

# Life as an exchange student at The University of Sydney

## 1. Going abroad might be the best decision of your life

Hey mate! It is great that you consider studying abroad – Australia might be the coolest place for doing so! In this document I will tell you about my exchange year at The University of Sydney (USYD) during the WiSe2023 and SoSe2024 and elaborate on my experience of studying, living and travelling in Australia. As a Geography student, I had the opportunity to study a range of modules in the field of Geology, Sustainability and Environmental Studies in various locations across the Camperdown/Darlington campus.

## 2. Your preparation for Sydney

The preparation for going abroad can be overwhelming, especially when travelling around the world. The semester before leaving for Australia was experienced as stressful for everyone I talked to, you will need to do your preparations on top of your usual study load and might also need to finish FU-assignments in Sydney. In my case, the semester at USYD commenced just one week after the semester had ended at FU. This can also be an issue for upcoming FU-exams. Your preparation will include enrolling at USYD, finding a place to stay in Sydney, taking an English-language proficiency test, obtaining your Australian plug adapter, getting your health insurance and the Australian visa, making sure that you meet the prerequisites for your aspired units of study as well as asking your FU-advisor if you can receive credits for the modules which you are taking abroad. At USYD, you will receive comprehensive emails which will guide you through the enrolment process. In my case, USYD also offered to acquire the health insurance by Allianz which meets the requirements for the Australian visa on my behalf. Moreover, we were given guaranteed access to one of the University owned accommodation options. I was allowed to stay at the Queen Mary Building, which I will talk about in more detail later. I highly recommend applying for a scholarship. The DAAD, for instance, offers the "[Jahresstipendium für Studienaufenthalte im Ausland](#)", which supported me with 1350 € per month and additional means to cover flight expenses. Do not be scared of the dragging application process – this will both reward you financially and ameliorate your CV and vocational prospects. As far as I know, you do need an Australian bank account if you are working next to your studies. If not, you can use your German bank account. I'd recommend bringing more than one bank card by Mastercard or Visa as I also experienced issues with one of them getting declined out of nowhere. Both Telstra and Optus work for your Australian sim-card, which can be purchased at the airport. Remember: the feeling of actually standing in front of the Sydney Opera House in your first week is worth the hassle.

## 3. The University of Sydney

The University of Sydney is located on Gadigal aboriginal land. A "Gadi" is a type of plant, which you can find at the campus entrance located at Princes Hwy. During welcome week there usually is a "welcome to country" smoke ceremony which, in contrast to an "acknowledgement of country", can only be held by Aboriginal People. Note, that the word "Aborigine" is considered outdated and inappropriate, instead people say "Aboriginal People". In front of the quadrangle you will find the flags of the Aboriginal People, the Torres Strait Islanders and the Australian one. I advocate for dealing with Australia's indigenous history. You can find a great exhibition in the upper level of the State Library of New South Wales and in the Australian Museum.

Studying at The University of Sydney is challenging. In my experience, there is more work to be done than at FU, especially because there are (more) assignments due during the semester with

the final exam usually not determining your whole mark. We came up with the joke that “USYD” actually stands for “U Sleep You Die”. However, the study load definitely depends on the exact module that you are taking. Some modules at FU were more challenging than others at USYD – and the other way around. Studying in Sydney can be really funny - but also frustrating. Some professors speak with a strong Australian accent or try to explain something using English puns, which does not make it easier. I recommend asking a lot of questions and getting involved in your lessons. Being an exchange student means having put a great deal of effort into being allowed to sit in that classroom which makes Uni much more fun and rewarding. The most precious aspect of going abroad are the people you meet along the way and the network which you can build. Make sure to be outgoing, consistent in showing up to your lectures and practicals and talk to your peers. At USYD there are also a range of societies, which introduce themselves during welcome week. Joining Jazz Society was one of my best decisions in Sydney – even though I didn’t even like Jazz before going abroad and literally joined as a joke. You will meet people from everywhere. My parents used to argue that the United Kingdom might be a better place for my exchange year as it would be easier to maintain friendships over that shorter distance. However, I still met heaps of European students, disproving my parents argumentation.

