

**EXCHANGE REPORT****Name****Year and term for exchange**

Ziyang Song

2023/24 Autumn

Exchange university

EPFL, École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne

Degree programme

Master's Programme, Information and Network Engineering (TINNM)

EPFL: A lifetime journey to exchange in Switzerland



Before departure

Switzerland has always been a dream destination within Europe and both ETH in Zurich and EPFL in Lausanne are highly prestigious Swiss Federal Institutes, which locate at German-speaking and French-speaking region respectively. I have always been wishing to get enrolled and experience the academical atmosphere and natural environment there, and ended up getting nominated to EPFL. With a recognized passport and the valid residence permit to study in Sweden, it is allowed to enter Switzerland directly without extra authorisation, which is very convenient and efficient for us. Not until I came back did I realize that this journey has brought me a lifetime memory and excessive surprises more than I have assumed.

Upon arrival

I arrived in the middle July, which was right the best summertime. With a little bit extra time ahead, I am eased to settle down, get in touch with a post-doc in the desired laboratory to conduct a semester project and plan some trip around to enjoy the summer vibe. The intensive French inter-semester course started in late August, and I think it is a very nice experience to learn some new language and meet some friends all over the world (as well as to obtain 3 credits within 2 weeks before the other courses start)! The ESN (Erasmus Student Network) also organized a welcome week for a lot of exchange students and those activities, like Apéro, wine-tasting, are really awesome.

Financials

The applicants would automatically apply for SEMP (Swiss-European Mobility Programme) grant worth 1,900CHF (~22,500SEK) and would be receiving it upon one-time payment during October. It does help ease the financial situation since the living expense in Switzerland is generally high. Upon moving in, inhabitant registration fee and residence permit fee would be charged. The former one depends on your local community and usually cost between 30~100CHF, and the latter one costs 150CHF. My monthly payment shown in table below could be for reference:

Item	Amount
Rent	500CHF
Transportation (Zone 11, 12: Grand Lausanne)	55CHF
Grocery	180CHF
Restaurant, Bar	80CHF
Entertainment, Sports, and Travel	200CHF
Total	1,015CHF (~12,000SEK)

Generally, if you want to cut your budget, my first advise would be avoiding buying lunch on campus because normally a single meal in the cafeteria or at food truck would cost over 10CHF and it is definite not worthy. Besides, as for youths under 25, SBB provides night GA travelcard for only 99CHF per year which allows you travel unlimitedly from 7p.m. to 5a.m. and could help you save a lot on train tickets during the night.

Accommodation

The accommodation in Lausanne is quite difficult to find, because the local accommodation providers are limited while the number of students is relatively considerable. FMEL, the most popular local student housing releases some spots every 1st and 16th of the month and housing with good location and nice price are in shortage and would run out pretty quick. Luckily I found my housing through UNIL-EPFL lodgement portal and it was a 3-room flat-share downtown living together with the local houseowner. It is located close to the Olympic Museum and 30 minutes away from campus by bus or by metro. It is an ideal place to live in, with walking-distance supermarkets and stations, neighbouring with local people and a reasonable rent. Plan and search 1~2 months ahead to get a good accommodation!

University and studies

The EPFL campus is about as large as KTH main campus, locating on the west of the city and beside the Lake Léman, next to UNIL campus and university sports center. It is quite enjoyable to study in the Rolex Learning Center, a newly unique-designed library and study place, and sitting at the public area for lunch beholding the EPFL giant logo with the mountains far opposite. The facilities are well-equipped and disability friendly. Most of subjects are sciences, engineering related, for it is also an institute known for technology like KTH. The lectures over bachelor level are given in English. And there is language center providing courses in both summer and autumn semester, while exchange students can only access French courses.

