

# **Study Abroad Report IISER Pune, India**

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## **Application**

I first got to know the IISER (Indian Institute for Science, Education and Research) Pune at the study abroad information session from Dr. Anke Schürer in Fall 2014. After this I decided to apply for an internship. I send a list of three possible groups and a letter of motivation for my highest prioritized group as well as my CV to Dr. Schürer. She forwarded everything to Ms Chandrika from the Göttingen office in Pune and she forwarded it to the IISER. Everything went very quickly and only one day later I got a positive reply from Aurnab Ghose. Also Mr. Ghose has sent a letter of invitation very quickly to me, so that it was possible for me to apply for the DAAD scholarship “A New Passage to India” in time. I was granted the scholarship, which granted me around 2200 Euros in total and I received the money around one month prior to my arrival in India.

## **Travel, Insurance & Visa**

There was a whole bunch to organize before leaving to the IISER. Vaccinations had to be done quite early. I started with it in June, but it would have been better to start even earlier. I had vaccinations be done from the UMG. Therefore I had to get an appointment for the works doctor at the UMG. For this, I had to wait a month and I had to fill a form prior to my visit, which was signed by Dr. Schürer. It was possible, to get various vaccinations at once, so I got all required vaccinations in two months. Also visa application was done two months prior. Therefore I had to register online at the Indo-German Consultancy Services of Hamburg. This is a service company handling all visa affairs for the Indian embassy in Hamburg. Everyone has to look up the embassy, which is responsible for him/her. This usually goes for the state one is permanently residing in. For Niedersachsen it's Hamburg. I had to provide a lot of information in the application form. The online form is a struggle; I had to fill in data three times, since the server always crashed before I could submit the form. They also demand passport photos in 5x5cm. If possible, I would recommend doing only two, since you will only need this format for the visa application. Make the normal passport photos in India (you will need a lot, for example for an Indian SIM card), since it is much cheaper there. I send the application with my valid passport to Hamburg and wasn't granted the student visa, I was applying for, but a research visa, which had cost around ten euros more. My study colleague, with whom I also travelled to the IISER, got my passport with the visa for me. We did not have any problems with this kind of visa in India and we did not even have to sign at the FRO, since this type of visa did not require this and we did not stay longer than six months. Actually one should always keep in mind that the visa starts with the date it is granted, not the date of arrival. I took the health insurance from the ADAC, since I am a member and it was quite cheap and also the goods and services were decent. This was done very quickly, so several days prior is enough for the health insurance. I took the Visa card from DKB. It was sufficient to have a VISA and I could withdraw money from every ATM (only problem was, when the ATM didn't have money anymore, which was regularly the case at IISER campus). For applying for a VISA card, two months prior is enough. I booked the flight via statravel already 5 months in advance. It's always the best to book the flight as early as possible, since it only gets more and more expensive

over time. I didn't book the flight back with the flight to India together, which was a huge mistake, since it cost me even more (around 360-380 Euros per flight). At that time I didn't know the exact time, when I will come back, but it would have been better to book it already, with the option of changing the booking for the same airline up to two times. There are several airlines providing this service, it costs a little extra, but it's worth. Also booking via Internet would be better, since it's cheaper. We've flown with Emirates, which was really amazing, but Lufthansa is good as well. On the way back I've flown with Oman Air, which was also quite good. I can recommend these airlines. We flew to Mumbai over Dubai and landed in the afternoon. This was very important for us, since a lot of flights go to Mumbai to the night. We missed the cab Ms Chandrika has called for us, so we had to take one by our own. This was still cheaper than flying to Pune directly!

