

Meru University of Science and Technology

Meru, Kenya

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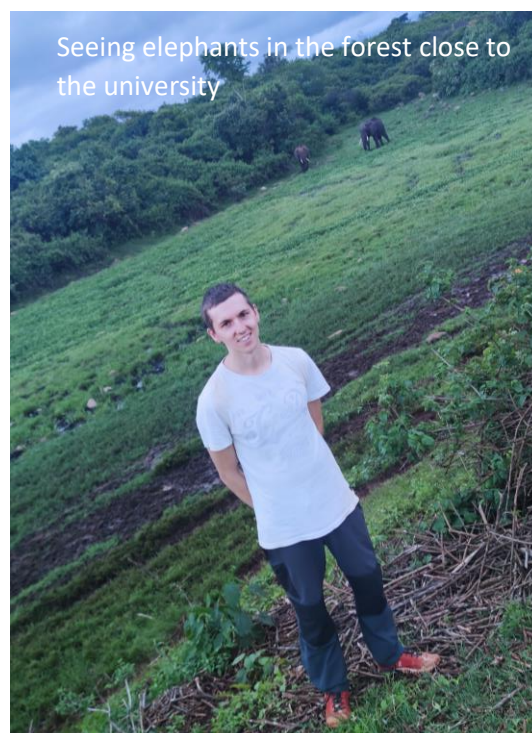
Receiving the IAESTE offer I was very excited, but having grown up in Germany I was also a bit concerned regarding health. After some preparation I knew that I wanted to do it, and I am very grateful for this unique and incredible opportunity.

Preparation

Before accepting my nomination for the IAESTE internship at Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST), I had met with a yellow-fever certified doctor for a travel consultation. She encouraged me to pursue this opportunity and scheduled the necessary vaccinations in a two-month period before the start of the internship. As time passed by quickly, we skipped the rabies vaccination. The doctor also prescribed anti-Malaria drugs which I took during my stay (this recommendation had just been changed due to climate change; talking to locals there was no Malaria risk (yet)). I was anyway careful to not be bitten by mosquitos and bought mosquito spray and a mosquito net which I impregnated.

For insurance I just bought the DAAD insurance after realizing that my health insurance insures only health, while the DAAD insurance covers health, liability ... :). I got a MasterCard and some US dollars that I exchanged partially at the airport. In retrospect Euros would just have done it, and I got better exchange rates at the airport than in the bank that I visited in Meru. In addition to the salary, I used my credit card to get cash at ATMs in Meru as cash and MPESA (mobile money loaded with cash) are the main means of payment. Lastly, I also registered at ELEFAND portal to notify the German diplomatic representation about my stay.

I also bought an umbrella (for the wet season), head lamp (in case of power outages; or getting water from the water tank in the dark, if there was no running water :)) and an immersion heater which came in handy. Bringing a second pair of (robust – mud) shoes (e.g., hiking boots) was also very practical for the wet season.



View from Mount Kunene next to the university



My workplace: 3rd floor in the innovation center



Arrival

Just before departure I got sick and decided to postpone my flight by three days (I did not book a flexible fare, but I could do it for 150Euro). Thankfully, my contact at MUST adapted despite my very short ahead change of plans.

Arriving in the night, I had booked an accommodation close to the airport in Nairobi that took care about the taxi transfer. This was helpful because it was chaotic outside the airport with taxi drivers vying for customers. Nonetheless, my taxi driver tried to get a double payment by asking me to pay although my host paid him. And I was lucky to see already some Zebras since they can roam around close to the airport at night.

A very friendly university driver picked me up the next day and showed me around on our trip (including a big waterfall with a chameleon :)). Arriving at MUST, I was welcomed by the IAESTE club that had prepared supper, which was very cool. They made sure I was settled for the first days and showed me around. The local IAESTE committee was highly engaged, and they wanted me to have the best possible experience and had a good feeling for what this might mean for me.



Living

MUST is not located in Meru but a bit north. The university is quite in the nature with a forest and farmers living around and the small village Nchiru in front of the university main gate. I lived in a small student housing outside the campus. One of the IAESTE students also lived there. He and the other students at my housing showed me a lot regarding cooking, buying stuff, washing clothes by hand, using MPESA ... This was very important because many things work a bit differently. They also taught me how to cook Ugali and Chapati which are two traditional staple foods that I liked very much.

The university and Meru lie in the proximity of the gigantic Mount Kenya (5199m high; but you can only spot it on clear mornings). With the altitude it can get a bit colder (for locals sometimes "very cold") in the evening and morning hours of the wet season (started in November). I hardly saw any mosquitoes apart from during the last two weeks of my stay. I walked every day 20-30min to work over the huge university area, which I enjoyed. However, the IAESTE students gave me the feeling that they try their best to accommodate my needs if anything bothers me (e.g., relocating, having somebody washing my clothes ...).

