

Exchange experience at the University of Melbourne

By Kai Mayer

My name is Kai Mayer, I am 25 years old at the time of my research stay in Melbourne and I spent a year of my studies in the master program Biofabrication (University of Bayreuth) at the University of Melbourne.

As soon as I learned about the awesome possibility to spend a time of my master studies abroad in Australia, I was very interested and sought for advice at the office of Melanie Poehlmann and Sylvia Sproedhuber about the "Bayreuth-Melbourne Polymer/Colloid Network". After a short chat with them, everything regarding the stay seemed to easy to be true. I should just find a cooperation partner in Melbourne and find a topic for my research. The perfect possibility for that was the Bayreuth summer school in 2017 where, amongst others, Prof. Andrea O'Connor from the University of Melbourne was visiting Bayreuth. I was very interested in her talks and could see myself working in her group. After one of the presentations, I approached her, and we quickly connected, and she was highly interested in working closer with Dr. Scheibles group (of which I was somehow part as master student of his program).

Via Email and skype, we arranged a somehow defined area in which my project should take place and I could write a short proposal and motivational letter with this information.

Now I was ready to go back to Melanie and Sylvia and everything went really fast. Everybody (Andrea O'Connor, Thomas Scheibel and myself) agreed on the plan to send me to Melbourne for not only one semester as it would be the usual case, especially regarding the scholarship given by the DAAD, but for two whole semesters to conduct my advanced module (24 ECTS) and right after that my master thesis (30 ECTS) in Prof. O'Connors Group. This was achieved as a one-time exception to prove that the programs from Bayreuth (Biofabrication) and Melbourne (Biomedical Engineering) are closely related to strengthen the negotiations about a joint master's degree between the universities.

The DAAD agreed to fund my stay for full 12 months with 825 € and a maximum of 1200 € for the flight expenses.

From that point on I could start planning and applying for enrolment at the University of Melbourne, as the enrolment is needed to apply for a Visa. Surprisingly, that step took very long (approximately 2-3 months) but as soon as I got the acceptance letter, I was able to apply for the student visa, which got accepted only 2 hours after submitting it. Everything concerning the scholarship and the flight costs, were handled with ease from the network office and I never had to worry about any financial things.

Everything was now settled and my adventure in Melbourne was about to begin.

I arrived at the end of march. Flying out of the snowy Frankfurt and arriving at 30 °C, surrounded by palm trees in the beautiful botanical gardens in Melbourne was a welcome change. The first impression of Melbourne was outstanding. Walking through

the streets and simply see smiling and happy people was really not something I was used to coming from the German winter.

For the first two weeks, I stayed at the graduate house on the University of Melbourne campus. That short stay was very convenient to adapt to the new timezone, get used to the new surroundings and stroll around a bit. Food was provided every morning and every evening during weekdays and the rooms were cleaned every few days.

On my first day at the University, I met Andrea O'Connor in her office and she introduced me to the lab and my new colleagues. After the first week of lab inductions, organizing keys and my enrolment, I could finally start with my work.

I won't go into specifics about my work as this report is meant for the exchange experience only. Everybody who is interested in my work here can read about it in my thesis once it is handed in.

After my two weeks stay in the graduate house, I was able to take over the flat of a student from Bayreuth who just finished his 6 months stay in Melbourne. Here I learned my first lesson: Melbourne is bigger than it seems. What I mean by that is that the new flat was not really that far away from the campus (10 km) but the public transport in Melbourne is not the fastest. There is no inner-city subway but a tram. The tram is free in the CBD of Melbourne, which was between my home and the university. The downside of a free tram is that it is crowded and stops every few meters. That results in walking through the CBD being faster than taking the tram. Furthermore, outside of the free-tram-zone, it is quite expensive with \$4.30 for two hours of tram riding. That results in nearly \$9 a day which again is \$45 a week and around \$200 a month. Without considering taking tram and trains on the weekends. Master students and internationals are not eligible for student concession fares. On top of that, taking the tram to uni took about 45 minutes which is, after the first month where I really enjoyed the scenery every ride, a time loss of 1.5 hours a day.

Long story short, I looked for a new place to stay that is closer to University. And here I found one of the best experiences of my stay in Australia. In Melbourne, the flat market is unbelievable fast. So as soon as I found someone to take over my contract, I started inspecting around 10 flats and, in the end, decided for a flat share with 10 other people. If someone would have asked me before, I would have said that I would never do something like this, but I immediately connected with the people and found some great friends. The house is even for Melbourne something special. There is no A/C or heater, and everything is a bit old (heritage house) but the company made more than up for that. During my stay, the housemates changed a lot. That is another usual thing for Melbourne (at least in the central city). Nobody here stays forever. It is a city where people come, earn experiences, grow, make friends, have an awesome time and... leave again. So, during my time there I lived with 1 Argentinian, 1 Italian, 1 British, 2 Indonesians, 1 Irish, 2 Polish, 2 French, 2 Americans, 1 Australian, 1 New Zealander, 1 Columbian, 1 Mexican and 1 Singaporean. Everybody was very respectful with each other and we spend some unforgettable time such as tours on the great ocean road and a trip to New Zealand over Christmas and New Years. That house quickly became home to me and will always think back to my time there with a big smile and hope to stay in contact with the people.



I think this house is the perfect representation for the whole city. It is unbelievable colourful with people from everywhere and I rarely encountered situations where people treated each other in a bad way.

Expect for my very nice stay in that house and working at the University, I travelled for a bit. For example, early on in April, I met some dutch people on facebook and went on a weekend hiking trip with them to Wilsons Prom. That national Park is more than beautiful and the trail lead from mountaintops through jungle forests areas directly to white sand beaches where we also put up our tents for the night. One more thing to consider is the big animal variety and so it came that our food supplies were stolen overnight by possums so that we just found empty banana peels the next day. On the other hand, we could spot kangaroos jumping over the beach at night. These moments make Australia really very special.

My furthest adventure took me the way up to the Gold coast which is, considering the total size of Australia, still pretty close to Melbourne but already pretty tropical. 300 m broad, white beaches with sand so fine it even makes a sound when walking on it. I have never seen something comparable. One should not be afraid of animal, tho. water dragons run around just about everywhere but are completely harmless.



This is the area where I spotted hand-sized spiders and 7 m long snakes. However, the snakes were housed at the Australia Zoo. This is the home of the crocodile hunter Steve Irwin himself. I used to love his TV shows as a kid and of course could not resist to see his testimonial and I am more than happy I did so. This was the single most exiting day for me in Australia. This “Zoo” doesn’t feel like one. Koalas hang around everywhere and are not even in cages and the animals actually seem like they are looked well after and enjoy their time. I can really recommend a visit there.



All In all, the stay in Melbourne and the rest of Australia was an awesome experience and I would not want to miss that. I can only recommend it to anybody who is even slightly interested. Many, many thanks again to everybody who made that possible for me, especially Melanie and Sylvia who were always there if some unexpected situations occurred.

For further questions and details, I am always happy to help via email: kai.mayer@uni-bayreuth.de or via phone +4917620906148.

Here are some more pictures to get a closer feeling of what Australia is like (because it is NOT ONLY a red desert 😊)



