

IAESTE – Experience Report – Daejeon, South Korea

When I started my Master program at TUM, I told myself I would do an internship in some country I know nothing about before graduating. That was a very vague idea, but IAESTE seemed like the perfect organization for pursuing that goal. When I applied and got the admission for the first round (and the list with available positions) I filtered the most interesting out. And there it was: An institute in South Korea, offering an internship about Global R&D Strategies in the energy field. It was the perfect mix of energy-engineering and business for me (my background is in Electrical Engineering) and so I put it as my first choice. At this point I didn't know how much this experience would change me and how I would view back on this decision as one if not the most important of my life.

Fast forward a couple of months: After a successful interview with my future employer it was time to start taking care of the organizational things, reading about the country etc.

I will make it short. Nothing you do in advance will prepare you for Korea. The less you know before the more fun it will be. Maybe spend some time on the Hangeul-Alphabet. Everything else you will find out once you are there. Of course, I also made sure to submit all the necessary documents in advance. Thus, I was ready to take the flight into the unknown.

Arrival in Korea – First impressions – Accommodation

I arrived on the Friday before the beginning of my internship (duration: 6 months) at Incheon Airport, on a very rainy day. IAESTE in Korea had organized two very friendly Korean students who picked me up at the airport. With their help I bought a 1-month SIM card for approximately 50 Euros, because I didn't have the foreign resident ID yet. Then I took the bus to Daejeon, about 2.5 hours, where my colleagues picked me up. They were quite shy but at the same time so warm to me that I immediately knew I would have nothing to worry about- they would help me with getting started in Korea.

At that point I did not know if I would get a place in the student dormitory on the institutes campus or if I would have to find an apartment. Later I found out that all foreign interns were faced with that uncertainty. It turned out that this ambiguity was a quite typical problem when communicating with Koreans. My colleagues went to the administrative office of the Institute with me to ask about vacancies in the dormitories. I was lucky and got one. I know from the friends I met there, that it is very easy to find an apartment within a day or two in Daejeon. I got the keys to my room (we never locked it, Korea is very safe), a card that could open all the doors at the institute. The rent was only about 50 Euros a month, but the room was shared (there was not a lot of space, but I did not spend a lot of time in the room anyway).

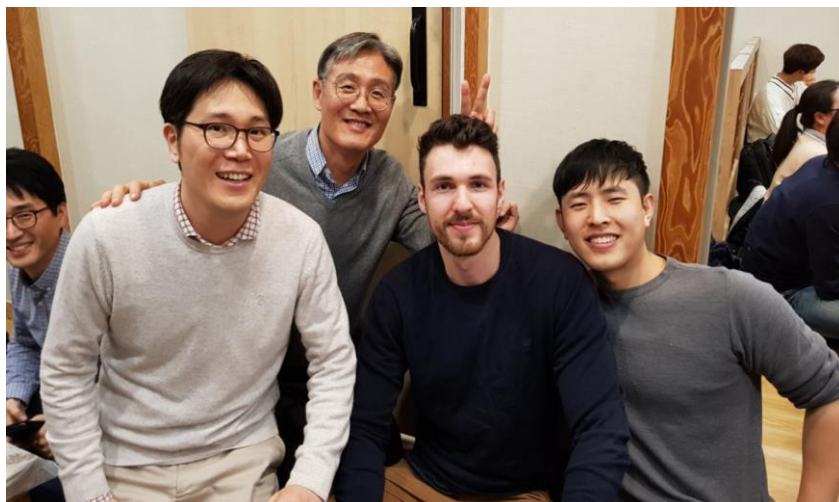
My internship at the Korean Institute of Energy Research (KIER)

As mentioned above I was working in the Global R&D Strategy Team. Without wanting to go into too much detail, their work entailed analyzing foreign R&D strategies and energy policies, facilitating strategic research partnerships and acquiring data on the state of technology-advancements in the research of different institutes. While KIER is a governmentally funded institute committed to develop technologies

My job was to analyze the German R&D strategies in the energy field, compare energy policies with the Korean energy transition and help with mapping of technologies of different institutes that conduct research on energy-related topics. I was working 8 hours every day and 1 hour lunch break (lunch was very cheap and all-you-can-eat) and had one day off every month (plus plenty of Korean National Holidays). The salary was quite big too, with roughly 1300 Euros a month (and only 50 Euros for accommodation!).

I had the chance to attend two different conferences on energy-related issues in Seoul. That was a very enriching experience and I learned a lot about the South Korean view on the energy-transition, climate change and energy policies. I finished my work by writing a report comparing the German and Korean energy transitions.

Apart from the work itself it was interesting to experience a different work culture. The Koreans are known for being hard workers and that is partly true. On the other hand, it would be totally acceptable to take a nap in the office (you might need it if you are going to stay until 10 p.m.). Another aspect of Korean business culture is Hweshik, going for dinner with your colleagues. Depending on your team or division this can happen once a week or once a month, but it will be a reoccurring event during your internship. The company always takes care of the bill and you get to socialize with your coworkers and get to know them better.



