

# Study Abroad Experience: Korea University

Winter Semester 2024 | English and American Studies B.A.



## Introduction

I'm a fifth semester English and American studies major at the university of Freiburg, and I spent the past semester studying at Korea University in Seoul. I'd been interested in Korea for years and it was a dream destination for me, so this was an amazing opportunity. I will recap my time here and share some pointers on how to have a great experience for a semester abroad.

## Before you go

Obviously the first thing to think about when planning a semester abroad is the destination. I already knew, because of my private and future career interests, that I wanted to go to East Asia and ideally Korea. If you have a general direction in mind, it really does help to do some research into your options and if what you imagine a country is like actually matches with the reality there. For Korea, you need to understand that the romanticized idea we have of it as "k-pop and k-drama land" is only a small part of life there.

I started planning my exchange about a year before I actually went. This is definitely the minimum amount of time you should be prepared for. I only attended one info session from the international office on zoom before starting my application, but if you're someone who wants to be well informed and perfectly prepared prior to taking the first step, I definitely recommend using all other resources that the International office offers.

The application itself is a rather straightforward process. The only thing to plan ahead for is the English language test, as qualifications like TOEFL can't be more than two years old and appointments quickly fill up.

Once you have the confirmation that you're in the program, I recommend doing everything as early as possible. Especially with plane tickets, the earlier you are, the less you pay.

If you want to save money, I also recommend applying for the dorms on campus. I didn't get a spot, so I ended up renting a studio apartment close to the KU campus on Airbnb. It was a little pricey, but I ended up enjoying the privacy and freedom it gave me a lot. The owners were also very kind and offered me help whenever I needed it, which was great.

You should also prepare for your visa application as soon as you get your confirmation and research beforehand where and how you need to apply for the exchange student visa. Because for me, living in NRW at the time of application, I had to go to an in-person appointment at the Korean consulate in Bonn. There can be very long waitlists for in-person appointments (mine was two months), but you get your visa within two weeks, while for applications per post, the visa confirmation can take over a month. So make sure to calculate in enough time for possible delays and you won't get in trouble later.

Lastly there's the matter of scholarships. I recommend applying to every one you're eligible for (the info sessions by the international office offer a good overview for financial aid options), because the costs of the stay abroad definitely add up. I didn't end up getting into any of the ones I applied for in Germany, but while already in Korea I was awarded one of the Global KU scholarships and it was a great aid to me, so make sure to check out the KU website as well.

## **In Seoul:**

### **Academics**

Korean university life works a bit differently from here in Germany. Course registration is prior to the semester on a first-come-first-serve basis, with a pre-registration period and an add-and-drop period during the first week of classes (you cannot drop any courses after that, so beware of overfilling your schedule or keeping courses you're not prepared to take exams in). It sounds stressful, but the university gives you all necessary information per email ahead of time, so as long as you follow the instructions it's all very easy. The courses, especially Korean language and literature courses, fill up very quickly, so make sure you're early on registration day.

Most courses are for three credits and happen twice a week, with Korean language classes being four days a week, and all have mandatory attendance (most classes have one free pass and every missed session after that impacts your grade, with a  $\frac{1}{3}$  absence rate giving you an automatic fail), so give some thought to how much time you realistically want to spend on academics (the time commitment of studying outside and homework also shouldn't be underestimated) and how much free time to explore you want to have.

I took four classes, two for my major and two out of personal interest: Business English, American Minority Literature, Beginner's Korean and Introduction to Korean History and Culture. The workload for each class was quite big, but I enjoyed all of them a lot. It was really nice to get a different perspective and teaching style from my regular major classes at home. I also definitely recommend taking at least one class on Korean culture or history, especially if

you aren't already super knowledgeable about it. It's nice to actually understand the society you are a guest in and how it came to be that way.

Also, especially if you haven't learned any Korean before the trip, definitely take a Korean language course. You can get along pretty well with just English in Seoul, but if you travel to other places without any Korean, you'll have a hard time communicating. I had already studied Korean for a while on my own, but taking the class there was great for strengthening the basics and getting some real speaking experience. And don't worry about choosing the wrong one, they have you take a level test in the first session and allow you to switch to the appropriate one in the first week).

All exams happen in the final week of the semester, as well as the deadlines for most term papers, so make sure you divide your time well so as not to get super stressed out.

Possibly my favorite thing about KU was the campus. It's huge and absolutely beautiful. It also allows for a rich student life. There are multiple cafeterias where you can grab a delicious lunch for only a few won, convenience stores and cafes in nearly every building and ample space to study or just hang out and chat.

Another great thing that KU offers to exchange students is KUBA, the Korea University Buddy Association, which is a group of Korean students who help you adjust to KU life and organize social events for exchange students. Participation in the KUBA events is totally voluntary, but even if you're an introvert like me, it's a great opportunity to actually make friends and get to know local students. They were the ones who organized the orientation at the start of the semester and offered a city tour. They also hold regular group dinners at local student bars and outings like the MT (aka membership training, an overnight retreat to hang out and play games together), a sports day and bbq, a trip to Everland (an amusement park outside of Seoul), a club night in Itaewon or attending the Koyeon Games (a huge sporting event between KU and Yonsei held every fall semester).

