

My IAESTE internship in Luleå: from Autumn to Summer through Swedish darkness and lights

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Sweden is divided into counties or *län*. Luleå is the capital city of Norrbotten County, the biggest county of Sweden, that is more than twice the size of Switzerland, but with half the population of the canton of Geneva, making a scarcely populated region mostly covered with forests, lakes, and isolated red houses. From Geneva, you will need to make stop at Stockholm, before further pursuing your travel. From there you can take the plane to Luleå (faster option) or the train. The last option will take more time, but will allow you to have a good look at the entire country. Arriving late September, I had the chance to witness the beautiful colours of Autumn. That first glimpse of the Swedish environment announced one aspect that characterises the Swedish nature: the light sublimating the colours of the sky and the trees.

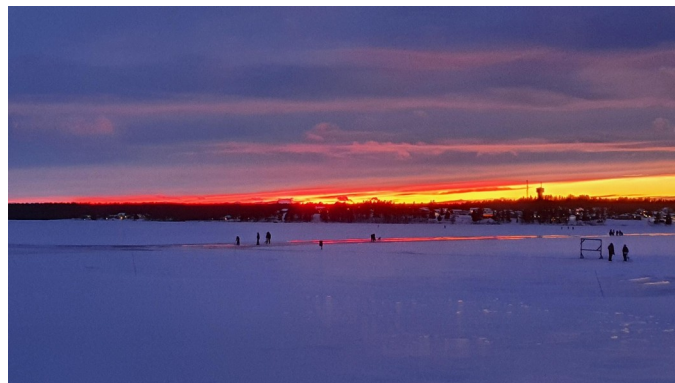


Autumn in Björksatan



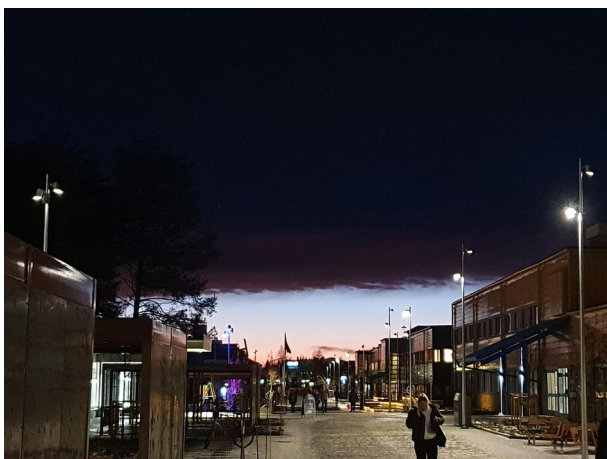
Sunset from Sinksundet

Winter comes quite early. The first snow falls around mid October, and will stay until mid April, The days will become shorter and shorter, starting around 9 am and ending around 3 pm. The water of the sea gradually freezes, allowing the inhabitants to walk from one side of the city to the other, from the southern harbour to the northern harbour.



The ice road at 3.50 pm from Södra Hamn

As the days become shorter and the sun less visible, even if the weather is nice, the lack of light might affect you: tiredness, depression, sleeping troubles are common encountered symptoms. Those issues could make your adaptation and your stay a bit harder. But fear not: in any grocery, you should find vitamin D pills, that you can supplement yourself with. The Swedes and the foreigners alike will advise you to do so. It might help you to bear with the long nights of the Swedish winter. The temperatures are cold, true, going as extreme as 26 degrees Celsius below 0. But with good clothing, you can enjoy a walk around the town or on the ice roads and end it with a warm beverage. Go visit the island of Gråsjälören, where a small cabin, with waffles and chocolate are served for a reasonable price during winter, just 30 minutes walk on the ice. Despite the seemingly harsh climate, it seems that it does not deter people from going there, as the student community is composed of young people coming from all around the world, even from Mediterranean countries or even warmer countries: Italy, Spain, Greece, France, Germany, Brazil, India, China, Iran, and so on. This ethnic diversity is characteristic of the academic world, making the Luleå University of Technology (or LTU for short) a dynamic and enriching environment, with opportunities of interesting encounters. But with all those students coming from allover the world, where are the Swedes? They are well active in the different student organisations, willing to welcome you and make your stay nicer and livelier. Sweden is a modern country rich with traditional celebrations, that you should attend to if you have the occasion. On the 4th of October, it is the *Kanelbullens dag* (the “Cinnamon Roll day”), a nice way to enjoy a warm fika (the traditional Swedish coffee-break) with fellow students, may they be Swedes or else, and if you befriend some Swedes, prepare yourself to be invited for a fika or invite them yourself for a fika, from time to time. Around Christmas, you should visit Gammelstad, the old church town of Luleå, where it holds a traditional Christmas market, that shows that despite the cold, dark and long winter, it is still lively there. Other important events are ice hokey games, they are quite popular, especially if the local team is playing. If you are staying during the month of June, one celebration you must attend to is the traditional feast of Midsommar that celebrates the Summer Solstice (I promise, it is less gruesome than the movie): a joyful feast, particularly popular in Sweden, considered as a national holiday, more important than their National Day. People will celebrate by weaving a wreath made with flowers, gather together to rise the Maypole and dance around it. Gammelstad holds a Midsommar celebration every year. The old church town of Luleå is worth visiting for its small open air museum: after all it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Sunset at the LTU



