

When a Foreigner Moves to Switzerland

Coming from India to ETH for his Master studies, our author went through a real culture shock. Find out how he got started in Zurich and how he experienced cultural differences.

by Ninad Chitnis

Switzerland welcomed me with traditional Swiss music accompanied by the intermittent mooing of cows. Anyone who has ever taken a flight into or out of Zurich will realise that I am talking about the soundtrack playing in the train ferrying passengers to and from the international terminal at Kloten airport. Equipped with a basic knowledge of German, I was certain that the language wouldn't feel too alien for me. Little did I know about the intricacies of the dialect called Swiss German!

Getting started in Zurich

The very first culture shock for me was living in a WG. I was thrown in a randomly assigned WOKO WG by the Housing Office of ETH. Now, student housing in India is a lot different than here. There, we have dormitories with two people sharing a room on an average. In the hostels of most public institutions, shower and toilet facilities are shared by entire floors. Cooking is completely forbidden. And the hostels are strictly segregated by gender! Visit by members of the opposite sex are frowned upon outside certain hours and even exiting your own dormitory at night is not allowed. Co-ed apartments like here would for sure draw the ire of most educational institutes there. Compared to this, a WOKO flat is extremely luxurious, almost like living in a large family instead of student accommodation. A private room, a modernly furnished kitchen and a group of people to chill with. What more could a student need?

Another culture shock was during my first meeting with my tutor. It was the beginning of the

Fall semester and it was still warm enough for summer clothes. As I opened the door to the professor's cabin, I was surprised to see him in shorts and a T-shirt. No professor in India would ever turn up to the University in anything other than formals. And there is a distinct separation between the teacher and the students. We are always expected to use honorifics when addressing teaching staff. But here, I have seen most PhD students refer to their guides by their first names.

The little differences in daily life

While I was getting used to the protocols of social interactions, the shock of language was seeping in. Even my German classmates were complaining of not being able to understand the Swiss. What followed was an attempt to learn Swiss German with the help of the Language Centre's courses and the support of Swiss and German friends. The first step was identifying which words in Swiss German are different than Standard German. Then came the pronunciations. Soon I was overwhelmed by the language. My struggle continues as I work to improve my German while also trying to develop Swiss pronunciations. At this point, nearly two semesters later, I can say I have developed a sense of comfort with the language. Even though I don't understand everything yet, it doesn't disorient me anymore.

Then there are the infamous Swiss prices. Everything here is at least five times more expensive than what I was used to. A basic meal in a mensa in India costs only around CHF 1.-. Here I barely get a loaf of bread in that cost. In the initial days, I would convert everything I buy into Indian Rupees. But I soon realised it was pointless if I wanted to live here in peace. A friend told me 'you just get used to Swiss prices after a while.' Truly enough, I realised that when I visited Germany and

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Swiss clichés - mooing cows and mountains everywhere

felt everything was so much cheaper there while it actually was still more expensive than Indian prices. Only the factor was less. The upside of high prices here is that having a party is a lot easier. Most are, I noticed, 'bring your own food/drinks.' A party in India means the host pays for everything. Organising one here is just a matter of logistics and not making a big dent in your monthly budget.

As the shock of prices subsided, I was shocked yet again by timings. I understood the hard way that I don't want an empty fridge in Switzerland on a Saturday evening. The biggest hurdle was adjusting to eating times. My stomach was used to having lunch after 13:00 and dinner after 21:00. Here I was already in class when my stomach said 'lunch'. In the initial days, I forced myself to have lunch at noon. And when I would make evening tea and maybe have a snack around 18:30, my Swiss flatmates were already having dinner. Months later, I have finally managed to feel hungry at Swiss times.

Food matters

Talking of eating reminds me yet again of the stark contrasts between the food of the Indian subcontinent and Switzerland and the table manners. Here there's a variety of cutlery you are expected to use with your meal while there we simply use our hands to eat. For someone who has grown up in India, using a fork and a knife for every meal is as unnatural as eating everything using only your

hands is for someone from the western world. As I started cooking my own food, I was determined to not be stereotypical and always eat spicy food but appreciate the different flavours of the region's cuisine. That phase barely lasted a month. Soon I was putting chillies and other spices in everything and by this time I'm sure I have only reinforced the spice stereotype for my flatmates. Food is clearly one aspect of life in a different culture I have not come to terms with. On the bright side, here you can always rush to tap for drinking water if the food is too spicy. No need for long waits near a water purifier. Where I come from, these purifiers are a domestic necessity. Then come the drinking etiquettes. In India, social drinking is only now getting accepted. Someone openly carrying alcohol on public transport might get disapproving looks, and drinking in public, the way I have seen people do here, is outright illegal.

