

Final report

Internship abroad

Personal data and general information on the internship

Subject of studies: Evolution, Ecology and Systematics

Bachelor/Master/State exam: Master (Msc.)

Time of internship: 28/02/2024 - 27/06/2024

Place of internship: Vienna, Austria

Internship institution: Messerli Institute, Veterinary Medicine University of Vienna

Planning and preparation

I discovered this lab during my previous internship, in Tenerife. I wanted to do my thesis in a topic in which there are no many labs in Munich. I initially got in contact through email with one of the PI from the Kea lab, at the Veterinary Medicine University of Vienna. But the way that ended up working was when I saw a poster in twitter from other of the PI from the same lab, who was looking for master students to work on a project in weight perception with Kea. I wrote her by email, and after some online meetings we agreed on what kind of project I would be doing during those months in the framework of this weight perception topic. I then enrolled as an exchange student at the VetMed University.

The work and the seminars of the labs were in English, so there was no extra pressure to learn a new language (beyond the already existing necessity to gradually learn German in order to live in the country).

Regarding the accommodation, Vienna is an accessible city in this regarding, since a lot of housing is controlled by public entities. I managed to get a student room with the ÖJAB organization without too many difficulties and for an affordable price.

Internship

As a thesis-internship student, my duties consisted in the design, writing and collecting of data for the experiments of the project, under the supervision of my thesis supervisor in Vienna (with whom I got a constant communication through email and in person at least once per week). She monitored me constantly, but she also gave me a lot of freedom about how to

design and which experiments to carry out in order to resolve the previously agreed research question.

I stayed in the city itself of Vienna, but the testing subjects (the Kea) were in Haidlhof, a research installation from the Vetmed and the Viena University located next to Bad Vöslau. Before starting to work with the animals I received a short training of 3-4 days to learn the basic stuff of the caretaking of the birds, basic commands and instructions to work with them, learning how to distinguish them and what where the basic safety measures to consider. After this I was allowed to go inside the enclosure of the birds by myself.

The days that I had to run experiments (more or less three days per week) I took the regional train (those tickets were paid by the lab) to reach Bad Vöslau at 8:00 am. from there, a car from the lab took us to Haidlhof, the same car would take us back to the train station of the town at 4pm, to take a train back to Vienna. During a normal working day, there were two testing slots to run experiments with the birds, one between 10:00 – 12:00 and the other after lunch, between 1:30 – 3:30. It was suggested to us to offer help to the zookeepers with part of the cleaning duties after the feeding of the birds (right before the start of the testing slot in the morning) if they needed, but this was never a mandatory or imposed thing for us. The experiments (not intrusive behavioral tests) were carried out in chambers that were part of the animal's enclosure, which could be insulated from the rest of the space at the time of testing. I carried out the experiments by myself, and afterwards I uploaded the recorded videos in the server, and entering the data in the database.

Besides this, depending on the state of the experiments. I had to do other things, like get some materials or create basic objects for the experiments (the expenditures of this were always covered by the lab, and the more complex objects and apparatus were built by a technician in Haidlhof). I had the option to participate in the lab seminars of the Messerli institute, but this was not mandatory.

Social contacts

The Kea lab is not the only cognition lab in Vienna, there is a bunch group of these labs, both from the VetMed University and the University of Vienna, so there is a social group from

these labs which gather at least once per month and is always open and welcoming to new members.

I did, though, interact more often with other group of friends that I meet in my student dormitory, in the communal kitchen of the building. I even traveled a little bit with some of them, in one occasion, I went for a weekend in a short Erasmus project in Slovakia related with hiking.

Vienna and Munich are both around the size, but I have the sensation that Vienna, because of its history and also being a capital city, it's a little bit more international. Which means that I could access to more activities in English than in Munich (something very useful considering that I am still not fluent at German) like a writing club in English that gathers at the University of Vienna.

Everyday life and leisure

The balance between the working time and the leisure time was fine. Since I arrived at the end of the winter, I was able to practice some ice skating in front of the rathaus and experience a little bit of the winter markets. I explored and walked a lot of the city and visited a lot of its cafes, since is one of the most representative cultural things from the city (alongside with their very good pastry). Later, in spring and summer, I did other activities like hiking around the city and visit some of its museums, like the Belvedere, where I could see some paints of the famous Gustav Klimt, one of my favorite artists.

Also, in order to keep in good shape (and also relax the mind) I tried to keep doing exercise. For this, it was very useful the fact that the student dorms that me and some friends lived in had small gyms. mine even had a small climbing boulder wall; which I visited frequently, since is my favorite sport. When the summer started, I took the opportunity to go to swim in the alter Donau when I arrived from the lab at the afternoon, which was 10 minutes walking from my dorm.

Another amenity from my dorm that I enjoyed a lot was the music room, which we could book and use freely. Inside there was a piano, so I took the opportunity to practice and learn a little bit of an instrument that I really like, but rarely have the opportunity to interact with.

In General, Vienna is a more affordable city than Munich, not only for being cheaper, but also because there are things like a lot of good second hand shops: a multiple second hand clothes shops around the city, but also a place called Carla, a huge second hand shop, ideal to get all kind of things that you might need for your room (like kitchen implements, chairs, etc.).

I tried to cook frequently since it's cheaper, I like it, and also I didn't feel to encourage to go and eat in the mensa at the campus of the VetMed University, Even though that I lived very close to it. Compared with the Mensa at the LMU, the portions were smaller, the options were fewer, and it was not so good, and it was not even cheaper.

Talking about the transportation, if you are moving frequently, maybe could be worth to pay a monthly subscription in which you get a OBB card and you can use the public transport in the city as much as you want by around 30 euros. You can also use your bike, either because you bring it with you, or there are some places in which you can buy second-hand bikes and after some months re-sell them to the same shop by half of the initial buying price.

Regarding other activities, the visit to some museums in Vienna is a must. The student discount is always helpful, but this only works if you are under 26, which was not my case anymore. There is still the option to visit some museums for free the first Sunday of every month.

Internship and studies

My previous experiences in this field proved being very useful at the moment of design cognition experiments and adapt to ongoing challenges during the process. Even having a very close monitoring from my supervisor, there was a lot of unforeseen inconveniences which I had to resolve thinking on my feet. This work was also a reaffirmation for me about how, even though I like the scientific research, is a labor that requires persistence and constant resilience. Therefore, knowing when to make a pause and get some rest before continuing is also very important, particularly when is, not only an intellectual demanding work, but also a physical one (since I had to carry heavy stuff for the experiments and also wake up very early in the morning in order to go to the research station).

As a general overview, I really liked my internship in Vienna, it was a nice opportunity to get more practice and knowledge in the research area that I want to specialize in, and to do important networking with other people in the same field. This gave me a good overview about future prospects and professional opportunities for me in Austria (something that I haven't considered before). It was physically very demanding, due to the commuting times, the logistics to carry the set up pieces for the experiments and the necessity of repeating some testing because of the individual mood variation between the testing subjects; this was therefore a good lesson to do not underestimate the importance of your own commodity (the experimenter's commodity) and basic logistics of the experiments in the planning stage.

In a personal level. I managed to meet very nice people (some of them who I consider might become life-long friends), and also experience and explore one of the most important cultural cities in Europe.