

Dermatology in Graz, Austria

I knew that I wanted to do an international rotation during my fourth year of medical school, but the question was where. In browsing the IMER listing of sister universities, I came across a program in a city I'd never heard of: Graz, Austria. I decided to take a chance on it and I am so glad that I did. As I write this, I am on my way back to the United States after completing a month-long dermatology rotation at the Medical University of Graz.

Graz is actually the second largest city in Austria, after Vienna. It is located about 200 km south of Vienna in the Austrian state Styria, of which is it the capitol. It is a major education center, home to several universities including the Medical University of Graz, so it is sort of a European version of a college town. Graz is situated on the Mur River in a basin surrounded by mountains except to its south where it is open to Mediterranean climate, causing the weather in Graz to be unusually warm and mild for its latitude. I was there during April and the weather was pretty comparable to Minnesota's May weather.

Graz is a beautiful, peaceful city and a lovely place to live for a month. Less well-known to tourists than other major European cities, it has retained a distinct European atmosphere as well as its own unique charm and character. I spent many happy hours wandering and exploring the city. It found it to be brimming with a large diversity of interesting sights and activities to suit all tastes. Graz has an abundance of both well-preserved historic old buildings and avant-garde modern architecture coexisting side by side. It has even been designated a UNESCO City of Design, one of just 11 cities worldwide, which also makes for some interesting shopping in the city center's shop-lined streets. Theater, music, and the arts have a strong presence in Graz as well. It is also a very green city with sprawling city parks and ubiquitous bike paths. Just outside the city the terrain is mountainous and the south is full of vineyards, apple orchards, and thermal spas.

Graz is quite easy to navigate. The entire city is well-connected with public transportation via trams or buses that are intuitive to figure out and astoundingly reliable. Walking was my most frequent mode of transport, however, as most distances in the city were quite traversable on foot. I also rented a bike one weekend to make some excursions into the countryside. Graz is also a major travel hub with a large train station and small airport, so travel to other cities and countries is quite easy. During my stay I took weekend trips to Prague, Vienna, and Salzburg.

I was assisted in making arrangements for my rotation by the Medical University of Graz's international exchange program coordinator, which was quite helpful. I stayed in a student dormitory during my rotation. There were some frustrations in making these arrangements, partly due to language and cultural barriers and partly due to the very minimal office hours kept by the housing management staff. The dorm itself was quite inexpensive (310 Euro/month for a private room). It was not exactly luxury conditions (you get what you pay for!) and my neighbors were rowdy college-age exchange students whose nightly partying made me thankful I'd brought ear plugs. However, my room was clean, I had my own bathroom and the dorm location was very convenient – within easy walking distance of the hospital and a block away from a tram that went anywhere I'd need to go. So overall I was pleased with my housing arrangements.

The official language in Austria is German. The language barrier did prove frustrating at times, though certainly not impossible to get past. I have a high school-level German language background (though not well-maintained or well-learned in the first place) which helped me communicate at a very basic level (mostly explaining to people that my German is terrible). In part due to the regional accent, I

found it nearly impossible to understand what others said to me in German. Many but not all people around town speak English so it is possible to get by with little or no knowledge of German. Fortunately, all the doctors at the university speak English. Most patients did not. Many doctors generously took whatever time they could to explain things to me in English, but I was not able to communicate much with patients or understand much during morning rounds or patient visits in clinic. In anticipation of these language limitations, I opted to do a dermatology rotation which was helpful because there was a visual component to my learning not reliant on understanding the language.

One of my primary goals in doing an international rotation was to learn about a different system of health care and medical education. In particular, Austria provided a great opportunity to learn more about the practical implications of certain approaches to healthcare delivery that have been proposed in debates about American healthcare reform. Austria has universal healthcare, with most citizens receiving state funded care although they also have the option to purchase supplementary private insurance. It was quite enlightening to see how structure impacted physicians' clinical decision-making and patients' experiences and outcomes.

There were other interesting contrasts between medicine here and in Austria. One of the most immediately striking differences was the relative lack of modesty and privacy for patients. Patients are instructed to simply strip down in front of their physicians, often with other people in the room. The concept of "draping patients" does not seem to exist! The inpatient rooms have 2-4 beds per room with no curtains dividing beds. Patients do not seem bothered by any of this. In a way, the room set up actually felt to a more spacious, open-air, and social environment rather than the often claustrophobic and isolating atmosphere of American hospital rooms. The hospital setting is also much more relaxed, with many doctors wearing jeans and sneakers to work! I did not need any of the professional attire that I had packed.

The practice of dermatology itself also had some interesting differences, most notably that the hospital has an inpatient dermatology unit! Most of these patients would have been treated either by different specialties or on an outpatient basis in the United States, for example diabetic ulcers, chemotherapy and/or surgery for skin cancers, cellulitis, urticaria, eczema flares.

The role of medical students is quite different in Austria. As in many other countries, Austrians start medical school directly out of high school. It takes 6 years total, with 4 years in the classroom and the last 2 doing rotations. After medical school, they do up to 3 years of internship before applying for a specialty. The primary responsibility of medical students in the hospital is to draw blood and start IVs, which meant I got lots of practice with this! They also do some basic history taking and physical exams, but there is much less emphasis on this and even less so on developing assessments and plans. In clinic, medical students just observe. My typical hospital day started on the inpatient unit drawing blood (with the help of an Austrian medical student as translator) then sometimes attending patient rounds (though this was fast-paced and in German, so difficult to understand much). Then I would spend the rest of the day in specialty clinics. In general, my days were very flexible and the hours were pretty relaxed, leaving me plenty of time to for sight-seeing around town after work. One of the very best things about this rotation was that all of the doctors, residents, and medical students at the hospital were extremely friendly, welcoming and wonderful to work with.

Graz was a wonderful place to spend my last month of medical school. I was able to learn a lot and had plenty of time for relaxation and sightseeing on the side. I hope that you will consider spending some time in Graz!