## **IISER campus**

Construction work is still going on at IISER campus, but it already looks really good. All the labs are on campus, which is guarded 24/7. Research facilities are well connected and everything is reachable very fast. Library is great and has a lot of useful books. It's also possible to make copies or to scan stuff there, but you need your student ID card (which you receive in the first couple of days). Lectures and symposia are hold in the Lecture hall complex and the guest house is near the main campus. There is a room, which is used as cinema, when the movie club is showing a movie again and the atm is there, too. Faculty members and the director live at the campus as well. Most of the students live in the student's hostel on campus. We also lived in the student's hostel, where everyone got his own room, but had to share bathroom and toilets. Kitchen was not available, but meals were nearly always available in the canteens and were not expensive (around 70 cent for a Thali). Filtered water and washing machines were always available and free. I paid around 70 Euros per month, since I bought my own bed sheets (otherwise it costs extra). Rules on the campus are very strict, since it's a governmental institute. So there are separate floors for boys and girls in the hostel and drugs, smoking and drinking alcohol is strictly forbidden on the whole campus (except of the director's bungalow, where drinking alcohol is allowed). During my stay at the IISER, it was festival season. There was Ganesh Chaturthi, which is celebrated big in Pune in September, the culture festival Karavaan at IISER campus in October and Diwali in November.

## **Working group**

I worked in the neuronal connectivity lab of Dr. Aurnab Ghose. My supervisor was Tanushree Kundu. I usually worked from 10.00-18.00 with slight variations depending on experiments. After 2 weeks of paper reading and technique learning I was allowed to work almost by myself with exception of the microscopes, since one has to pass a class (practical and theoretical) on it and write an exam. Classes are hold around once in a month or in two months. During my stay I couldn't finish this microscope examination due to lack of time. So my supervisor did microscopy work for me and I worked on the cultivation of neuronal cell cultures of chick spinal cord. The project was very interesting, but I was facing various difficulties (contaminations, equipment broke, solutions went out), so I didn't get the results, I was hoping for. But it was interesting to mix solutions manually, where one in Germany would use a solution in a kit (e.g. for RNA purification). I was a member of the lab from the very beginning, so I also attended lab meetings, where I also had to present everything I've done at the end of my internship. I asked Dr. Ghose for free weekends in the very beginning as well. So I did not have to attend the Journal Club on Saturdays (except for my own presentation).

## **cultural experience**

It was really helpful to live in the student's hostel, even if it's not as comfortable as the guest house. But one finds more friends, since most Indians are working whole day, they meet to chat in their rooms in the evening. This is especially true for the girls, who cook together in their rooms. Otherwise people are meeting in the canteen or they are drinking tea during breaks in the institute. Since Indians are working really hard, they spent most of their time in the lab also during the night and on weekends. Most of the people I knew did not have much money so the most popular thing to do during leisure time is to go hiking. There are plenty of opportunities in and around Pune, I recommend Panchavati hills near IISER campus. I experienced a lot during my stay in Pune and also after the internship during my travels to South India. Most of the time, people were warm and very helpful. Family bonds are very strong and people seem to help each other (at least in the families). They are wearing very colorful and bright clothes and are happier than westerners, although they are quite poor in average. Food is the best! Especially for vegetarians (which I am) it's heaven on earth and I highly recommend the veg thalis in Maharashtra in thali restaurants or traditional dinner in a house restaurant near IISER campus. There are a lot of nice festivals for every (Hindu) god and those festivals usually last around 7-10 days, where people are dancing and (especially in Maharashtra) drumming in the evening. Also in many places Hindus live together with Muslims peacefully and so Islam is the second biggest religion in India. But I had also bad experiences, so there is a huge littering problem. Garbage is lying everywhere and since there is no such thing like a governmental waste disposal, people just burn their waste on the streets. This results in smog along with the fumes of cars and scooters. Although many people use buses, there are still plenty of cars and two-wheelers on the streets and the traffic is very dangerous, since nobody seems to follow any rules. Dogs are everywhere; they even seem to have developed a sub-society and are organized in groups and gangs. At the IISER most dogs are vaccinated against rabies and those dogs are wearing black collars. Education is very expensive, so poor people can't afford to send their children to school, I faced many children who were working instead of going to school. Caste system is still important to many Hindus and most of the people are still living after it, which creates discrimination. Women are discriminated as well, since they have (at least) to cover their shoulders and knees (even when going swimming, a bathing suit is admitted as nudity!) and it is still common, that parents have to pay dowries for their daughters.

## **Conclusion**

I had a wonderful time in India and especially at the IISER, with all the friends I made, the experience I gained and the memories I never want to forget. Although it was exhausting for me as a woman to travel around India since I always had to take care, I really want to come back! I can recommend to go to India to everyone! If there are questions, please contact me via E-Mail:

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