

Political Science (major) Cultural Anthropology (minor); Bachelor of Arts  
USA  
August 2018 – May 2019  
San Diego State University  
USA-2018-W18S19-w

## REPORT ABOUT MY FIRST TERM AT SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY (SDSU)

California – the Golden State. And I was going to live there. I was beyond thrilled when I found out that my application for the California-State-University-Program was successful and even more that my preference, San Diego, has worked out, too. I was going to live close to Los Angeles as well as the border, two places of enormous importance. But to live there turned out to be a bit different from what one would expect. But in detail:

### Arrival

After 24 hours on the go, I finally arrived at San Diego the week before the “Orientation Week” for International students started. The cheapest one-way flight I was able to book was not the most convenient one, sending me to Manchester and San Francisco first. It really pays off to book the flight there and back in advance together, but it was not that clear to me back then. The cab ride I took to get to my hotel room for the first night left me baffled. San Diego’s airport is located directly next to downtown which means you can catch a glimpse of the majestic skyscrapers when arriving per plane. Less euphoric was I when I saw the area of my university and where I was going to live: “College area” looks rather like I imagined suburbs to be than the exciting downtown, but at least it meant that it was going to be quieter.

My first week went great. I moved in with different people I met on Facebook into an apartment which we were able to sign the lease for already in advance. It was fully furnished which was a great advantage, but sadly I discovered a cockroach on the second day which should haunt us over the whole period of our stay. But besides that, I loved everything at first: The weather was amazing, the campus is beautiful and people in the supermarkets, in the bike shop and on campus where incredibly helpful, funny and kind. The International Office at SDSU organized relatively good events to get to know the campus and to be aware of issues concerning security, the visa, grades and more. It also enabled us to get to know each other, but people mostly stuck with other students from their home country which I tried to avoid. The information we received was nevertheless plenty and helped to adapt to the new environment. The team of the “International Student Center” as they are called made it further clear that they were there to help.



Hepner Hall, on campus

## Preparation

How I was going to live, what courses I was going to take and the purchase of an insurance: All these things I had already settled before I came to the US. Still, there is no reason to overly stress



**Taco: Borderland cuisine**

about these issues. There is basically only one insurance San Diego State accepts which you can purchase over the website of the International Student Center. Further, I was informed timely when to choose my courses which was about three to four months before the term at SDSU started. For political science it was not so much a struggle to get into the courses I was interested in, but it might depend on the subject. Housing might be a more complicated matter. As I, just like most other International students, was not eligible for “on-campus”-housing, I had to search for an alternative from abroad. Of course, there is the possibility to move to San Diego and search for a place to live when on site but I preferred an apartment beforehand.

There are quite a few privately-run apartment complexes close to campus from which I chose one. Over Facebook-groups (e.g. SDSU Housing, International Students Fall 2018) I then found enough roommates to share an apartment with. The costs for housing are particularly high. Under 900\$ there is no way to find a private room, cheaper are shared rooms which option I picked. Looking back, I would have probably been more patient and would have tried to find people I would have had more in common, but this is naturally hard from a distance.

## Highlights

As a political science major, it was stunning to be in the United States at times of high polarization. My favorite moments where I felt like I was able to be close to the happenings. When there were protests and riots at the border, I had reports from classmates who lived there the next day. It makes all the difference to be there to really understand. Studying political science in another country is incredibly eye-opening and highly recommendable. I started to truly comprehend the United States and their political actions. But it goes both ways: As I was active in an organization of the student government I was told that it was enriching to have international perspective through me.

My biggest non-political highlight was a daytrip to the desert, Salvation Mountain and Slab city, a hippie trailer park from the 60s. California is rich in interesting places and easy to discover – with a car. The location of San Diego, between mountains, the Pacific and in the desert is unique and really invites to explore all these different places in and around.



**The desert**

## Things I had to get used to

Highly problematic is the lack of a good public transport infrastructure. I started the term of ambitiously and bought a bike, thinking I could travel San Diego just like at home. After being yelled and honked at several times I gave up mastering any journeys besides the one to campus and back home. After a few months where I relied on the car rides friends gave me (barely any of my international friends had a car though) and wasting a lot of money on Uber and Lyft, two transportation mobile apps, I decided I had to get a car. This is surely something very different from home where I would have never considered buying a vehicle. Mastering the streets in the United States can be hard, but it is still better to be stuck on campus and in a neighborhood where there are not many things to do. To go to the beach, to go to downtown, to go to the beautiful Balboa park or to a nice coffee place: You need a car. I can recommend everyone to buy a car in the beginning of the term rather than renting one as you can sell the car back and have no restrictions with that on travelling. I bought a car of Craigslist which I only dared to do as I had a friend with a lot of experiences with cars with me. Lastly, I only had to get a few things done on the car and bought a car insurance which is mandatory to have.

