

# Experience Report Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

## 2018-2019

### Study programme

The undergrad law programme in the Bahir Dar University (BDU) consists of 5 years. The university was very accommodating with the courses I wanted to attend as they gave me a free choice. Several courses are focussed on the Ethiopian legal system specifically but there are also multiple courses which have a (partial) international focus. I followed the following courses:

- 1<sup>st</sup> year courses: Introduction to Ethiopia legal System and Customary Law – both courses are easy to follow and quite interesting if you want to know more about the applicable laws in Ethiopia
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year course: Constitutional law – Can be a little boring and repetitive but as I already followed Comparative Constitutional Law at the RUG it was a fairly easy course
- 4<sup>th</sup> year courses: International Humanitarian Law, Environmental Law, Water law – I highly recommend following IHL and IEL! Both courses are truly interesting and my teachers (Tefera and Abiy) were really knowledgeable on their subjects. Water law has the potential of becoming a great course as the subject is nice, but I did not have the best teacher for it
- LLM course: the BDU granted me permission to follow some masters courses as well. While I only followed the International Human Rights Law course for a grade, I also attended the course on Philosophy and Politics of Human Rights. If you like a little challenge and enjoy IRHL I would encourage anyone to seek approval to follow these courses as well.

All courses have Teaching Materials which you can download online or get in hard copy from the Law Students Union. Do get them because some teachers literally follow the materials and often refer it. The examination is not just based on one final exam but consists of a mid-term exam, at least one assignment, a final exam and the class participation.

The pace of the Ethiopian learning process is slower than in Groningen and the teachers do not really expect a lot of preparation before you attend class. For me, this made some classes almost too easy, yet, I also appreciated the less demanding learning environment.

### Language

The main language spoken in Bahir Dar is Amharic, this is also the working language in Ethiopia, yet if you travel to a different region than the Amhara region you will most likely encounter other languages. Some people speak English but expect most people's knowledge to be limited to a few words. Try to learn some simple words in Amharic, the people truly appreciate the effort and they will be very willing to teach you some more.

Naturally, people at university do speak English, however, some teachers and students might be inclined to switch to Amharic while explaining or asking questions. It is okay to remind the teacher to use English or request a translation for Amharic questions or answers.

### Finance and other conditions

Ethiopia could be regarded as a relatively cheap country. The currency is the Ethiopian Birr (ETB). Especially the food is rather cheap. On campus you can buy a meal in the student lounge for 13 ETB (€0.40), the meals are not fancy, but they are tasty, filling and in good portions. In the city most main dishes in the restaurants range from 40 to 100 ETB (€1.24 – €3.10); they're cheaper if you eat in the small local places and more expensive if you choose touristy place or hotel to eat. Tipping is appreciated but not obligatory, usually tips are not more than 5 ETB.

I bought most food at the gebeya (market) where most vegetables are less than 20 ETB per kilo, meat should not exceed 100 ETB per 500g and rice or pasta should be between 20 and 30 ETB per kilo. In Bahir Dar the main forms of transportation are shared taxis and Bajaj. Shared taxis usually cost

between 2 and 5 ETB if you are traveling within the city. Bajaj should ask between 10 and 50 ETB depending on the distance. Be aware the drivers will always ask way too much first because you are a foreigner. It is acceptable to bargain down the price but do not be surprised some drivers simply drive away if they disagree with you. Don't worry though, because there are Bajaj everywhere.

### **Preparation and contacts with the faculty before, during and after your stay**

For me, it took quite some time before all preparations for my exchange were properly finished. Firstly, there were various discussions about potential political unrest in the country and a degree of uncertainty whether I would be allowed to actually go to the country. Secondly, it took the BDU a while before they had their academic calendar approved. Hence, I completed my full application quite late as well, regardless, this was not a real problem as the Ethiopian academic year only started in October.

The contact with the faculty itself went well. Before my exchange I corresponded with Mr Alebachew (the Law School director). He is helpful and understanding because patiently answered any question I had both regarding the university as well as the city or country itself. While studying at the BDU, Mr Alemu (the department head) accepted to be my contact person. I was welcomed in his office at any time he was present, he patiently answered all my questions and always tried to help me to his best capabilities. I visited his office quite a lot since not all classes went smoothly but he always found a workable solution for me.

