

My Erasmus experience in Groningen

Groningen is the living dream of a student city. In the following I want to tell a bit, why at last this city fully convinced me to be so, even if in the beginning it wasn't my first choice. To be fair, I had no idea what studying in the Netherlands would be like, however, for me it didn't feel 'far enough' from Germany and I dreamed of moving to one of the southern European countries like Spain, Italy or Greece to spend the summer semester.

I'm studying in a European master's program for Renewable Energies, though I had options to go to the south, the selection of my specialization in sustainable mobility solutions, which was better matching my background, brought me to Groningen. A city, which so far, I had never heard of.

The city is medium sized with 230.000 inhabitants. What is very special about it, though, is its number of students. Over 50.000 young people live there to attend one of the two big universities: The Royal University of Groningen (RUG) and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences. This means over one fifth of the population are students! And you can really feel that! Wherever you go, you will see many young faces in the parks, the libraries, the cafes or just in the supermarket.

Most likely you will also notice a lot of foreign languages, as many of the students are internationals. I was astonished by the openness of the Dutch inhabitants. Not only do they have very good English language skills throughout all age classes, they are also most willing to use them. During my semester I had never any problems of communicating with locals. On the other hand, I must admit, that this made me quite lazy to learn Dutch, as communication was so easy in English. Most people will switch too English as soon as they notice you're not a local. However, I'd recommend learning at least a few words like hi ('hallo'), thank you ('dank u wel') and have a good day ('Fijne dag'), the people will reward you with a smile.

What in general delighted me encountering the locals, was their bright mood. Eventually it's because I'm from the South of Germany and people are known to be a little closed and maybe even a bit grumpier, that I experienced the Dutch as extraordinary friendly and relaxed. The whole atmosphere of the city is welcoming and chilled, I enjoyed that a lot.

The oldtown of Groningen is surrounded by a small waterway with many house boats and historic ships, which gives it the beautiful Dutch look, you might think of as a tourist. It has many small streets with picturesque old buildings.

As the heart of the city it is very lively. Many buildings of the Royal University are located here, which can be easily noted by the number of students passing by. Don't miss out on the various cafes surrounding the university buildings! Really all of them are great and serve amazing coffee and cake. Something that fast become noticeable in my expenditures but was definitely worth it.

Maybe the most important point of the city is the Vismarkt, a great plaza in the middle of the oldtown. Every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday you will find a huge market offering fresh

vegetables, cheese, meat, bread and most important seafood. The prices and quality are usually really good, which makes it a great alternative to the supermarkets. Definitely you should try the fried fish for lunch!

The traditional landmark of the city is the Martinikerk (St. Martin church) with its 97 m high Martini tower, being characteristic for the urban scape. Every full hour you will hear the beautiful melody of its bells, which for me was a significant part of the Groningen atmosphere.

Next to the Martinikerk you will find the 'Forum'. The first time I saw it, I thought an alien space ship must have landed and couldn't understand how you could place such a huge, hyper-modern looking building in a cute oldtown. Against my first resentments, however, it soon became one of my favourite spots in the city. In its principal the Forum is a library, but designed as an interactive multimedia centre, inhabiting exhibitions, a cinema, workshops for kids, cafes and an observation deck. Also, many study desks are placed over the six library floors. If you're lucky you may prepare for your next exam with a view over the roofs of Groningen!

So, what is it like to be a student in Groningen?

First the bad news: It will start with a nightmare, which is finding a place to live. Due to the many students, the competition is high and rental prices are extreme. You need to start looking for a place early! If you're well a head (at least a year) you can try to sign up for social housing (e.g. Lefier), with less time I would recommend searching over Facebook groups. The best option is always to know someone whose room you can take over. Finally I got lucky and find a nice shared apartment north of the city centre. This is a convenient location as it's between downtown and the Zernike Campus, where most Hanze buildings are located. Also it was close to the beautiful park Noorderplantsoen, where I took many walks and runs to get some fresh air.

But also, when you are located within or at other positions around the city centre it's not really a problem. As Groningen is a small city you can get around anywhere easily by bike. Dedicated bike routes and in most cases special traffic lights for bikers make it very safe. I would say it's the best transport option and you could call Groningen a bike city. Public transport is also available and can be used by obtaining a chip card of the local provider 'OV' or buying single tickets on the bus.

Especially the Zernike Campus is very well connected with bike routes and public transport to allow movement of thousands of students every day. It is a large area with many modern buildings of different faculties and it's definitely worth looking at a map before going there the first time. Something I had to adapt to, was the Dutch culture for only having a small lunch. It is very common to have just a soup or a sandwich and do short lunch times. You will find plenty small cafes, however no real Mensa, which is serving full meals. There is a very hip food court, where street food is offered. Prices are too high to go there on a daily basis but it's a nice alternative from time to time. In sum, be prepared to bring your own lunch to the campus if you want a cheap and proper meal.

In my experienced the professors of the University had a good knowledge in their field and were well teaching. Still be aware that Hanze is a University of Applied Sciences and not dedicated to research. Activities in this field are growing, but the resources are rather limited.

For your free time all kind of activities are offered. I would definitely recommend getting a membership card of the student sports centre 'ACLO'. The rates per semester are around 60 € and you can attend all kinds of sports classes from Yoga, swimming, football to Karate and climbing. I also enjoyed a lot riding my bike around the city. As distances are short you are outside in the beautiful countryside very fast. A great place to go is the Hoornsemer south of the city, a big lake with bike routes and beaches. If you have time, take a trip to the islands from Lauwersoog.

Groningen has an amazing nightlife! As a night owl you will enjoy the plenty bars and clubs, which are full of people on the weekends. One of my favourite places to go was the Latino bar 'Copas'.

As I attended the summer semester 2020 of course I have to mention that it was impacted by Corona. First, I'd like to say that Hanze was very well in organizing online courses and examination and I was grateful to be able to continue my studies in a proper way. While Groningen luckily wasn't hit hard by the pandemic, still all the aspects of my student life were impacted a lot and I was not able to do as many activities and enjoy the Dutch culture as much as I would have wanted. Still I'm happy to have spend the time abroad and to gain all these great experiences.

In any case I think Groningen is one of the best student cities I've seen so far and I'm glad I had the chance to learn more about the Dutch culture. The Netherlands are now a place for me, where I will always feel welcome and will enjoy going!