Another thing I would have liked to know before I came here was how important “Greek Life” at SDSU is. Greek life is basically an umbrella-term for sororities and fraternities on campus, and it is shaping the university a lot. They are social organizations at colleges which are somewhat related to *Studentenverbindungen* as they exist in Germany. Back at home I feel like it is not as popular or present, here in the United States I was overwhelmed by the very different culture on campus this creates.

## Daily life at SDSU

As I chose housing close to campus I can conveniently reach my college within seven minutes with my bike. Further, most private student housing facilities also offer a shuttle bus to campus so that no one must walk more than 5 minutes (very important here!). All my courses I took were taking part biweekly, further you were expected to do homework after every meeting. Like in Germany, I therefore spent a lot of time next to my classes in the library to be able to meet my workload. The difference here was though that you were being examined way more often. In three of my courses I had weekly quizzes I had to take online or in class concerning the reading. The courses were very much “back to school” for me as the professor is more of a teacher than anything else and there was mandatory homework and less class discussions. In the end, there might have been more work, but then again it was definitely easier to get a good grade here.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
05:00					
05:30					
06:00					
06:30					
07:00					
07:30					
08:00					
08:30	WRLT-101 (Su-Tu)		WRLT-101 (Su-Tu)		
09:00					
09:30					
10:00					
10:30					
11:00	POL S-183 WU-225	POL S-383 S-201	POL S-183 WU-225	POL S-383 S-201	
11:30					
12:00					
12:30					
13:00					
13:30					
14:00		POL S-430 WU-225		POL S-430 WU-225	
14:30					
15:00					
15:30					
16:00					
16:30					
17:00					

1My class schedule

The campus does not really have a cafeteria like the university in Freiburg has but there are different stores on campus e.g. Subway and the obligatory Starbucks-stores where everyone grabs their coffee. This means again that life here is more expensive than back in Freiburg where the “Mensa” provides cheap, filling meals.

A great benefit of the US college-system is that it is very easy to take courses completely different from the major. In my next term I will take a surfing class for example and receive 2 ECTS for it. Further it is possible to do certain internships for which you can also receive credits what I am considering, too.

### **College Unity**

The US-universities are proud of their own identity and have a strong sense of belonging. The campus-wear can be seen all the time, and many watch the football game of the own college team which is free for students. This can be quite weird at first, but it also means that it feels like the college cares a lot about the well-being of their students. One event particularly struck me: On the Friday before college starts, SDSU hosts a huge outdoor event to welcome the Freshmen. They have music and cheerleader, but the highlight is the “welcome walk”. The welcome walk consists of all the new students that are sent through an archway of Hepner Hall, the famous SDSU-landmark. Inside different members of staff and parents are lined up to give you a high-five, congratulate you on getting into SDSU and cheer at you as a form of welcoming. I have rarely felt as appreciated and was deeply moved.



**Very US-American: A football match**

### **What I miss the most**

Many people have told me it is a specific feature of Southern California: I found it very hard to build meaningful connections with other people. I was very lucky to have a great roommate for the first term to talk about anything with, but my other relationships with “natives” have remained superficial. Further, most other exchange students are just here for a term and are more interested in travelling mostly. I joined a lot of clubs on campus which SDSU has many interesting of, but again I was not able to build relationships that would go beyond the club activity. This might also have to do with the lack of possibilities to go out close to campus and that many of the students are commuters. As I am a very social person this was particularly hard for me, but it also teaches you to be able to be on your own.

### **To sum it up**

I can honestly recommend everyone to leave the European comfort zone and go on a global exchange. You will most definitely be exposed to greater difference which makes you rethink many aspects of your own personal life and perhaps also academic issues. Studying political science has not just made me an expert of another political system but also broadened my views on subjects as migration. It provokes you to rethink your beliefs and embeds your thoughts in a broader context.

There are of course downsides to San Diego. It is frustrating without a car and considering the campus fees, the insurance(s), the housing costs and other living costs it is quite expensive - with and without your own vehicle. But if you are ready for a completely different experience and can gain a scholarship or so this year might be just right for you.