let 4 of them to be taken in Hamburg and the machine there is really bad, so better let them be taken somewhere else!) were sent in along with the passport by post. It took only a few days to get the notice that the visa was granted. Before, we called the agency multiple times though to ask questions about the form and documents and got very little helpful information. Furthermore, the validity of the visa starts from the day of acceptance (fortunately the agency called me before issuing the visa and let me postpone that by some days so that my travel plans were unaffected) and not from the day of entry.

For the vaccinations and health check, I managed to get a form signed by the dean of the Biology department that the trip was relevant for my studies and hence the medical provision would be carried by the UMG. After a general medical check-up with blood test, I

received a plan for my vaccinations, which I managed to fulfil within 2 months. Additional vaccinations against Japanese encephalitis and cholera were paid subtracting the 'Selbstbeteiligung' by the TK after filing in a request at the respective office at the Z-Mensa.

I imagine the oral vaccination against Cholera to be quite helpful, since diarrhea was a common phenomenon for me in India. The hygienic standards are quite different than the ones in Germany and confronting your stomach with that vaccine in advance made me feel a bit better. Also from the UMG, we were equipped with a comprehensive medical care package. Aside from disinfectants, antibiotics and a malaria remedy to be taken after the infection, also activated charcoal tablets were included, which have proven to be very efficient for me. Every time my stomach started to feel funny in India, I took the recommended amount and kept taking them until I started to recover. Most incidents of mild food poisoning were cured in my case that way.

We went to the STA travel office in Göttingen together to book the flights. Since I was very keen on keeping travelling India (and returned only at the end of March back to Germany), I did not book the flight back. For me, that was the right choice, also since I booked a very cheap flight back with Emirates for 260 € to Frankfurt only 1 month prior to flying back. The flight to India on the other hand cost 340 €. Flying back to India again this summer for a summer school, I notice that the prices vary quite a lot, depending on the season. I strongly recommend to book the flights online and find the best deals with e.g. [kayak](#), [Google Flights](#) and [skyscanner](#).

Before going to India, I opened an account at the DKB, since they offer free cash withdrawal abroad. The DKB also would cover fees, which certain banks would take at their ATMs in another country, but just recently crossed that out of their terms. In India, no ATM would charge extra, so I can still recommend it. In Australia however, some ATMs would be charging, most not.

I recommend to pack sunscreen and mosquito repellents. Since most Indian people don't have to worry too much of getting sunburned, you would not find sunscreen in the super market too often. Even worse with mosquito repellents. The UMG gave us some useful information sheets about the diseases you can get and which meds to take against them. And also how to protect yourself from mosquito bites in the first place. Amongst others, they recommended DEET concentrations of at least 20 %, preferably 30 – 50 % (and Icaridin above 20 %) and advised strongly against essential oils (no effect at all). I wasn't able to get any repellent with more than 20 % of any agent. Given that you get these repellents quite cheap at the drugstore in Germany: bring plenty of it along! You can't avoid to get bitten, but the repellent can reduce the bites quite a bit. I also bought a vaporizer for liquid repellents in the room in India. This one proved to be completely useless, letting me end up with a massacre involving 10+ mosquitos in one night in my room in the hostel (the windows in the hostel were protected with fly screens, somehow those bastards found a gap that night).

We chose to come in September when the monsoon was ceasing, so the climate was pleasantly dry, but the landscape still lush. Mosquitos are seemingly always around, even if there is a longer drought.

Furthermore, Indians try to avoid paper since it is a limited resource. Hence toilet paper you get at the super market doesn't come in such a variety as in Germany. The same goes for handkerchiefs. So if you got some space left, you can add some of those too.

I took the Tavel XL package from the Envivas travel insurance, which is, as far as I know, exclusively for TK customers. Since I planned to travel longer, I insured myself for 7 months for about 130 € as far as I remember. Fortunately, I did not have to see a doctor at all during this time, but this way I can't tell how likely they are to pay. At the IISER campus, there are several doctors taking turns to provide assistance on every day of week. I saw some for meds against cold and fever and they were not charging anything. Ask the students though, as far as I remember, they are varying in quality a bit, so you might want to check when to go to see whom.