A street in Gammelstad during Summer

I had the chance to be invited to a Julbord with my research group (Jul being the Swedish word for Christmas, based on an old Germanic celebration of the Winter Solstice). Julbord (“Christmas table”) is a banquet, with several traditional Swedish dishes and food. A nice way to have a good time with your colleagues and to be introduced to Swedish food.

Luleå itself is a nice small town, but you might want to see something else to gaze at the greater picture. It is well connected through planes (local airport), buses and trains. It is a door to visit the greater north of Sweden and for many outdoor activities: Luleå archipelago boat tour, Storforsen (magnificent waterfalls), Kungsleden from Abisko (great hiking lane), visit the Lofoten in Norway or Rovaniemi in Finland.



Storforsen in April



Beach in Klubbviken in June

In terms of practicality, Sweden is almost a cashless country. You might be able to pay with cash, but it becomes rarer over time and people do prefer cashless. Once you received your coordination number, you can open a temporary bank account in Swedbank quite easily, so you can receive your salary without having to pay taxes and being able to pay wherever you go. In terms of prices, they are more or less the same as in Switzerland, and if you want to go for groceries, you should either go to Willy's or ICA (Willy's being the cheapest one). Grocery stores are open everyday, even on Sundays, until 9 or 10 pm. There is also a Red Cross shop, if you are looking for second hand coats and clothes, or any other stuff you may need, you should pay them a visit. Otherwise, there are many different shops, and you will find anything you need downtown, especially good winter clothing. Being an IAESTE intern, the received wages are more than enough to cover your expenses. The different parts of towns are well connected through different bus lines: download the LTT application, so you can always plan your travels at anytime from anywhere. I advise you to go visit the LTT office to purchase a travel card, which will reduce the costs of your whereabouts around Luleå. Otherwise, cycling is a good option. Bike lanes are safe, well maintained, and can be used all year long, as long as you have good gloves and a scarf. You can buy a second-hand bike on Marketplace (Facebook), for affordable prices, however you will need to invest in a good locker: bike theft is common, especially on the campus. As for the Swedes themselves, they might come at first as quiet, but they are polite and nice people. You can learn Swedish or a few words, but everyone is able to communicate in English.

As for the university itself and the campus, it might be a bit distant from town, but you can join LTU from the city centre in ten minutes by bus or fifteen minutes by bike. A local cafeteria offers food with decent price, a good restaurant, there is an ICA for your groceries or if you want to buy a snack close to it, a pub for an afterwork drink, and a gym to stay in shape. I did my internship in the Biochemical Process Engineering research group, a dynamic and international laboratory. The colleagues are nice, open-minded, ready to help, and you will learn a lot, both scientifically and socially. I had the chances to work with techniques I have never used before, in the field of analytical chemistry and work with new microorganisms, expanding my knowledge in the domain of microbiology. You will meet a lot of people, from different backgrounds and diverse cultures. You will have to wander out of your comfort zone, but by doing so, you will mature, learn a lot, and you will end up with an enriching experience.

Overall, visiting Sweden was totally worth it and a good experience.



Sunset from Mjölkuddberget

The website of the municipality, with the timetable for the boats:

<https://www.lulea.se/uppleva--gora/lulea-skargard/the-lulea-archipelago.html?qs=boat>

To visit Luleå:

<https://visitlulea.se/>

To know a bit more about Gammelstad:

<https://www.visitgammelstad.se/>

To know a bit more about the university LTU:

<https://www.ltu.se/>

Red Cross in Luleå:

<https://www.rodakorset.se/ort/norrbotten/lulea-kommun/om-oss/>

Public transport in Luleå:

<https://www.llt.lulea.se/>

Trains in Sweden:

<https://www.sj.se/en/>

To know a bit more about Julbord:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julebord>