#### 4. The Queen Mary Building

As mentioned earlier, I lived in the Queen Mary Building (QMB), which is part of the university-owned housing system. Within the accommodation I was given my own room with a bed, closet, desk and fridge. The bathroom and kitchen are community based, meaning that you share it with other residents. Hence, it can be hard to find enough private space, which is the biggest drawback of living in the QMB. Still, I highly recommend applying for a student accommodation if you do not have any contacts in Sydney because you will meet countless interesting people in the same situation as you. Moreover, the accommodation team applies pesticides on a regular basis so that it is unlikely that your room gets infested with cockroaches, which are abundant in Sydney. It is also a great feeling of having that reception with people you can talk to, when coming to a new city alone. The accommodation team is also reliable in fixing dysfunctional facilities and there are few things to worry about as a resident, other than your rent. The QMB also has a gym, theatre, hang-out-area and music room in the basement. On the rooftop you can catch great views of Sydney. Again, I recommend being openminded. Engage with other residents and do not be scared to show up to the kitchen or gym alone – usually people are talkative and find themselves in the same situation as you. If you are a runner, like me, you can also enjoy an in-total 13 km run from the QMB to the Opera House and back, going down George Street.

#### 5. Things to do in Sydney

Sydney is an enormous city, being more than twelve times as big than Berlin. There is the “Opal Card” for the public transport system. You might be eligible for a concession as a student, paying only 50 %. However, you can also use credit or debit cards to use the public transport system, paying the full price. Running is a great way of getting to know your neighbourhood. Looking back, running to the Opera House was some of the most fun stuff I did in Sydney. If you are ambitious, you can also run to Manly Beach, which is about 23 km from the QMB and then catch a ferry on the way home. I’d recommend taking a surf lesson. [Let’s Go Surfing](#) offers a great beginner class at Bondi Beach. I made the mistake of trying to surf without any background knowledge and actually got injured on my hand. The ferry rides through Sydney Harbour, which are part of the public transport system, are one of the most fun things to do. Manly Beach is a great destination to surf and nearby you will find Shelly Beach which is a little more idyllic. However, we also experienced a shark alarm here. Therefore, only swim at supervised beaches and follow the instructions given by lifeguards. Another place to go is Hornby Lighthouse which can be reached

through a short walk from the Watsons Bay ferry station. Between May and November you also have the chance to spot migrating whales outside Sydney Harbour. I did this [whale watching tour](#), but be aware that you might experience seasickness after spending four hours on board. Don't miss out on seeing a show in the [Opera House](#). Most recitals are rather expensive but you can also grab cheaper tickets if you do not mind sitting in one of the back seats. There are also tours of the Opera House, which are supposed to be really good. Another recommendation of mine is going on the [Sydney Tower Eye](#), where you can enjoy some of Sydney's best views. You also get a concession as a student. If you are a fan of the movie Finding Nemo, you can trace back the approximate location of the dentist living in "42 Wallaby Way, Sydney, NSW". The address does not exist in reality but it is possible to derive the most realistic place, based on the angle between the dentist, the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge seen in some scenes.

## 6. Wildlife

Australia is home to some of the most magnificent but also dangerous wildlife on the planet. However, within big cities like Sydney you will barely encounter any harmful animals. In my experience, there are more insects and spiders around in a German summer, but if you do encounter something in Australia you should better keep your distance. The biggest shock to me was the amount of cockroaches roaming the streets of Sydney, especially during summertime. If you cannot handle cockroaches, you should not go to Sydney. Perhaps, Melbourne was the only place in Australia where I did not see any. Also, I once actually came across a funnel web spider, the most venomous spider on earth, on a park bench while studying. In Victoria I also saw a Tiger Snake, which is one of the most venomous snakes in the world. Note, that there are more venomous than non-venomous snakes in Australia, so avoid walking through high grass and make noises while hitting the ground with your shoe if you do. Between August and September Magpies, a type of bird, begin to "swoop" people on the street in order to protect their territory. Students are literally getting attacked on the USYD campus during those months. Moreover, avoid driving between dusk and dawn as kangaroos get active during this time. When I was taking a Greyhound-Bus from Sydney to Melbourne we actually hit a grown-up kangaroo in the middle of the night. On Tasmania we also hit a wallaby with our car during nighttime. Hence, make sure to insure your car, if you decide to hire one. Also, take photos of existing scratches on the car before taking it for your ride. Kangaroos can be found almost anywhere outside of bigger cities. If you desperately want to see some, you can go on a daytrip to the Grampians National Park from Melbourne, where they casually hang around in the park of Halls Gap. Around Melbourne and Tasmania you also have the chance of seeing penguins, Phillip Island is supposed to be a great spot for that. I highly recommend checking out the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree Rainforest around Cairns as well. I've been lucky enough to see some wild crocodiles and cassowaries on a guided tour at the Daintree River. If you are travelling into the outback, make sure to get yourself a fly-net as there will be millions of them buzzing around your face.