Since there were not many white people around, I stood out. Many students were interested in meeting me and getting my phone contact, also to inquire about opportunities abroad. Sadly, many young people were not too optimistic about the job market in Kenya and wished for leaving the country at least for some time.

As far as I saw it MUST has a big campus life with many student clubs. I missed looking more into this. Almost all students and many people I met spoke English very well, although Swahili mixed with some English words was the preferred language (for people not belonging to the same tribe :)).



Internship

For my internship I was assigned to a welcoming computer science researcher. As students are supposed to come up with their own projects, I had the feeling my supervisor wanted me to decide / come up with my project. I picked working on one of his suggestions: developing machine learning models for fact-checking climate change statements. This was extremely interesting since I learned a lot from basic natural language processing to the technicalities of how state-of-the-art AI language models including large language models like the one behind Chat-GPT work.

I worked independently on the project by reading literature and articles and implementing models on a (sometimes slow) desktop PC in the office and in the end on a GPU-accelerated workstation (hence, I hardly used my student laptop from home). I exchanged with my supervisor mainly regarding project proposals of other students and current available research grants. He also made it possible for me to join the graduation ceremony, the “Innovation week” and workshops of Safaricom (the company behind MPESA) and Google which all were very fascinating events.

For lunch I went to the staff cafeteria that provides tasty and big meals. I had frequently lunch on my own, which was also a bit my mistake as by just sitting closer to the lectures some of them joined me. Apart from a few exceptions (e.g., being invited by a lecturer to Nyama Choma – Kenyan BBQ at his place) I wanted to have a vegetarian diet (i.e., beans, cabbage, greens).



Presentation during innovation week

Lunch at the staff cafeteria

Trips

Since I was the only and first IAESTE student at MUST I did weekend trips with local students (that is also why I had the honor to be introduced personally to the Vice president of MUST :)). The IAESTE club organized cool events and I did single day trips to amazing places. For these trips I always went with a friend for who I often paid the ride and lunch. This was almost always a person from the IAESTE club, where I met many caring and engaged students. I only once went on my own to places I knew in Meru and while waiting for the Matatu many strangers

wanted to talk to me, which was a bit overwhelming and one of the rare moments I felt a bit unsafe.

For the trips I used public transport which was an experience on its own for me. It was very interesting to see different landscapes (forests around Meru, foggy highlands on the way to Nanyuki, savannah around Isiolo) and cultural differences (Isiolo was due to its Muslim character and Somali dishes in the restaurants very different from Meru and Nanyuki) close together.

Visiting an amazing waterfall at Kaithi close to the university and walking in the forest were also two highlights for me. When the wet season starts in November big African elephants come typically very close to the university (let that sink in :)), so that I could see them twice in walking distance from where I lived. On my last weekend five local high school boys guided us around the forest and in between some running and crawling sessions we saw a monkey, four gazelles and more elephants than I can count. As reward we invited them for supper to a local place, and they ate up the last Andazi and cup of tea that the place had to offer. This will be an unforgettable day for me.

Once a local farmer had offered to show me around (and maybe see some elephants and buffalo). I agreed and luckily a friend accompanied me because this guy was a bit sketchy. For such services for white foreigners adult locals often expect some money in return (here 200KSch). In general, some farmers, students, security guards asked me for food, money, a cup of tea. If I said no in a polite way, nobody was mad, but a few times I did not get around it.



Waterfalls at Kaithi



Forest at the university

Departure

To spend some more time in the country I booked my flight back one week after the end of the internship. During my stay I decided to book a safari to Maasai Mara (if you do it end of October you might be able to see the Serengeti great migration, but I guess also a lot of other tourists :); <https://www.safaribookings.com/> is a comprehensive comparison portal for safaris; upgrading to a jeep instead of a van might be worth it). This was also an amazing (so MANY animals :)) but different (touristy / commercial) experience.

General

These are some rules that I tried to follow

- eating cooked food in clean places; drinking sealed bottled water (also for brushing teeth), soda or hot tea; washing hands with soap more often (we are also talking about helminths / intestinal parasitic worms)
- observe infections carefully
- do not walk alone in darkness in strange areas
- avoid contact with fresh water (we are talking about schistosomiasis / blood fluke; even though there might not have been any risks, I wanted to be sure)
- avoid mosquito bites (long, light, not too thin clothing, also good to protect against sun; mosquito spray; impregnated mosquito net, I bought one with ~600 holes / square inch)