## **Life in Korea**

The KU global service center and KUBA are generally very helpful in helping you adjust to life in Korea and go through all the right steps. Still, I thought I should mention beforehand that the paperwork doesn't end when you get your visa. Once you've arrived in Seoul, you need to apply for the ARC (foreigner registration card) within 90 days. You can do that either per group order (KU will inform you on that) or by yourself. The process itself is simple (fill out an application, have a passport photo and the required documents ready, pay a fee and get fingerprinted), but make sure you do everything as soon as possible due to the long waiting times (I had to wait over a month for my individual appointment).

Once you have your ARC, you will also automatically be registered in the Korean national health insurance and are required to pay monthly. It's not expensive or complicated, but just something to be aware of so you're not surprised when you get the first letter in the mail.

As for actually living in Korea, it's great. Public transport is very affordable and so is food. Especially if you're not picky and enjoy Korean food, there are so many great hole-in-the-wall restaurants or food stalls to have a delicious meal without spending a fortune, not to speak of the omnipresent convenience stores that offer a quick and delicious bite at every time of day. And if you have a kitchen and want to cook at home, the grocery prices are generally not too

bad (meat and fruits tend to stray a little to the expensive side, but with a little smart budgeting you won't lack anything you need).

And if you're feeling homesick, I recommend visiting *The Baker's Table* near Noksapyeong Station for some real German food or *Bäckerin* by Anguk Station for a good pretzel.

I already mentioned the aspect of learning Korean earlier, but I once again want to recommend it! Nobody expects you to be fluent, but if you're at least a little familiar with the sound of Korean speaking, hangul (the Korean writing system) and some common expressions ("hello", "thank you" and "I'd like to have..." will truly get you far, and people appreciate that you're at least trying to communicate in Korean), you will have a much easier time than going in blind. The same goes for cultural competence. If k-dramas haven't taught you the basics of behavior yet, you should definitely look into the "dos and don'ts" of Korean society (such as turning away when drinking with an elder, using the correct seats on public transport or giving/receiving things with two hands).

In my experience, Koreans were generally very friendly and helpful, especially if you speak Korean and act in the proper respectful way. I didn't have any bad experiences and generally felt quite safe, even when traveling alone as a young woman. My personal favorite local experience was when I couldn't get into a lunch restaurant in Busan and an ahjussi invited me to join him and his son at the table. We had a wonderful konglish conversation and he even insisted on covering all the food, which was so kind. Of course it never hurts to be cautious, but I just recommend going into every situation with an open mind and heart.

## **My experience**

Personally, I absolutely adored life in Seoul. It's a gigantic city where there's always something to do and to see. From the numerous gorgeous cafes, palaces and temples, mountain parks and shopping streets. Even if you're a homebody like me, I really recommend that you make the most of your time, get out there (whether by yourself or with a group) and explore all parts of the city.

As a starter, I'll share my personal top5 spots in the city:

- Ikseon-dong (a gorgeous neighborhood with cute little shops and a ton of amazing food and cafe options, close to other popular spots like Gwanghwamun)
- Naksan Park (a little mountain that the old city wall runs over and has an amazing view of the city skyline, especially at night)
- Dongdaemun (a very trendy place with multiple department stores and of course the famous DDP, where you can visit super cool art exhibitions)
- Eunpyeong Hanok Village (at the foot of Seoraksan mountain and not as crowded as Bukchon Hanok Village, the perfect place for a relaxing day trip)
- Myeong-dong (extremely touristy, but worth the visit for amazing street food and cool shops all concentrated in one place)

And then there's the whole rest of Korea. It's quite easy to take a day trip to Incheon or Suwon during your day off (both are about an hour away from Seoul and have a completely different vibe). But if you have the time over a long weekend/after the semester and can afford it, I absolutely recommend traveling to other places too. Seoul is quite different from most other parts of the country, so anywhere else you travel will be a completely new experience (this is

also where your real Korean skills come into play, because the smaller cities are much less internationally oriented and you have to see how you get around alone).

I had the chance to visit both Busan and Sokcho, and both trips were fantastic. Compared to inner-German travel, it was also less expensive than expected. Booking the hotels about a month ahead while already in Korea made them quite cheap and especially if you travel by express/intercity bus (no need to reserve seats, just by your ticket at the station), you can get around the whole country without much hassle.

### **Must-haves**

- 1) Apps:
  - a) Papago (the most accurate translator, much better than google, which also translates recorded voice and photos)
  - b) Kakao Talk (nobody in Korea uses WhatsApp, this is the main texting app for both students and teachers)
  - c) Naver Maps (Google Maps isn't very reliable in Korea, and this one has more English availability than Kakao Maps)
- 2) Phone: Get an eSIM for mobile data or, if you want a Korean number, get a phone plan when you arrive in Seoul
- 3) Money:
  - a) Bring a good amount of Korean Won in cash (or be prepared to regularly withdraw at the ATM) because some things, like KUBA events or Tmoney card charge, you can only pay for in cash
  - b) Credit card that works everywhere (you can pay with card almost anywhere, so save your cash for when you really need it)
  - c) Tmoney card (available at convenience stores, Artbox and stations; this is the card you should buy to use public transport. It's a one-time investment, and then you charge it with however much you need)
- 4) other: If you're worried about not being able to get necessities in Korea, there's no reason. Everything from electronics to non-prescription medication is easily available if you ever need it, so don't overpack. But make sure you have the thing that you absolutely know you can't live without while you're away.