

From American to European Agriculture

By: Miriam Cook

Growing up on a farm, I never considered the possibility that I would leave the country for more than a short vacation. When I came to Purdue though and found out that over 40% of the students studied abroad while in college, I started to think of the possibilities. When I started breaking down all the vast array of options, the most economical and logical one that presented itself was spending a whole semester abroad. When I got to thinking about that I immediately thought of animal agriculture and where heavy dairy pockets are. I finally settled upon The Netherlands, which is the home of the Holstein cow. Not only is the country a huge exporter of agriculture products it is also centrally located within Europe making it the perfect place to be able to visit multiple countries.

Granted Covid-19 made my plans a bit more difficult, and I only got the green light to go abroad, two weeks before my start date at Wageningen University in The Netherlands. Even with such short notice I still said yes to adventure and packed my bags with little prep time to spend six months in a foreign country. While most would find that extremely terrifying, and I was scared, I did cry waiting in line at the airport but when I got to my gate I had the luck of meeting the sweetest girl from Croatia that was my same age and had been traveling her whole life and had already filled one passport book with stamps and was working on her second one. It was in that moment at the airport I knew everything was going to be just fine as I headed abroad.



The European culture and mentality were a whole other world to get used. The simple fact of the vast public transportation system took some time getting used to navigating not having a car anymore. For example, when I would travel from Amsterdam from Wageningen or Wageningen to any other country, I took trains or overnight busses. Then when living in Wageningen they absolutely love their bikes. Instead of parking garages for cars they had parking garages for bikes under the academic buildings. Bikes had the right of way on roads and even had bigger bike lanes than the roads for cars. Even beyond that everything was so incredibly smaller than in the US, there were hardly any tall buildings, the cars were the size of a standard KIA or smaller, and homes were half the size we are used too.

Even with the differences in cultures, it was the people that made the trip all the sweeter for me. I was told at one point that Wageningen is home to the most nationalities per square kilometer (also no metric system over there definitely an adjustment from yard to meters, and F° to C°). I got the chance to live with 9 other individuals from 9 different countries, Columbia, Bonaire, Greece, Hungary, Pakistan, Indonesia, Germany, Spain, and Iceland. Sharing our different cultures, and languages was a treat every day, we became such a close family, hosting corridor get togethers often. Beyond that though I was constantly going to potlucks with other exchange students, eating traditional dishes from friends from Estonia, Norway, Denmark and so many more places, not to mention traditional Dutch cuisine. I even had a weekly meeting with other religiously interested people like myself, called Navigators International that gave me a home away from home. We broke bread, shared our faith and deepened our beliefs along with make long lasting bonds of friendship.



Beyond all that I did get to go to 8 other countries on varies occasions, from Austria, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, France, Czech Republic, and of course all over The Netherlands. Touring farms all over, from Belgium Blue farms in Belgium, large goat farms in The Netherlands, dairies in almost every country and breweries in Germany. Seeing some great historical sites along the way, from sad concentration camps, the EU hemicycle, giant waves at Nazaré, German Christmas markets, Oktoberfest, the Eiffel Tower and so much more. The plethora of history and amazing sites is so much one could not do it living there five years, let alone the six months I spent there.



While I did travel a ton, make so many amazing friends, and see so many cool sights I did take a few classes. Wageningen being the number one agriculture university truly stretched my mind and challenged me but also taught me so much about the Dutch farming mentality. It truly was unique to learn about their take on financial management and interact with so many of my fellow young agriculturalist who had an equal passion to deepen their agriculture knowledge to give back to European agriculture. Their passion matched mines and it was refreshing to know that agriculture was still alive and while around the world.



Ultimately, if I wouldn't have said yes on a whim and pursued this dream of mines my mind would never have been opened to agriculture beyond our borders. I would never have made friends outside the US whose native language is not English. I not only gained an appreciation for the United States but for global agriculture. Now my future path may be working in a country that is not the US and moving miles away from home. If you would have told me I would go so far beyond my small farming town in Michigan I would not have believed you. Now I can't imagine myself doing anything differently so my advice to everyone is take that risk, step outside your comfort zone, do the thing that scares you as it will change your life!