

Field Report India 2013

Name: [REDACTED]

Program of study: M.Sc. Microbiology and Biochemistry

Semester: 3

Guest Institute: Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research (IISER) Pune

City: Pune Country: India

Period of stay: end of August until beginning of December 2013

1. Preparation (Planning, Organization, Application) and Arrival

The way of applying for an 3-month exchange in India was quite simple with the help of Maren Büttner and the DAAD program „A New Passage to India“.

First, I applied for the DAAD scholarship at the beginning of December to be able to go to India at the end of summer. I had a talk with Maren Büttner about which Institute or University would suit best for me being a microbiologist. We came to the conclusion that Pune with either its University or the IISER in Pune would be the best choice. I could give a ranking on the DAAD scholarship application of my most favourite Institutes. I ranked Pune University over IISER Pune, but in the end I decided for the IISER. About 2 months after my application for the scholarship I got an email telling me that I receive a scholarship over 2 month. The scholarship for only two instead of three month was totally sufficient. Living in India is very cheap. Food, clothes, transport, everything is way cheaper than in Europe. Although I heard that especially in Pune the rent for a flat is about the same as in Göttingen.

As soon as I got the acceptance of the scholarship I started the send application letters to several labs at the IISER in Pune.

Anmerkung vom Studienbüro: Zuerst Labor am IISER Pune finden (bei der Suche ist das Studienbüro behilflich. Bitte kontaktieren Sie uns). Danach erst Bewerbung zum A New Passage to India einreichen.

I soon got an offer of Mayurika Lahiri's lab. She wrote that I could join her lab for 10 weeks. I accepted her invitation and stayed in contact with her until I finally reached Pune.

In order to spend time in India, I had to apply for a visa about 2 months in advance of my trip. There are different companies for different federal states in Germany. One has to send the application to the company responsible for your domicile address. My domestic address is still Mannheim in Baden-Württemberg; therefore I had to apply at Cox and Kings GmbH in Munich. Cox and Kings is responsible for visa applications from people who are domestic in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. I decided to apply for a "student visa". I did not have any problems with the application and about 3 weeks later I received my visa. With the student visa it is very important to get registered in India within 14 days of arrival. This caused a bit of a problem since there haven't been many exchange students at IISER Pune before. But anyway, if you don't get registered in time, you have to pay a "late fee" which is about 2000 rupee (23 euro). No panic if you cannot make it in time. This registration is very important when you leave India. They will check at the airport for your registration and in the worst case they won't let you get on the airplane. So make sure, if the visa you apply for has this paragraph of getting registered.

On the day of my arrival I already got to know a bad side of India. Most of the planes going to India arrive in the evening or at night. I was unlucky and made the mistake to grab a cab at the airport, which try to fool me. I was brought to a more expensive hotel than I wanted. I was tired and it was late, so I accepted this cheating. But to not make the same mistake I recommend taking a pre-paid taxi and really insisting of bringing one to a specific hotel that had been chosen in advance. I arrived in Delhi, which is quite up north. If I had landed in Mumbai, Mayurika Lahiri would have sent me a cab to pick me up. So, stay in touch with your supervisor to talk about such things.

2. Accommodation

Once I arrived in Pune everything went well. They took really good care of me at the IISER. I got an apartment, which I shared with another girl from the same program. We did not have to pay for the

accommodation at the IISER as well as for the food served in the canteen. Our apartment had two bedrooms, a bathroom and kind of a kitchen. The kitchen only consisted of shelves, a fridge and a sink, but we asked for a kettle, an electric cook top, plates and pans, which they gave us the same day.

It was really comfortable living at the IISER. They quite regularly cleaned your apartment and once at a time put us bottled water in the fridge.

The communication with the staff at IISER was sometimes a bit challenging, but they were always friendly and tried to keep you as comfortable as possible.

3. Studies

The lab work at the IISER turned out to be quite exhausting to me. Not because of the enormous work I had to handle, but because of the way they worked there. The first two weeks I was not allowed to do anything but watch people doing their experiments. I first had to learn by eyes how to perform cell cultivation and cytotoxicity assays. As I could finally start to work on my own there came up another problem. The whole lab was shifting from the old to the new campus, where I already lived. That meant that the sterile chambers, which I needed could not be used for another 2 weeks. This really threw me back in my research. After shifting was more or less done, I started with my work again. I had a bit of trouble getting in the work flow, because there were often essential things like sterile tips or eppis missing in the lab. The communication within the lab was not perfect. There were rotation plans saying who had to take care of what, but they were hardly followed. The topic I was working on was really interesting; therefore I am a bit disappointed that the actual work on it turned out to be so poor.

4. Leisure

When I was not working in the lab I quite often went to Aundh, which was the area next to the IISER campus. Most of the time I went there with my flatmate or other people I met at the IISER, but it was not a big deal to go by you as well. Indians like to stare at so called « Westerners », because there are not a lot of foreigners in India. But with the time it won't bother you that much anymore and you feel comfortable to go by yourself, at daytime!

At night I never went out by myself. It gets dark quite early at around 5 to 6pm. We often went out for dinner in Aundh, if we couldn't stand the Indian food at the canteen.

Shops are also opened on the weekend, Saturday and Sunday. We sometimes went to the Koregeon Park, a quite touristic place, because of Osho's ashram. There are a lot of Western restaurants, bars and even kind of clubs. The people in Pune are more western orientated as in other parts of India, therefore there is a lot to see and do, if you miss home.

I also visited the city centre quite often. It is a good place to go clothes shopping. You can get both, Western style and Indian style clothes and loads of jewellery.

There are also some malls with cinemas, where you can watch both English and Hindi movies. I watched a nice Hindi bollywood movie. The plot is most of the time quite easy to understand although they speak Hindi. And the atmosphere is totally different than in Germany. They love to applaud and scream at exciting parts of the movie, which is very entertaining.

5. Conclusion

My conclusion of my stay in India is a bit controversy. On one hand it was a totally new experience for me. India is really nothing like Europe or anything I have seen before. I got to know so many strange, but funny things. I certainly learned to be even more independent and assertive. I had the chance to travel around India a bit with some friends and got to see wonderfully surreal places. India is for sure a very beautiful country with warm-hearted inhabitants.

On the other hand, the communication and cultural differences sometimes were extremely hard to overcome. You often have to defend yourself (not physically of course) to not get tricked. And the permanent attention that is paid to you sometime drove me crazy.

To put it in one sentence:

India is a lovely place, but you have to be prepared to face unpredictably strange situations.