

IAESTE internship in Luleå (Sweden), February-June 2022

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Work

During my internship I had the opportunity to work at Luleå University of Technology in the biochemical process engineering department. As a biology student, I appreciated the chance to extend my knowledge beyond the boundaries of my discipline by experiencing the daily routine of a chemical and biotechnology laboratory focusing on the sustainable production of nutrients, chemicals and medical substances with industrial applications. More concretely, I worked on the valorisation and modification of some bioactive substances contained in a halophyte plant by means of enzymatic synthesis. The daily work in the lab and the use of sophisticated machinery such as the High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) that I operated regularly allowed me to acquire a great deal of autonomy and confidence. It also enabled me to refine the critical yet calm spirit necessary to tackle the technical or procedural problems that inevitably arise along the way. Not least, I learnt to appreciate the Swedish tradition of interspersing work with “Fika” breaks where a good cup of coffee or tea is always accompanied by a nice chat with colleagues.

Experience

Located in the north of Sweden just a few kilometres from the Arctic Circle, the small town of Luleå is the backdrop to the incredible changing of the seasons in Swedish Lapland. I think one of the most striking experiences for me was witnessing the transition from a winter made of snow, ice and little light to a summer when the days are never-ending, and the darkness is never dark enough to see the stars in the sky. I remember with joy a winter walk on cross-country skis on the frozen sea of Luleå that ended under some beautiful northern lights, as well as a summer hike in Abisko National Park accompanied by the spectacle of the midnight sun. From Luleå I had in fact the opportunity to visit many places including the lovely Swedish capital and Norway's amazing Lofoten islands. Sweden has enriched me with many precious international friendships thanks to its many Erasmus students and interns, and allowed me to get to know the Swedish mentality and way of life thanks to the very kind local IAESTE committee and thanks to a gymnastics group I joined and with which I shared many great sportive and humanly enriching moments.

Discoveries

My stay in Sweden taught me many things: While I learnt how to withstand arctic temperatures approaching -30°C and how to sleep with light during summer, this experience certainly enriched me professionally and humanly in first place. I lived alone for the first time in a foreign place that slowly became more and more familiar, I participated in and contributed to the work of a biochemical research group discovering the differences between an academic teaching setting and an academic working environment, I interacted with many different types of personalities – some of them more challenging than others, but always valuable because they made me stronger and more experienced. I am truly grateful for these months as an IAESTE intern and I encourage anyone to have an experience abroad because breaking away from one's habits, points of reference and friends allows one to learn so much about others and oneself, both in difficult and happy times.