Before I left Mr Alemu and Mr Alebachew ensured I could finish all my courses in time before I left even though the semester was extended. Moreover, they provided me with all the necessary documents before I left.

### **Housing**

I had a slight issue with the housing at the beginning of my stay in Bahir Dar. The first 3 weeks I resided at Addis Continental, upon recommendation of a contact of the university. This was not ideal as the place was expensive and far from Yibab Campus, however, after some help of a broker I found a nice place in Kebele 13. This a nice and safe Kebele where more foreigners reside. Plus, it is close to the condominium where many teachers reside so you can simply walk there and take the teacher bus to campus.

I rented a house for 10,000 ETB a month (approx. €310) including g/w/e. It was quite big (could have easily housed two people), clean and had all necessary amenities as it was furnished. For me, the best part of the house was the contact with the owner and his family. They completely accepted me as part of their family and we often ate the food my 'Ethiopian mama' prepared together and we drank coffee or tea together on almost a daily basis. I totally recommend residing there.

### **Culture**

Ethiopia has a lovely culture. They have a particular way of eating food; it is served on and eaten with injera (the greyish Teff pancakes) which the country is very proud of. Common foods are e.g. shiro (paste made of beans and chickpeas), tibbs (meat) or doro wott (chicken in sauce). Yet, in the city you can also buy other dishes such as pizza, rice, pasta, burgers or salads. Do note that Ethiopians eat (almost) all food with their hands, especially if it is served on injera you are expected to tear off a piece of injera and grab the other foods on top of it with that.

Bahir Dar has several traditional dance clubs. Here Eskista, the traditional shoulder dances, is performed. They're nice to look at and the atmosphere in the clubs is really good. Don't be surprised if the dancers invite you to stand up and dance with them and do not be ashamed to try and dance with them, it is all good fun. Also try some Tej (traditional honey wine) while you're at one of the clubs. The Tej is rather tasty though you have to be careful because the alcohol level is quite high.

## Free time

I had a fair amount of free time since the BDU is less demanding than the Groningen University. A lot of Ethiopians like to spend their time eating food with their friends or drinking coffee or tea together, so I also did that often. I spent quite some time with my Ethiopian family as well. For the rest I often took walks around Lake Tana because it has beautiful surroundings and I also just spent a lot of time on Campus because I had internet access there and that is quite useful.

## Travelling

I did not have too much time to travel the country. Because of some slight complications the semester started later than expected but the university could not give me an exact date as to when it would commence so I could only take short trips when they told me to wait a few more days.

Two things which should be on your list to near Bahir Dar are a boat trip on Lake Tana (you can see hippos and pelicans, walk around on the islands and visit old monasteries) and a trip to the Tis Abay (the walk to the waterfalls is already worth it because the landscape is beautiful and the waterfalls itself are also amazing).

If you a few days off I highly recommend to visit Gondar and the Simien Mountains. Gondar holds the remains of seven castles of former rulers of Ethiopia. Go to the Simien Mountains if you enjoy trekking in beautiful nature and landscapes. I went trekking for 3 days in the national park and the views were absolutely breath taking. Going to Simien was one of my best decisions made in Ethiopia. If you are interested in some travelling, ask the university (or me) for Tegistu's number. He owns a travel agency (Ethiopian Travel Adventures) and is friends with Mr Alebachew, he helped me with all my touristy endeavours while I was in Ethiopia.

## Other

Be aware that you will stand out as if you have a lighter skin tone than the people there. People, both children and adults, often people will call you out as faranji (foreigner) on the streets. Don't be offended by this, they just like greeting foreigners and this is the way they do it. And even in Bahir Dar people might look surprised to see a foreigner or children will want to touch you or shake your hand (I thought this only happened in rural areas but apparently this is not the case).

It is good to remember Ethiopia uses both a different calendar and time indication. They celebrate New Year in September where they entered 2011 (which was for us 2018). The Ethiopian clock starts when the sun rises at 6 am. Therefore 7am will be 1 in the morning and 3pm will be 8 in the afternoon. It's pretty simple once you understand you only have to subtract 6 hours from our time indication. It might be wise to clarify whether you're using local time or not to avoid misunderstandings.