

Personal Experience Report



Alastair Greene

Home Country: Ireland
Country of Placement: Switzerland
Company: Vario-Optics
Duration of Placement: 1/6/2016 – 26/8/2016

How did your traineeship influence your personal development?

Before I came to Switzerland I had never lived away from family, or worked independently in a job relevant to my field of study. This being the case, I was somewhat apprehensive before I left, not knowing what I had signed up for, how not seeing my family for a prolonged period of time would



affect me or what IAESTE had in store. I can say now that each of these personal challenges was a blessing in disguise, and each one in turn helped me to develop both professionally and socially into a stronger character all round. Thrown right into the thick of it, my first weekend I found myself rafting down a glacial river with some great friends in the making! I never expected that I'd find myself swept away so quickly in all the activities!

In my professional environment I cannot say how friendly and accepting my colleagues were in Vario-Optics. At every turn they were happy to help, correct my mistakes and better my skills and knowledge as an up and coming mechanical engineer nearing the end of college studies. I was taught the etiquette of the office, and how to conduct myself appropriately. My technical knowledge was tested with practical and engaging tasks, and the project I was allocated throughout my three month stay was stimulating and challenging. It was this fine balance of expectation and stimulating work that kept me motivated throughout my stay here. And I can now say that I would seriously consider further studies and possibly a career in the area of optomechanics.

I also felt that the challenges that were set for me were tailored specifically to my skill set. If I had had a stronger background in optics or programming, I felt that I would have also been challenged in these areas. It was perfect for both me and my co-workers that the work allocated to me was directly in line with my interest and my strong areas. This played a big part in my seamless transition

into the team. Another point to mention is that 'fair' German was advertised as a requirement for this internship. I came to Switzerland with rusty unpractised German, rough and ready to improve. My co-workers recognised the level of German I was comfortable with, and not only did they make sure to include me in the office life in English, but they also pushed and challenged my German. To this end, in my three months here, I have achieved a level of competency which I had never reached before. My only regret is that my stay is not longer, and that I will not have the opportunity to strive for full fluency during my first brief stay in a German speaking country. However I am now motivated to continue my practice until such a point, where I can return and really throw myself into the language without hesitation.

Socially, IAESTE provided me with every opportunity possible in order to make sure that my stay here was as lively as possible. During my three month stay, I enjoyed a vibrant and unparalleled exploration of this beautiful country with a group of international students which I can only now describe as lifelong friends. Every weekend there were trips all around the country to go on and see as much as your heart's content! Trips varied from city weekends complete with city tours, sunbathing on beaches and evening barbeques; all the way to overnight hikes up vast Alpine landscapes, to which a picture paints a thousand words. That's some of our group, playing Frisbee on top of an Alp at 5am!



On top of this, there were regular check-ins from IAESTE local committee members to make sure my stay was going as smoothly as possible, and every Thursday there were meetings with all the other students in the area for a drink and a catch up. Half of the friends I have made over the duration of my stay, I already have provisional invites and intentions to visit in the future; and similarly with me in my own home country. In terms of my own personal development, this is an international community which I would never have got a chance to experience otherwise; for this reason I can't

imagine why someone wouldn't consider signing up for IAESTE given all that it is possible to experience outside one's comfort zone, even if only for a single summer.

What differences did you notice about the way work is conducted in Switzerland compare to in Ireland?

Of my experience of work in Switzerland, it was differed slightly to my expectations, which were based on previous experiences with the working life in Ireland, both first and second hand. A typical day for me involved arriving at work at 8:15am, working until a coffee break at 10am, and then taking lunch from 12-1. Then after lunch, there was a longer shift from 1-5. I usually left the office between 5 and 5:30. The first thing I noticed was the regularity of the coffee breaks in the morning. It was quite common that the different employees would work in different areas in the building, meaning that the office floor itself was usually quite quiet. The purpose of the coffee break, as well as to break up the morning was also to bring everyone together for a friendly chat at least once a day. This I thought was a great idea and one which I would think would be beneficial at home in a lot of businesses. From talking to my peers in IAESTE, it seemed that the Swiss working day generally started and ended earlier than a lot typical working hours in our own home countries.