The hostel was just raising their prices when I came back to visit my friends in March. Now it is 400 rupees / day if you lend their linen and 250 rupees / day if you bring your own pillow?, pillow cover, bed sheet and blanket. Since you can buy those things very cheap at e.g. D-Mart in Pune, I strongly suggest bringing your own thin blanket and buy a pillow and the other linen if needed there.

## **Life at IISER**

### **The Hostel**

Though I was still doing my master, I was given a room at the 'PhD hostel' upon contact with Naresh Sharma. He is the coordinator for the international students at IISER, which aren't too many. I think we were at most 5 German students upon 1000+ Indian students, so you really get to know the locals quite well! In the PhD hostel, you have washing machines on each floor as well as water purifiers to fill up your water bottle, since tap water isn't always drinkable. In contrast to the 'undergraduate hostel', for the students in their bachelor-master combined studies, you get one room all for yourself.

If not already at your room, you can get a LAN cable from the hostel manager, to whom you also pay your hostel fees (quite on a flexible basis... I paid it monthly). Internet gets quite slow in the evening, when most students are at the hostel. I used Skype along with a subscription to call landline numbers in Germany (400 minutes for ~1,75 € / month) to call my parents and friends. It was mostly working all the time despite the slow connection. When I was lucky, I could have a video connection as well.

### **Research group**

The supervisor assigned to me at Suhita Nadkarni's group was Nishant Singh, a PhD student. I came to form a close friendship with him and we're still in regular contact. He and the other members of the lab included me very fast and warm-hearted into their team. With them, I got to watch 'The Martian' and 'StarWars – the force awakens' and 'Good bye Lenin!' in the cinema and was also hanging out with some of them after work. This way, I came to

know a lot about the Indian culture and manners and customs in the country. That helped a great deal to experience the country while travelling and made up for the annoying people trying to fleece you. Knowing that there are actually people that are very open and sincere prevented me from judging the country only by the people you see on the road.

The research itself was quite interesting to me. Having just completed the 'systems biology' module in Göttingen, I was not too familiar with the topic. Suhita let me choose one out of 3 interesting topics for my project and Nishant did a great job in introducing me to the methods to be used.

## **Culture**

Hanging out with the students from the institute was a great experience. But of course, you stick out like a sore thumb and draw quite some attention to you.

The food of course, is just amazing. The mess (Mensa) is quite decent, but also some families in the close vicinity offer home cooked food to students and ultimately eating at your friends place when invited home is simply the best. Street food is very tasty too (especially Pani Puri or Dabhelli), but better take some locals along cause hygiene is low and your stomach at risk.

Over the weekends, it's quite feasible to do some short trips. My group took me, and also the other German students at the IISER, along for a lab outing to the caves of Ajanta and Elora. Also a trip to Mumbai and visiting the district of Colaba proved to be pleasing. Those travel destinations are definitely worth a visit. In Germany, I got myself the Lonely Planet travel guide to India, other guides should be fine too. While traveling that guide was most valuable to find cheap and good hotels, avoiding tourist traps and read about the sights worth visiting.

Within Pune, it's best to travel by auto rickshaw, but always ask them, if they go 'by meter' (taximeter), otherwise they'll charge you thrice the price. You might end up stopping multiple drivers till one agrees though. If they don't know about the IISER, tell them that it's next to NCL (National Chemical Laboratory, which neighbors IISER) in Pashan, Pune.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back, the time I spent at the institute greatly contributed to my personal development and cultural knowledge. As my stay was coming to an end, I realized more and more that the phrase 'India competence', as used to describe the goal of the DAAD fellowship, actually got something to it.

So don't hesitate! For getting to know a new, colorful and crazy culture, with which at least I fell in love with, the opportunity to go abroad with the close cooperation between Göttingen and Pune, is perfect!