

letters from

SWEDEN

The following are letters sent to Excalibur from York students studying in Sweden.

Hello from Sweden. My name is Mike Heiber and I am on the York-Umea exchange programme. Umea is a city in northern Sweden (note: not Switzerland) which lies on the east coast on the 64th parallel. It is as far north as Yellowknife yet it is not as cold as you think. Up until now it is averaging about five degrees Celsius during the days and a few degrees below zero at night, although the sun now begins to set at 3:15 p.m. and rises at 7:30 a.m.

I work in a laboratory in the field of molecular biology. I am completing my fourth year thesis course for my degree. Everyone I work with is fluent in English and I have no problem communicating with most of the people who I have met at the university. In fact many of the books in the library are in English and the library computer can even be switched to English. One really can get along fine here without learning Swedish. When I started talking Swedish to people they ask me where I am from,

and when I say, they immediately start talking English to me. This does in fact make the conversation go faster, although it prevents me from practising. Although knowing Swedish is not necessary, it certainly makes things easier if you can speak it. It is sometimes annoying to hear people talk, and especially laugh, when you cannot understand what they are saying.

I live in what is called a "korridor," which is similar to a 12 room suite in Bethune College at York, except that there are seven rooms and they are much larger, each having a shower. It is great to come back from a jog and be able to drop the old clothes off without having to put on a towel and drag my stuff out to the shower like in residence at York.

I live with five other Swedes and a guy from Saskatoon. The Swedes are all neat and are relatively quiet. The other Canadian guy is loud and leaves a mess in the kitchen. I do not know if this is a comment on our two societies or if this is too small a sample size to judge.

I heard many stories about Sweden before I came and it has turned out that some, unfortunately, are not true. Sweden is just as modern as Canada and the standard of living is just the same. Sometimes I

do not even realize that I am in a foreign country except for the fact that I do not recognize the car makes (except Volvo and some Saabs) and I cannot understand the signs. The customs are more or less the same, but, for example, they do not say "Excuse me" in bars when they try to get through a crowd, they just knock into you. Five foot nothing girls are shoving like offensive linemen. That takes getting used to.

Overall I would rate the experience here as very positive. It is sometimes very difficult to start thinking about one's own society unless there is something to compare it to. For the most part it has been enjoyable, although there have been tough periods which have required a bit of endurance. Yet both the good and the bad helps one to learn about life and of oneself. Oh yes, one more thing: Be nice to foreign students!

Greetings from Sweden!

Well I won't lie to you and tell you that it's sunny and warm here... but actually it's cloudy and warm. This is the warmest autumn that they've had here in a long time. It's now mid-November and we've only had frost twice. I think that the grass is actually getting greener! So much for those misconceptions

about how cold northern Sweden is.

Even though the warm weather has been nice, I am looking forward to snow. Umea is a great city if you like outdoor activities. There are paths all over the city for cycling and in winter there are many lit trails for cross-country skiing. Umea also has many cultural activities including its own opera company and many theatre groups.

I am studying geography here at the university doing research for my thesis, which will be about Sweden's environmental policy. So far I've had no trouble finding information in English and most people here speak English very well.

This term I am taking one course at the university. In Sweden, students often study only one subject per term and these courses are very intensive with lots of reading. I am taking a geography course which is in Swedish but I am allowed to write the exams and papers in English. The main book for the course is in English also, so it's not too difficult. The only bad thing is that the exams are six hours long and there are two of them!

In addition to my geography course, I am also taking Swedish at night school. It helps to know some Swedish here, although it's not abso-

lutely necessary. There are plenty of other foreigners here and taking Swedish lessons is a good way to meet a few of them.

Umea University has about 9,000 students, most of whom live in some form of student accommodation. I live in a student residence very close to the university. Each building is divided up into corridors so I live on a corridor with six other people. Everyone has their own furnished room with a bathroom and we share the kitchen and a TV room. It is quite cheap to live in these 'student rooms' as they call them here — only \$160 per month. This makes up at least a little for the fact that food is so expensive here.

I recommend this exchange to all of you. I think it is a great opportunity to study abroad. Sweden is a beautiful country and I hope all of you that are interested will apply.

Cathy Kingdon,
MA Student in Faculty of Environmental Studies

For more information about the York-Umea exchange, call Alf Bang at 736-2100 ext. 5113. For information on other exchanges offered at York call Clark Horsing at ext. 5144.

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