

Students

Study Abroad:

Four Stories

By Leah Pileggi

A semester abroad. Is it the chance of a lifetime, or could it completely scramble your academic schedule? Would it be worth the extra effort and potential extra cost?

Four CMU ECE undergrads have recently experienced a semester or year abroad. Here are their stories.



Mike Kowalski, of Osterville, Massachusetts, spent his junior year in Lausanne, Switzerland at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. "I knew, starting at CMU, that I wanted to go abroad for at least one semester. Junior year seemed convenient." Mike's minor in French helped him decide to study at EPFL since all of his classes would be taught in French. "I chose EPFL because it was technical and francophone. I could use French, and all credits would transfer."

Mike worked with Janet Peters, ECE's Assistant for Undergraduate Education, to arrange his schedule to stay on track for his ECE major. He had the option of taking general courses for credit but decided to take ECE electives and technical courses including Analog Circuits, Digital Wireless Communication, Fundamentals of Semiconductor Devices, Optics and Information Theory. Mike feels that studying abroad for a full year is probably easier than going just for a semester because it makes the scheduling cycle easier to maintain.

EPFL does not offer dorms or campus housing. Mike lived in a building off campus with other students, some of whom were German, Swiss-German, Swiss-French, Belgian and Italian. He chose not to eat the food offered on campus. "What you find in the stores and markets was generally much superior (and cheaper)." He used local transportation to go grocery shopping, and he learned a lot about cooking. "Technical courses were easy [to understand in French]; grocery shopping was hard." He discovered endive and "many different types of potatoes, all pretty good." In restaurants, although he could mostly read the French menus, he "didn't know what it meant in English, or in some cases [didn't believe] that someone would make or eat such a dish." Many bottled waters were available, but Evian was across the lake, and the locals were proud of their water.

Mike feels that his experience was so positive because he had a plan in place before he left, and he had researched the people and culture of the area beforehand including the many different cultural groups who have struggled to coexist within Switzerland for centuries. There was a lot of red tape to work through initially and a foreign bureaucracy to navigate as far as getting his visa, but Mike felt it was all worth it. "Absolutely. It's good to have a diversion from four or more years at CMU, to experience another approach to higher education, to eat good food, to see great landscapes." He uses Skype—computer software that facilitates telephone calls and video conferencing worldwide—to stay in touch with students he met.

After graduation this spring, Mike will be interning at re2 here in Pittsburgh. He then plans to continue at Carnegie Mellon in the Integrated Master's/Bachelor's Degree Program which he hopes to complete in two or three semesters. "I probably would not stay in Pittsburgh as long as I now plan to had I not gone to EPFL."

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EPFL

École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne is located in the La Romandie region of Lausanne, Switzerland. The Dean of the School of Engineering is CMU alumnus Demetri Psaltis. EPFL's foreign student program is a spring, fall or full-year program. Interested ECE students should contact the Office of International Education, in Warner Hall. Check the OIE website at www.ece.cmu.edu/undergraduate/abroad/approved.html.

Ritu Saxena studied in Sydney, Australia from July to December, 2007, the first half of her junior year. "Australia seemed like a really fun and adventurous, as well as scenic place. It was also a place that would be easy to communicate in since they speak English, and the school systems are similar. It was on the top of my list of study abroad locations." Although her semester at the University of New South Wales was more expensive than a semester at Carnegie Mellon, she retained her financial aid.

Ritu, who is from Frederick, Maryland, applied to the school herself. She had found out about the program called "Study Australia" through friends of hers from the University of Maryland.

Because the University of New South Wales offers limited housing, many Australian students commute up to two hours to campus. Ritu had heard that some U.S. students fly over to Sydney without a housing plan and stay wherever they can for a few days until they find a place for the semester. She didn't want to chance that. Instead, through the Study Australia Program, she found a three-bedroom apartment in Bondi Junction, an upscale neighborhood with a view of the Sydney Opera House. She shared the apartment with five other students from Maryland and Seattle. Her rent included a cleaning service. Below her apartment building, there were bus and train stops.

Orientation before classes started included a trip to a rainforest and to the Great Barrier Reef. "In July, the water was still a bit chilly. Near the Reef, many sandbars could be found which looked gorgeous with the hills in the background. The Reef was amazing, even though you could see that many parts of it were dying."

Ritu did not take ECE classes, but she received credit for all six elective classes she took. They included Aboriginal Pop Culture, Modern India, Statistics, Differ-

ential Equations, Psychology and Business Law. Some classes met only once a week. Typically, only two tests were given during the semester, each worth 10 percent of the grade. The final was worth 80 percent.

As for eating out, food portions were small and very expensive. She did some cooking in her apartment. She avoided the tourist foods of kangaroo and crocodile that were available every day. But she discovered "meat pies—basically like chicken pot pies but instead with beef and gravy—which are as popular in Australia as hot dogs are in America."

