



My exchange studies in Istanbul, Turkey

Before departure

I had always known I wanted to do an exchange, and when the end of my studies approached, I didn't want to regret not taking this opportunity, so I just went for it to see if I could get in somewhere. I choose Koç university because I wanted to apply to Turkey and I knew that this was the best option, because of its high standing in Turkey, diversity in culture with students from all over the world and education in English. I choose Turkey because it would be the most different from what I have experienced so far, and at the same time I could get Erasmus, which is good because I didn't want to take any loans.

An official application through their own system is also obligatory and is done a couple of months before traveling, they will guide you through every step. Other preparations I did was getting health insurance documents from KTH, which sufficed for what you needed for the student residence permit in Turkey.

Upon arrival

One week before the actual studies begin, the school organizes an orientation week, where they introduce you to the school, let you meet other exchange students, help you apply for courses and other important documents. I arrived 6 days prior to this, 4 days I stayed in the city in a rented room, and 2 days before the orientation, I arrived at the dorms and checked in to my dorm room.

The orientation week was amazing, highly recommend it and helped with easing into the university, not only academically but also socially. You meet the rest of the exchange students, the mentors that you can ask for help and the international coordinators. The week starts with just introductions and getting to know others through different games, tours of the school and other gatherings.



The incoming team organized a traditional Turkish breakfast for the exchange students.

During the last two days, the students club recruiting started. All the student clubs had a separate stall where you could go around and ask questions, try different activities, and apply to the clubs you would

like to join. There were plenty of clubs, sports clubs like football, volleyball, wrestling, kick boxing, climbing as well as none sport clubs like painting, debate club, game-board club, theatre club and a lot more.



Student clubs recruiting students.

Financials

I received an Erasmus scholarship, and this precisely covered my dorm payment in the university. I also received a language grant that I used to take a Turkish course before I arrived in Turkey. Compared to Sweden, Turkey is less expensive. The Turkish lira (TL) was pretty much half the value of the Swedish kronor when I was there, so it was like everything was half-off for me. Also, Koç owns the food branch Yemekhane that offers Turkish home cooked meals and has one inside the school with student friendly prices. A standard student meal, consisting of a main dish, side dishes, fruits and dessert (4 plates) costed me 36 TL, which is around 13 Swedish kronor. There where off course other options When it comes to mandatory fees, you must pay a fee of 350 Turkish lira when applying for the student residence permit.

If you want to save money, don't spend money in any of the tourist's trap. Istanbul has a lot of tourists coming in all year around, making it a big income stream. Use your student privileges when going to tourist attraction, you pay literally 10% of the original price when you are a student. Buy an Istanbul student card and you will pay half the usual price for public transportation.



Yemekhane, serves home cooking 3 times a day (usually busy)

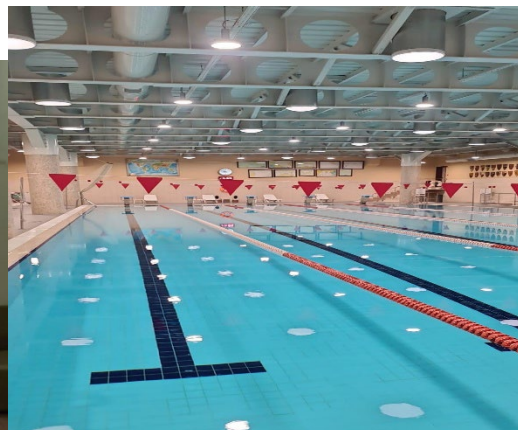
Accommodation

I got accommodation through the school. I applied for the dorms during summer and paid the fee, then they give the dorms on a first come basis, but I believe they have some bias towards exchange and international students. The school has two campuses, main and west, main is inside the school with walking distance towards the lecture halls, while west campus is a 5-minute shuttle ride from the school. The shuttles are free and goes regularly 24/7, more frequently during the day and less during evenings and nights. I lived in west campus and shared a room with 2 other Turkish students, as did all other exchange students.



West campus

The housing conditions were alright, my roommates were nice, and it was nice being close to school, on average the ones that did not live around campus had to travel 1-1.5 hours to school, the school is quite far away from the city. The west campus also has nice student environment with student centres where you can hang out with friends, play pool, ping-pong, board games, buy food, swim (they have an indoor swimming pool), a gym, and a lot more.





West campus has a lot of free facilities for students, including an indoor swimming pool.

University and studies

The university was big, including the main campus dorms, separate buildings for all the different majors, a student centre, big sports centre that had a gym, basketball court, indoor running track, climbing and bouldering walls, a football turf, and an outdoor swimming pool. It was secluded and build on top of a mountainous forestry area, so when comparing it to the rest of city which has very little nature, Koç was kind of city of its own. A lot of the students rarely left the campus because they feel they had everything they needed close by.



The university is surrounded by forest and hills. The isolated building to the right with the green roof is the sports centre.



A grocery store in main campus

The university offers a big range of subject areas: medicine, engineering (mechanical, computer, electrical etc), business, philosophy, media and arts and a lot more. This was great because you had all kinds of people inside the same campus and that was a big difference to KTH who only has engineering students. All the courses are thought in English and there are plenty of language courses like Turkish, Chinese, Kurdish, Arabic and many more.