The working language was also interesting to observe. The employees spoke colloquially to each other in Swiss German or High German if there was a non-Swiss speaker present. But the interesting thing was that as the official business language was English, and with Switzerland being a trilingual country; by nature, there were many different languages present among the employees, English being a common one. So it was no difficulty for me, as everyone else in the office had English, but they also had French, Italian and Russian speakers amongst them. This was an interesting thing to note working in a country surrounded by a diversity of other European languages.

One other thing to note is that the economy in Switzerland is doing well compared to a lot of other countries in IAESTE. Because of this, it was commented on among our group of friends that the salaries from the internships, provided a strong financial base to live and travel on; unlike a lot of the other internship positions being offered back in our home countries. The living costs in Switzerland were also quite high, one of the highest in the world. But it is clear that the wages complemented this. In my case, and I know that in the case of many others here with me; we were able to live and work comfortably while enjoying all the weekends IAESTE had to offer, with little or no financial restrictions. This is not something I would have necessarily have been able to do at home, or at least not without fierce competition for positions.

What was the most difficult thing you had to get used to?

The most difficult thing I had to get used to during my time here was the language. Most people I encountered during my time in Switzerland had either semi-fluent, or more often than not, fluent English. This suited me when I was ever in a tricky situation, I was never stuck. But having learnt German in school, I set myself the challenge to try and always interact in German whenever possible while keeping the flow of the conversation. Most people appreciated this whenever I tried having remembering their own language learning days, but as a result one of the most challenging things was getting used to the pace and the accent that the locals speak with. The Swiss German dialect can

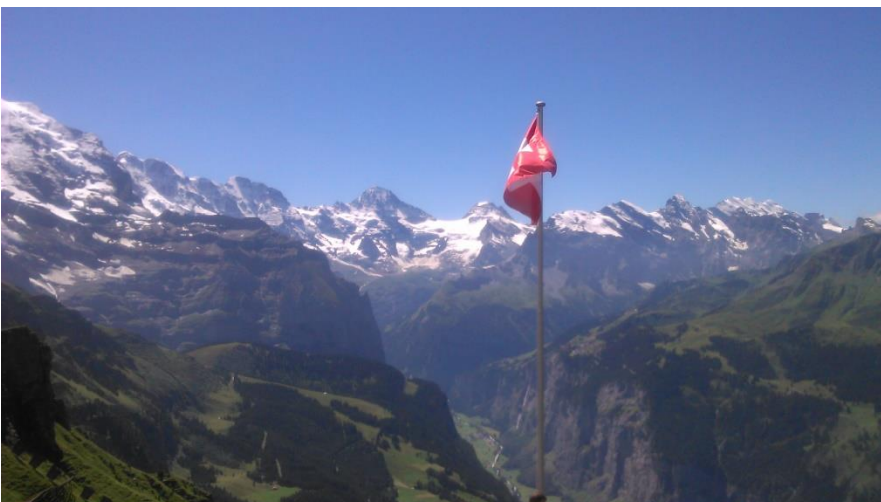
be very difficult for outsiders to understand in general, so courteously everyone spoke with me in High German. The thing I had to get used to was the different accent and the pace of speech. This was great for my language learning; while I was behind the natural pace of the conversation most of the while, I noticed myself the improvements were dramatic, if even from my own perspective. By the end of my stay I found it far easier to follow conversations and to interact with people.

This turned out to be exceptionally handy, especially among the IAESTE group I spent time with on the weekends. Most had no German at all among the group which became my regular friends. This put me more often than not, in a position to correspond between the group and the locals, whatever the circumstance may be. In the beginning I found it while difficult to communicate, but towards the end, I began to really enjoy the challenge. Having said that, there was plenty of room for improvement by the time I finished my internship! Upon my return, I would like to continue my learning of the language, and progress it to a level where I can achieve real fluency, maybe even strive to learn to understand the Swiss dialect if I ever return to live in the German speaking quarter of Switzerland. This was definitely the most challenging part of my stay.

What does IAESTE mean to you?