In planning her trip, Ritu received assistance from OIE and from Janet Peters. Kurt Larsen, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies, helped her with scheduling.

"This experience really opened my eyes to what is outside of the life I have been living. I had become so focused on life in school and academics that I had forgotten what else is out there to be explored," explains Ritu. "I now know that I want to spend a lot of my life just traveling and learning about other people and cultures. This was the most amazing experience of my life to date."

After graduation, Ritu is considering a one-year master's program at Carnegie Mellon or possibly an MBA.



NCTU

National Chiao Tung University is located in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The Dean of Engineering in the College of ECE is Han-Ping "David" Shieh, a graduate of ECE at Carnegie Mellon. For more information about studying at NCTU, contact Susan Farrington, ECE's Director of Alumni and Student Relations, at 412-268-6955.

Bernard Kung, an ECE student from Massachusetts, saw a poster in the department promoting undergraduate study at NCTU, National Chiao Tung University in Hsinchu, Taiwan. He made arrangements to attend the second semester of his sophomore year.

Although Bernard can speak Mandarin Chinese (his parents are from Taiwan), he is not able to read it. NCTU offers a lot of language help to foreign students, but Bernard feels that, after his experience, one does not have to speak Chinese to be able to study in Taiwan.

His semester began in February of 2006 in the College of ECE. Some of Bernard's classes were taught in English, such as Signals and Systems. "I took Logic Design, taught in Chinese and Linear Algebra, [taught in] mixed Chinese-English which I found out that is mostly taken by Chinese students who knew the material, but they wanted to learn the English for the terms and that kind of practice." He took the same course load of technical and math courses that he would have taken at Carnegie Mellon. He met a student from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and some students from Sweden who were there for a full year of study.

Bernard lived in the nicest dorm at NCTU, a graduate dorm set up for foreign students. The cafeteria wasn't great, but he usually ate lunch there. For dinner, he would take a shuttle bus to one of the night markets in the area. "The one in Hsinchu where the university was at was mostly street vendors open

only at night and then stores who were open most of the day. Another night market in Taipei has storefronts but also street vendors extending into the street and taking up most of the space." One adjustment he had to make was to Taiwanese money. Bills of different denominations are different sizes.

In addition to his semester at NCTU, Bernard stayed for a summer internship at Sunplus, a semiconductor/multimedia company located in the nearby Hsinchu Science Based Industrial Park. Using cameras provided by the company, he worked on algorithms and wrote a program to control distortion in photographs.

During his time in Taiwan, Bernard would sometimes travel, staying in hotels whose rates were the equivalent of \$20/night U.S. He visited Taichung, in the eastern middle area of Taiwan, on the recommendation of a co-worker at his internship who went specifically for the seafood. Su Au and Hualien were much more mountainous and rural regions, involving a lot of two-lane driving and a cliff-side highway. These places had "several mochi shops of some renown in Taiwan, mochi being some sort of gelatinous rice pudding treat, originally from Japan."

"Life in Taiwan was a lot more casual and laid back, coupled with much cheaper food" than in the U.S. Bernard also took advantage of the lower drinking age in Taiwan. "It does feel somewhat like getting grounded for a year after coming back."



Laura Pritchard, a senior from the Dominican Republic, spent the spring semester of her junior year in Copenhagen, Denmark. "I came to CMU knowing that I wanted to study abroad at some point. I picked Denmark because I liked the program." The Danish Institute for Study Abroad, or DIS, is affiliated with the University of Copenhagen. Carnegie Mellon is a DIS partner school.

Eva Mergner, Senior Coordinator for Study Abroad and Exchange Programs for Carnegie Mellon's Office of International Education, helped Laura organize her semester. From Denmark, people in the DIS program helped her with her residency application and housing information.

Laura lived in a Danish student Kollegium, a housing complex similar to a coop. Laura had her own room and bathroom. But the residents within Kollegium blocks organize themselves depending on their communal needs, such as sharing the kitchen. She enjoyed meeting the Danish students and found it easier than if she

had lived elsewhere. She also met a small number of students from China and Russia. She keeps in touch with one of the Danish girls she met.

All of the classes Laura took transferred in to Carnegie Mellon. She took one ECE elective and four courses that apply toward her International Relations degree, including Nordic Mythology, 20th Century European History and Russian Literature.

As for food, "Food related things that struck me was the fact that in Denmark they call what we call a Danish (i.e., the pastry) 'Vienna bread.' It was one of the first things I learned how to say so I could stop at the bakery on my way to class and get one for breakfast. And the Danes love licorice, a lot."

Laura surprised herself by hopping on a train to Amsterdam without knowing anyone there, speaking the language, or knowing where she would stay, an adventurous decision she would never have made before.

"My time abroad made me more self-reliant, assertive and independent."

Laura plans to stay at Carnegie Mellon for an Integrated Master's/Bachelor's Degree.

