

## ERFAHRUNGSBERICHT ÜBER STUDIENERFAHRUNGEN IN BAYERN [Report on study experiences in Bavaria]

Herkunftsland [county of origin]:	Serbia
Studium in Bayern [program in Bavaria]:	von [from] 2018 bis [until] 2019 (funded from 2019)
Hochschule in Bayern [university in Bavaria]:	Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Studienfach [subject of study]:	Evolution Ecology and Systematics
Abschluss [degree]:	Master

I have been receiving the BAYHOST scholarship for graduates of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European states for two years, during my studies in Munich. Thanks to the BAYHOST scholarship, I have completed Munich Graduate School for Evolution, Ecology and Systematics (EES) as well as Environmental Studies Certificate Program at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU).

In the final year of my undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Biology in Belgrade, I decided to pursue my master's studies abroad, because I did not have an opportunity to work with birds while continuing my education in Serbia. EES program was a perfect match for my academic aspirations, because of its research orientation and collaboration with the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology. Unfortunately, I discovered EES program too late to be able to apply for the funding by the Free state of Bavaria. But, I was lucky enough that my parents could take a loan to support the first year of my studies in Munich, and in that way I didn't have to miss one academic year. During the second and third year of my stay in Munich I received BAYHOST scholarship, which allowed me to explore full potential of living and studying in Munich.

Besides significantly advancing my scientific skills, I got involved with interdisciplinary research and humanities literature, which I learned is quite uncommon for a natural scientist, and which for me was very important formative experience. I grew personally as well, I experienced various cultures, faced different worldviews, and made friends for life that come from all around the globe.

### 1. Tips and tricks for life in Munich

Munich is a vast beautiful city full of opportunities for a young person. The main uncertainty about life in Munich and the main financial worry for a student is the accommodation. In that regard I would advise anyone who wants to have a genuine student-life experience to sign up for the waiting list for one of the dorms offered by the Munich Student Union (Studentenwerk), as soon as they are accepted to the program.

Based on my experience, everyone that did so, received a dorm room offer within the six months waiting period (although the periods can be longer for the dorms closer to the city center). I got a dorm room three months after my arrival to Munich, and I lived there for two and a half years. As the dorm was in the vicinity to the Faculty of Biology, when I moved in I already had friends from my program as my neighbors. Because of the dorm experience, I also got an opportunity to meet and become close friends with people that were studying across Munich, who I would probably never meet considering that my main studying activities were in Martinstried, isolated from the main campuses of LMU and TUM.

While waiting for your own dorm room, there is often an opportunity to move in someone else's room for a short period of time. For instance, I sublet my dorm room to a girl, while doing fieldwork for my thesis out-

side of Munich, which helped me a lot financially because I didn't have to pay double rent. These sublet opportunities are usually announced on Facebook groups of dorms. For private accommodation, long term or temporary, there are many Facebook groups, as well, and websites, such as WG-Gesucht that can be helpful.

The public transport in Munich is very good, so even if you are living on the outskirts, you will have a nice connection to the city center. There is a semester ticket for public transportation which is quite expensive but useful for winter months. Since I love biking, Munich was a perfect city for me, I could reach everything by bike, and never even felt a need for public transportation during summer semesters. Considering administrative procedures, my only advice is to do things in time and have patience, especially as a non-EU citizen. Most of the information is available online, so you can inform yourself in advance and prepare documentation, and there should be no problems.

Munich University Sports Center (ZHS) offers very affordable opportunities for students to do various forms of sports. It is very practical for people that are located around Olympiacentrum. Since I was living far, I only applied for recreational ballet, because I missed training it and couldn't afford private clubs, but, unfortunately, I stayed on the waiting list throughout my studies. There are also cheap gyms all over the city. There are numerous and affordable opportunities to go hiking and experience breathtaking landscapes of Alps. Alternatively, for people who prefer the city life and cultural trips, the same affordable group train ticket that can be used to reach mountains can also be used to visit cities across Bavaria. There are many forms of socializing opportunities for students, from daily sports in parks and workshops to night clubs. They are usually well advertised as well. I believe everyone will be able to discover them easily once they start meeting their classmates or colleagues.