Courses

The courses to choose are various depending on your receiving school, and it is also allowed to choose courses provided by other schools. For me, I was in School of Computer and Communication Sciences (IC) and I chose 4 technical courses and a language course in my study plan. The courses are usually combined with lectures, exercise sessions, and project within the course, but the final grading mostly only depends on your course project and exams (midterm and final), with non-graded assignments and exercises. You are also allowed to withdraw the exam before the exam registration period after trying out a course for a while and finding it doesn't suit you (or maybe too hard to pass), without leaving any record on your transcript. The lectures are generally of good professional quality, well-organized and in-detailed, usually given by one or two professors and together with an extra guest lecture at the end of course. Despite that, I found the project part very challenging and stressful because mostly you have to finish an individual work (with a quite strong workload, and TAs only offer limited help) before the non-negotiable deterministic deadline; and the exam problems are extremely hard, with a strict grading scheme, even though you have 2~3 weeks plenty of time preparing for it. I attended the Machine Learning, which is a large course with over 500 students attending, and it was great. I also attended some distributed computing related courses but sadly didn't manage to pass, so I couldn't obtain as much credits as planned. Having said that, I felt educated a lot experiencing through this and I don't regret that. My advice is: invest your time smartly and diligently, don't hesitate to reach TA or your classmates if there is problem, and attend those on-campus sessions as much as possible! In addition to that, you are free to participate a semester project available showing on the list of some laboratories and I would say it could be an alternative to obtain certain amounts of credits.

City and country

Comparing with Stockholm, Lausanne is a small town. It was peaceful, tranquil, and very beautiful with the excellent sight of the lake. The transportation is well-developed: with buses, metros, trains, and even public bicycles, you could get to everywhere in the city easily. People are very kind and friendly, even if you don't speak French. I haven't been through any racism or discrimination during my stay, and it is also LGBTQ+ friendly. Security wouldn't be a big concern, both days and nights. The networks and telecoms are stable even in rural areas or in mountains. The trains are at most cases punctual and comfortable to ride. In conclusion, Switzerland is a nice country, where you would always find pure beauty and unexpected joy with your own experiences.

Leisure and social activities

If you don't swim during summer, you will be missing to witness the half of paradise. If you go skiing in winter, you will see where the Swiss spirit lies. I went swimming both in public pools and in the lake, and it was cool. And I attended a weekend ski trip organized by sportif UNIL-EPFL as a beginner and it was terrific. I also did workout in sports center facility and joined a triathlon team as a part of weekly training. The sports are of variety and affordable, and especially in Lausanne, the capital of Olympics, you would definitely find a sport that suits you. As a part of exchange experience, I went on short travels on a monthly basis with other exchange students I get to know from elsewhere. Going hiking, or sightseeing in such natural environments could be really pleased and relaxing. And as mentioned, the train is handy, for example, departing from Lausanne, destinations in Switzerland are reachable not exceeding 4 hours: Geneva (45min), Bern (1h15min), Zurich (2h30min), Basel (2h30min), Interlaken (2h30min), Zermatt (3h), and Evian, France (35min by boat). As being in an origin of cheese and chocolate products, you must have tasted the cheese fondue and chocolate bars there.

Sustainability

Switzerland is a country which values sustainability. You are obligated to sort your disposals, purchased the government-specified garbage bags to hold non-recyclable garbage and put them separately at certain dustbins. Otherwised you may get sued and fined in violation of laws. The trains network is well-designed, in which you could get directly from Geneva Airport to Lausanne Station within 1 hour. The buses are electric powered replacing diesel ones, which are cleaner and quieter.

EPFL also encourages sustainability, for example, on the opening day all the students are distributed with a cloth bag by student association, all the lunch boxes or coffee cups are recyclable, and the course materials are generally available electronically and you could print them on your own if needed.

Other recommendations and observations

When you hand in your residence permit application, you would notice that health insurance is obligatory in Switzerland and if you have a foreign one which KTH provides to every outgoing exchange students, issued by Kammarkollegiet, you would need to fill out an exemption form to show that you already have had one. I happened to go to hospital once and it was really expensive, although the services are great. Make sure your insurance covers it. There is also a nurse clinic for normal medical care call "Point Santé" and a psychological consulting room on EPFL campus you could book a time, which are free of charge to its students. And, in Lausanne, you wouldn't need your heavy coats and snow boots since even the lowest temperature in winter is usually above 0°C and no heavy snow occurs (only some lightly, tiny snowing).