## 7. Places to see within Australia

There are some places within Australia that I would like to recommend. Firstly, you should definitely visit Melbourne. I personally prefer Sydney over Melbourne but it is worth seeing for sure. The website [Viator](#) offers great day-trips and guided tours for most cities in Australia. In the case of Melbourne I did one to the Twelve Apostles along the Great Ocean Road and one to the Grampians National Park. Both have been amazing, we actually had a glimpse on some wild koalas! It is worth going on one guided day-trip to Canberra to see the parliament house and the war memorial, but apart from that, there is nothing to do in the capital if you do not know any local

people. Secondly, it is worth travelling up the East Coast. On our trip we did stops in Byron Bay, Brisbane, Surfers Paradise in the Gold Coast, Noosa Heads and Hervey Bay at K´Gari. You can find reasonably priced hostels on the website [Hostelworld](#). Generally, I can recommend the YHA Hostels, the one in Brisbane has a cool rooftop terrace. Byron Bay and Noosa Heads are cool places for surfing. The biggest disappointment on the road trip was Surfers Paradise, you should not spend more than two days there as the only cool thing to do is going on the SkyPoint Observation Deck. K´Gari is an interesting island to visit, it is so quaint that you literally wouldn't be surprised to see dinosaurs there. However, I would avoid spending too much time in that area. Unfortunately, there was a tropical cyclone coming through Queensland just when I planned to travel further to the Whitsunday Islands, which are supposed to be mesmerizing. Therefore, I had to turn and head back to Sydney. As mentioned earlier, the Great Barrier Reef is one of the most magnificent things to marvel at on the planet. I booked a flight to Cairns during my mid-semester-break and spent five days in the Bounce Hostel, which is cool if you like to party. Last but not least, the outback is worth a stay as well, especially if you are interested in Aboriginal culture. Uluru is one of the most magical places I have seen in my life. It is likely that there is no better place to see a clear night sky with an uncountable number of stars and the milky way stretching along the whole horizon. There are direct flights to Uluru and to Alice Springs from Sydney. I would recommend going to Alice Springs first and then book a [guided tour to Uluru](#). However, you should be aware that Alice Springs is considered to be the most dangerous place in Australia, due to its high crime rate. There was a couple being robbed in the very same hotel we stayed at, two weeks prior to our arrival, because they did not lock up their room properly. When I was travelling to Melbourne and up the East Coast, I took Greyhound busses, which can be a cool experience to see the country up close and to get a feeling for the long distances. On the other hand, I also made a lot of negative experiences with the company. For instance, one of our drivers fell asleep during a night-haul and almost crashed the bus. Some other friends had the instance of a wheel falling off their bus out of nowhere while being on the road.

## 8. Climate Change

Sydney is 16.000 km apart from Berlin. Travelling down under means being responsible for large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions. My flights between Germany and Australia emitted approximately 20 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, which is 2,6 times the amount that the average German person causes per year. Note, that you will make strong social connections to people in Australia and other countries, making it likely that this exchange will not be your last visit to those places. However, I would like to highlight something that one of our professors mentioned: the difference between your "footprint" and your "handprint". Going abroad can come with an extensive range of benefits that without doubt outweigh the drawbacks, if you make your time abroad count.

## 9. Should you go? Benefits and drawbacks of going abroad

Going abroad was the best decision of my life. Saying goodbye to your family and friends is hard but does not mean having a bad relationship to them. You might realize how much you actually mean to each other and end up having an even better relationship. While being abroad, I realized which people, aspects and activities I actually miss about home and hence, how and where I would like to spend my life. You might also be shocked by how fast one year goes by. On the other hand, going abroad does come with downsides. Firstly, you will miss out on a lot of time with your family and might get really homesick. Secondly, going on exchange is a nightmare in romantic terms. You might not only need to leave your partner behind in Germany but might also fall in love in Australia, which inevitably leads to complicated outcomes. In the end, it is up to the question if you can make your time abroad one that makes you grow as a person and if you have the courage to face the more complicated but more rewarding path over the easier options.