A long journey of discovery

Now I am at a stage where I am comfortable with the Swiss way of life though I cannot say that I have completely adjusted to the culture. Every few days, I learn something new about the country or its people and it surprises me. When I was new here, I would compare things with how we did something similar back home. Now I just accept it. As Prof. Samuel van den Bergh put it in his seminar for new international students at ETH, "cultures aren't good or bad, they're just different."

How International Students Can Feel at Home

by Ninad Chitnis

Experiences of culture shock are felt by every person who moves from one country to another or even changes regions within the same country. A Swiss-French person, for instance, might feel out of place as they move across the 'Rösti ditch'. To help new students cope up with this feeling of disorientation and adjust to life at ETH, various student organisations with a geographical focus exist under the umbrella of VSETH. The goal of these organisations is to provide support whenever required and also share the culture of their homelands.

A large Indian community exists at ETH and is supported by the 'Indian Students Association of Zurich.' This organisation helps new students adjust to life in Switzerland by assigning a 'mentor' to every new student to help with the settling in Zurich right from receiving them at the airport and also coordinates closely with the Indian Embassy in Bern. I found the organisation very friendly as they helped me with all the little things a person in a new city finds daunting such as familiarising with the public transport, opening a bank account and even suggesting small hacks to aid everyday life here. They also encourage interest in Indian culture by organising celebrations of major Indian festivals.

Another large community of international students exists among students coming from China. They are supported by the 'Association of Chinese Students and Scholars in Zurich.' Their goal is to provide a platform to facilitate communication between members and strengthen ties among the Chinese community in Zurich. They also promote bilateral relations between China and Switzerland by organising different cultural events around the year.

Even the smaller communities aren't any less represented. There are organisations for students

coming from Iran (Iranian Student Association at ETH/UZH), Sri Lanka (Tamilischer Verein der Studierenden), Albania (Albanischer Studierendenverein Zurich), Pakistan (Pakistani Students Association), the list goes on.

Even ethnic communities are well represented. The 'African Students Association of Zurich' represents students coming from the various countries on the African continent at institutions of higher education in Zurich. They aim to bring all the students of African origin together and promote their different cultures. The 'Muslim Students Association Zurich' represents the needs of Muslim students. They hold weekly prayer every Friday during the semester and organise cultural events from the Islamic world. The 'Latino Studenten Verein Zurich' brings together Spanish and Portuguese speaking people and organises events regarding Latino culture. Priding itself as the 'most alive student association in Zurich', they are the co-organisers of the famous 'Ménage à Trois'.

It's not just distant countries and cultures who are represented here. There's the 'Association francophone des étudiants de Zurich' of the French-speaking students, the 'Associazione Studenti Ticinesi a Zurigo' for Italian-speaking students from the Canton of Ticino, 'Societas Studentium Vallesanorum Turici' for students from Valais and many more. The overall aim of all these bodies is the same. Make members of the community feel at home when they are actually miles away from their comfort zone.

You can find a comprehensive list of all the international student organisations associated with ETH at: ethz.ch/students/en/campus/student-associations/international-student-associations.html

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Wir argumentieren täglich und glauben häufig, überzeugend gewesen zu sein. Vielfach sind wir dann überrascht, wenn der Gesprächspartner nicht überzeugt ist. Woran liegt das?

Das Buch zeigt, wie man professionell, gezielt und letztlich überzeugend argumentiert. Entsprechend ist das Buch für alle geeignet, die an ihrer Argumentationstechnik feilen wollen. Anhand eines fiktiven Bewerbungsgesprächs wird die Theorie des Argumentierens kurz und verständlich erläutert. Den Schwerpunkt bilden zahlreiche praxisorientierte Übungen mit kommentierten Lösungsvorschlägen.

Die zweite Auflage enthält neu unter anderem ein Kapitel zum Thema *Gegenargumentation*.

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