DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/ German Academic Exchange Service) RISE Professional Program 2016

June 1\textsuperscript{st} - August 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2016

Tarini Bhatnagar
PhD candidate
Department of Earth Sciences
Columbia University, New York, USA.
After studying for three years and reaching a comfortable position in my academic run at Columbia University, I wanted to gain work experience in a different country, a place that could offer me a new cultural experience. That was the underlying reason I moved from India to US, and now, again, it was time to explore something new. I did some research and came across DAAD RISE professional program. To be honest, I did not have high hopes, as internships in earth sciences are very limited and only offered at a few places. But to my luck, I found one with DAAD that matched exactly with my interests and professional goals. I quickly went ahead and applied for the position.

The application process was quite easy and convenient. In a few months, I was offered a summer internship at Forschungszentrum Jülich, which is a member of Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres and is one of the largest interdisciplinary research centres in Europe. Even though I was studying on an international passport and visa in US, I had no problem in getting a Schengen visa. The only difficult part was finding housing in Jülich. However, my German advisor was very helpful and it was through her contacts that I was able to find an accommodation. I will advise future participants to start early to look for a place to stay. Try to build connections in your area (through social media etc) as they can really offer help by letting you about local vacancies, which you might no be able to find being otherwise.

I arrived in Germany with practically no German speaking skills, which was a bit terrifying, but my colleague was kind enough to receive me at the station and help me settle down in my new home. This was really helpful, as my landlord didn’t speak any English! I started my work at the Institute of Biogeoscience at Forschungszentrum Jülich. In my department, hydrogeophysical and remote sensing methods are combined to understand flow and transport processes at various scales. My colleagues were really warm and welcoming. On my first day at work, I was welcomed to a group lunch and everybody took out time from their schedule to say hi to me. It was great to meet so many new people.
My project work involved characterization of geophysical properties of peatlands in northern Germany using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). This is a useful tool for mapping shallow subsurface electrical properties, such as electrical conductivity, and can be used to characterize the lateral and vertical changes of the soil properties. A typical day included reviewing literature and adding to the data processing manual by extending and modifying the existing Matlab algorithms. Our group had a daily lunch and coffee break which I always looked forward to, as it was much more relaxed and socializing than in the US.

However, my intern was quite different from others as it involved 6 weeks of fieldwork in Northern Germany. This was the highlight of my internship as I have always enjoyed working outdoors. My advisor and a few other students helped us to kick-start everything for first 5 days, but then my colleague and I stayed back for the rest of the time. In field, we measured GPR data sets at different peatlands with different land type use, e.g. natural areas, wet grasslands and rewetted areas. Our aim was to process this data to determine peat thickness and investigate the confining layers that are acting as gas traps. This experience was a great learning experience as it gave me an opportunity to work independently in a remote, local area away from city life, and a chance to take responsibility of all the work.

Collecting GPR data in peatlands.
Outside of work, I took this opportunity to travel around to places including Belgium, Amsterdam, Paris, Switzerland and Italy. This was a very pleasant experience due to the impressive ease of travel in Europe. It was very convenient as all modes of transportation were very punctual and all bookings could be done online. I would also like to mention the DAAD meeting in Heidelberg. Those 3 days were very enjoyable and it was a pleasure to meet other DAAD scholarship holders and learn about their experiences. The event was extremely well organized and I really enjoyed my stay, which concluded with an opportunity to witness Heidelberger Schlossbeleuchtung (castle illumination fireworks).

I can confidently say that my summer in Germany was well spent and it was a pleasure to learn so much about a new country and explore their way of life. I truly appreciated people’s dedication towards their work. This comes through quite clearly in the excellent quality of the research being done over here. I will surely look forward to come to Germany again.
With fellow DAAD RISE Professionals at Heidelberg.

Presenting my research at DAAD Heidelberg meeting.
Exploring Heidelberg with RISE fellows.

Heidelberg castle illumination fireworks.

I agree that my report and accompanying pictures may be used by the DAAD in printed materials, presentations, and on websites in order to inform funding organizations, sponsors, and students about the RISE program.