## **2. My study experience in Munich**

My study program in Munich was very flexible, I could create my own curriculum. Except only a few obligatory study modules, everything else was electoral. This was completely opposite to my undergraduate experience. So, it could be stressful when I was trying to understand how to organize my curriculum administratively, especially when I was interested in classes or internships outside of the ones offered at the faculty. But eventually, I could always find someone to ask for support or discuss my dilemmas. I am grateful I got a chance to tailor my master's studies to my own academic affinities, which became even more defined in the process. Because of the sea of opportunities it offers, I strongly believe Munich is a perfect city for someone who is still exploring options and trying to define their career path.

During the first year of my studies in Munich, I discovered that I can also enroll to the Environmental Studies Certificate Program (ESCP) at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, which I completed in parallel to my master's studies. This program was incredibly formative for me, as it challenged my worldviews as a biologist and opened my eyes to humanities perspective on many environmental issues. For the first time in my life, I started thinking about conservation policies in the context of economic and political systems throughout history. I came to Munich wanting to pursue a career in bird conservation. I was always an avid supporter of nature protection and conservation biology, as conservation was for me something unconditionally good. But, realizing how entangled conservation is with the political and economic systems and how many people were evicted and left without any livelihood option due to conservation, I was devastated. I am afraid I would never open my eyes to this dimension of conservation if I didn't have an opportunity to enroll in the ESCP.

As the final project for the certificate, I conducted a small social study in which I challenged fellow biologists (N = 34) with the critical literature on conservation. I wanted to contextualize my experience and explore

what other biology students think about current mainstream conservation practices and whether a presentation that addresses some of the contradictions of market-based conservation could awaken a more critical and socially sensitive perspective towards conservation.

I realized how ubiquitous the gap between humanities and natural sciences is, but also that it is bridgeable. Even though my project was small, it made some people question their work. A participant working at the international tree-planting and environmental advocacy organization Plant-for-the-Planet asked me for permission to use my recorded presentation when recruiting new members to trigger critical thinking from the beginning of their career. During studies in Munich, I formed a clear professional goal, which is to develop into a confident quantitative ecologist who will one day be in a position to bridge this gap between social and natural sciences. This would be impossible without the BAYHOST scholarship which provided me with financial security during my explorative and formative period as a young scientist. Challenging my worldview as a biologist was the main milestone in my professional and personal development, but during my master's program I had an incredible opportunity to attend various seminars, practical and theoretical courses, which significantly advanced my scientific skills. I advanced in data collection and programming in R and Python, the two most used programming languages in biology. I additionally developed skills in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and significantly improved my scientific writing and presentation skills. Thanks to the BAYHOST scholarship I felt secure enough to pursue my dream master thesis project. I developed my thesis supported by a professor from LMU, and researchers from the Senckenberg Institute (Germany), University of Porto (Portugal), University of Helsinki (Finland). I was lucky enough to also participated in the fieldwork in Portugal for three months, in the midst of the widespread lockdown in Europe.

Developing my master project from scratch was an invaluable experience, as I was exposed to every step of the research process, from writing project proposal to finding appropriate methodology for data analysis and wiring the manuscript. Since I only received remote support from my supervisors, I became confident working independently and I learned how to establish strong and meaningful collaborations without ever meeting in person. The past three years of living and studying in Munich have impacted my life in a way I could never even imagine, both professionally and personally. It is true that I did not find my research niche at the Faculty of Biology, but being an EES student I was encouraged and supported to pursue projects that I truly cared. And during the Environmental Studies Certificate Program, my worldview has dramatically changed, and I truly hope I will never lose this new perspective out of my sight. I can't express how grateful I am for the BAYHOST-scholarship which allowed me to feel financially secure and focus my entire energy in Munich only on my academic and personal development.

### **3. My future plans**

I am currently searching for Ph.D. opportunities that will allow me to keep working with birds, but also keep advancing my computational and analytical skills. I hope to continue discovering humanities literature as well, and always put my work in the social, political, and economic context. The most important lesson I took from Munich, is that only by truly integrating humanities and natural science perspectives we can reach socially and ecologically just solutions to combat the ongoing ecological and social crisis. I really hope I will manage to shape my career to contribute to that endeavor.