Now that I have completed my internship, looking back on my experiences, if someone was to ask me what I think of when prompted with 'IAESTE,' the first thing that comes into my head are the friendships I have made during my exchange. These friendships lie in the workplace, among my roommates and especially among the pool of international students I had the pleasure of meeting and embarking on all these unique weekend trips all over the country with. Without the students, the employers and the local committees all working together equally, there would be no IAESTE. To anyone considering an internship with IAESTE reading this now, I would strongly recommend it! Not only because of the work experience you will gain and the place you will stay, but for every other reason behind the scenes which you cannot see at this point. The chance to experience a completely different culture, the chance to make enough lifelong friends to travel with for a lifetime, and the chance to spend time potentially finding a place that becomes a permanent home in future years to come.

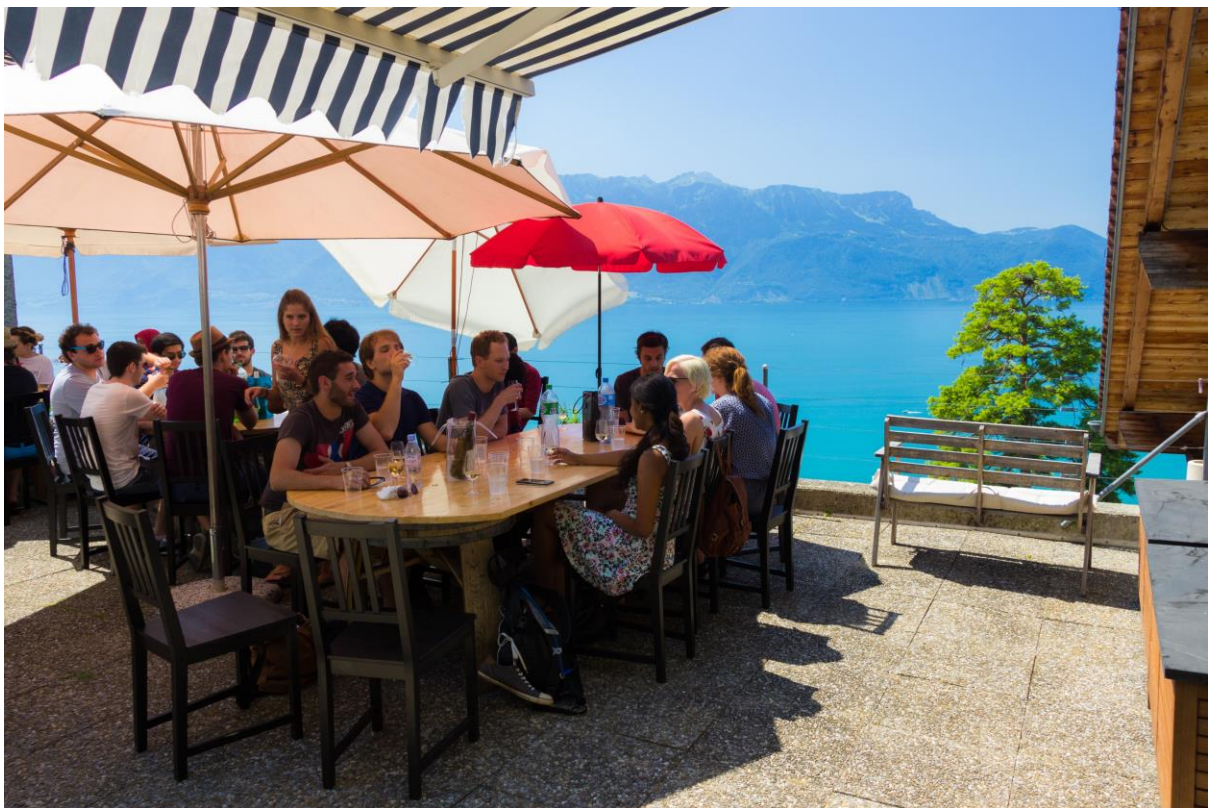
I leave you with a few of the memories that I have had the joy of experiencing during my time in my IAESTE internship in Switzerland.



Hiking above Interlaken in at the foot of the Alps.



Fireworks in Geneva at one of many city festivals we attended over the summer weekends.



Eating our lunch at a vineyard on the slopes above Lake Geneva near Lausanne.