Dinner with the team

This was always a lot of fun, even when my Korean coworkers would switch from English to Korean and I would sit there trying to understand what they were joking about. Sometimes I would hear my name and they would laugh but they would immediately reassure me that they are not saying anything I should worry about. The day after would usually be less productive because of the high amount of alcohol consumption. Koreans liked to drink from minute one and they would often go to another bar after dinner was over. And sometimes even to a third one. Meanwhile, I always had to drink when the older colleagues told us to and pour them some more when they had finished theirs (a matter of politeness in Korea). Age is something that must be respected in Korea.

Communicating during work was not difficult because of English (my Korean colleagues were all fluent in English) but more because of the cultural differences.

Life in Korea

Living in Korea was a lot of fun (even though winters are quite harsh! Prepare warm clothes). When I was there, six other IAESTE interns from different European countries (see below picture) were also doing their internships at KIER. We spent a lot of time together. On the weekends we would usually try to organize some trip to Seoul (amazing city) or to other places in Korea. Transportation in Korea is generally quite affordable, fast and reliable.

A big part of going out in Korea is eating. Everywhere you go you usually eat. A lot of Kimchi and a lot of spicy food in general. The most fun experience was always the Korean barbecue, that is grilling the meat in the middle of the table and Being a vegetarian is sometimes a problem but one of the girls in our group managed t . Even though we hung out a lot at “foreigner bars” (bars that play western music and have drinks like cocktails and wine) we quickly discovered the Korean “Pochas”, bars where you go for drinking and eating (everything is being shared) and that have a quite unique atmosphere. We also learned about different drinking games that revolved around the Korean national drink: Soju.

In Korea you can do a lot of things at any time- some like to call it a 24/7 culture. For instance, you can go clubbing and then go to a Korean bathhouse (jjimjilbang) at 3 a.m. to chill out and maybe even take a nap. Street-life is incredibly vivid and there is always something to do.

From time to time we were meeting Koreans who wanted to hang out with us. Some showed genuine interest, some wanted to improve their English-speaking and some wanted to show off to their friends on social media (hanging out with foreigners is considered cool among some young people in Korea).

The most memorable experiences were made during the trips. We went to Seoul on many occasions. I recommend staying in Hongdae or Myeongdong. Itaewon is highly overrated and full of tourists and foreigners. A smaller city that is worth a 1 or 2-day visit is Jeonju. According to my Korean colleagues Jeonju has the best food in Korea.

It was always fun to explore new places, struggling with navigating through the cities and communicating with Koreans. Once we couldn't find which way to take and an

elder Korean man took notice, pointed to himself and then towards the direction and signaled us with a hand gesture that he would take us there. He led us through some hidden alleys and eventually we reached our destination. The whole interaction went without any exchange of words, but at least we knew enough Korean to thank him (gamsahamnida) once we had reached our destination.

We also managed to travel to places outside of Korea, namely Japan and Thailand- but I will not go into more detail in this report. I will just say that staying longer for your internship has the advantage that you get to see a lot more places and will enable you to visit neighbouring or nearby countries.



Last day with the IAESTE-interns

Some general recommendations

I would like to end this report with some general and some more specific recommendations and advice for your future internship and how to make the most out of your experience.

1. Take a lot of pictures, especially from everyday life and with the people you meet. Don't be lazy- keep a journal, too. Write down funny things you experience, stories of your trips or your learnings about the culture. Reflect on your experiences and on how they make you feel, what they invoke in you etc.
2. Try new things- use the opportunity of a new environment for trying out new things (e.g. Karaoke, Korean bathhouse, crazy food)
3. Many things you read about Korea on the internet while you prepare for your internship are misleading and sometimes even wrong. It is better to read less and go there without any prejudices.
4. Make some effort and try to learn Korean.

5. Don't rely on IAESTE or other people to organize trips. Instead try to organize your own trips- people will appreciate you taking the initiative.
6. Try to meet people who are not IAESTE interns (admittedly not always easy)
7. Learn from the culture and compare it with your own. Ask yourself: Do they maybe do some things better than us? Why do they have different views on some issues?
Try to see things objectively and in the context of the Korean culture.
8. Everything administrative you will figure out once you are there. That is: accommodation, banking, phone etc. Another learning from my internship: you don't always have to have everything planned- don't worry!

Conclusion

I had an amazing time in Daejeon, and I can highly recommend going on an internship with IAESTE to Korea. I made some very good friends, experienced many new things, saw amazing places and learned a lot during my time there. I developed a better sensitivity for cultural differences and realized how there are different ways of living, and one is not necessarily better than the other.

More pictures



Food in Korea



Bukhansan National Park in the outskirts of Seoul



Shared bedroom in the KIER dormitory (50 EUR /month)