Courses

In Koç you generally take 5 courses for full-time studies. In my case I had to take one project course because of my master program and the rest could be free as long as it was related somehow to my degree. The school did not have much robotics courses, so I took this chance to take computer engineering courses I would not have a chance to take otherwise. The courses take place at the same times throughout the whole semester, this allows you to build your own schedule. My days were usually from 10-14:30. Fridays usually are off or for labs.

Software engineering (COMP 302)

This course teaches you software engineering principles as well as different patterns used in real development. The majority of the examination is done through a project done in a group of 4-6 students, the other part is quizzes or midterms on the different software development concepts and principles. Attendance is a part of the grade. The project is making a game in java using the different principles and patterns learned throughout the course. All in all, a lot of programming and diagramming. I made a lot of my friends from this course, both from my project group but also by being introduced to their friends. It was the best course I took, it was really interesting and I actually felt more prepared for real life work because we actually went through what is used out there.

Introduction to artificial intelligence (COMP 341)

Very broad course covering different search methods, probabilistic methods for Ai as well as machine learning and reinforcement learning. It is based on the Stanford course CS188. The teacher is very knowledgeable, and it is a popular course so it can be hard to get in if you don't apply early. The examination is done through different homeworks where you develop different algorithms for the classic Pacman game.

Deep learning and computer vision (COMP411)

This course covers the theory of deep learning applied to computer vision and is also based on a Stanford course. The homeworks were time consuming and there was both a final exam and a final project done in a group. The course was interesting but very time consuming.

Computer Systems and programming (COMP 201)

This course goes in depth into the C language and memory management. It has mandatory labs every week as well as an afterlab. The course also has 4 different homeworks, one midterm and a final exam, all of which count towards your final grade. This was the most time-consuming courses as well as the hardest course to grasp, but the teacher is really nice and funny, and I learned a lot from it.

Basic Arabic (ARBC 201)

I took this course to lighten the load a bit, it was not that time consuming, and the teacher is really nice and funny. The course is very manageable for beginners, and you learn a lot.

The first number in each course specifies which year you generally take the course, I took courses ranging from second to fourth year to get a taste of how it was to be computer engineering student in Koç.

The transcript of records used to transfer credits are sent to the home universities around march but can be requested earlier if you want. Before my exchange, I made sure to take all the mandatory courses here in KTH so that I would have as much elective courses left to choose from. This made it easier to fit courses because there were not that many robotics courses to choose from.

City and country

The school is very diverse with a large part of the percentage of the student populations being international students from all over the world. One way they celebrated this is by organizing an international week where you can try different foods from all around the world and activities like cooking workshops, movie screenings and with stalls where students could show things they brought from their home country.



International week. Each stall has students representing their country with posters, food and items etc.

Close to Istanbul are several other cities that are a short boat ride away. This allows for excellent day trips. Some nice spots are Burca who is known for their skiing resorts and Yalova that is known for their healing thermal waters.



Day trip to Yalova

Istanbul is famous for its historic buildings and its rich history. Most of these are free to see, the only downside is that it usually is very crowded. The school clubs offered guided tours many times throughout the semester.



Inside the famous Aya Sofia mosque (previously church) and outside Topkapi palace.

Close to the campus is Sariyer Merkez which is kind of like a bay area with boats that can take you to different parts of Istanbul. There are also plenty of shops and restaurants where you can enjoy traditional desserts like baklava.



The waters beside Sariyer Merkez



Turkish baklava with sticky ice cream

The biggest culture shock was probably the amount of people that lived in the city and that almost no one understood English. Having lived in Sweden my whole life it was quite the difference. On a positive note, the people are a lot warmer in Turkey, so it was easy to make friends, compared to Sweden. They are also very curious about life abroad, people very frequently came up to exchange students and asked about the life in their country and why they choose Turkey. This is how I met many of my Turkish friends.

The amount of animals on the street was also quite the shock, there were literally cats and dogs everywhere, even inside the campuses.



Cats everywhere...

Leisure and social activities

Mostly in my spare time I participated in the activities that the school or the student clubs offered. There were a lot of sports clubs, so there was always something that you could join. If not that, the student centres had lots of restaurants, cafes, games etc that you could play together with your friends. Istanbul of course has a lot of historical landmarks and museums that you can explore.

There is a nice bakery close to west campus were I frequently visited and ate traditional Turkish food like Pidé and Lahmacun. They also offered a wide selection of very nice cakes (they call them pasta). I came here many times after school with my friends and talked and ate cake with Turkish tea. This was one of my favourite activities, especially as the semester got more hectic and there was less time to go explore.



Hard to choose when there are so many cakes...

Sustainability

I believe you could travel sustainable by train, however it would take a long time and I choose not to do that. I remember the university offered textbook switching during the beginning of the semester to encourage students to share old textbooks. Other than that, the public transportation system is very good and cheap, this together with the Istanbul traffic encourages people to take public transportation.

Other recommendations and observations

If you stay in the country for more than 180 days, they might force you to pay a large fee (8000 sek) to continue using your phone. One option, recommended by the incoming team at the university, is to bring two phones into the country. I used an E-SIM for my whole time there, so I dodged this one, however the downside is that I did not have a Turkish number. Make sure you have access to Wi-Fi before you arrive, otherwise you might be lost for a couple of hours in the city like me. You can buy cheap E-sim cards using Airalo.

Try not to study too much and enjoy your time.