Student exchange at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Be’er Sheva, Israel

Study Program
The International program at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Be’er Sheva is coordinated by the BGU OSP office. A broad variety of courses is offered, for students from all kinds of different backgrounds. The group of international students is guided by two guides that organize meetings, talks, trips and other activities. The semester starts with an overnight trip to get to know each other and this made our group bond from the very beginning. The guides are always available to answer questions related to life in Be’er Sheva, what to do on the weekend and how to organize a hiking trip for example. There is a possibility for renting equipment from the office.
For any academic questions the office is available and always happy to help.
Contact between students and the office is very casual and friendly. The courses offered are very interesting and relevant and the professors are very approachable, yet professional.

Language
For me as a Middle Eastern studies student, my exchange started with an intensive six week Ulpan Hebrew course. Classes are five days a week, three hours a day. The course was demanding, but extremely helpful and made me improve a lot. During the semester it is possible to continue studying Hebrew for three times a week for an hour a half and for many students it’s possible to take Hebrew for credit. For students that haven’t studied Hebrew before and didn’t take part in the Ulpan there was a spoken Hebrew course for beginners.
Many people in Israel speak decent English, and most students speak fluently. If you don’t read any Hebrew it might take a bit more time to figure out public transportation, but people are always happy to help.

Finance and other conditions
Israel is relatively expensive. Overall a bit more expensive than Holland I would say. Rent is about the same price, groceries a bit more expensive, alcohol very expensive. However, going out to eat is pretty cheap and public transportation is much cheaper in Israel.
It’s not possible to work while on a student visa so you’ll have to do with scholarships/loans etc. There are many possibilities for volunteering though, both inside the city as in communities around the country or agriculture.
Preparation and contacts with the faculty
Communication with the host university was very professional and quick. I was always provided with information on time and the office was always accessible for questions.

Housing
Most students in this international program choose to live in the University dorms located right next to the campus. The dorms consist of shared apartments of four bedrooms with a shared kitchen and bathroom, men and women separated. I personally preferred not to live in the dorms and found an apartment with two Israeli roommates close to campus which was fully furnished and a bit cheaper than the dorms.

Culture
Israeli culture is very direct, open, hospitable and friendly. Most people are very interested to meet foreigners and it’s very easy to get in touch with locals and to make new friends.

Free time
In the years before this student exchange I already spent around eight months in Israel so I would use my free time mostly to visit my friends and to travel around the country. The program organized many activities and every week they sent an e-mail with all kinds of activities in the city, from volunteer projects to festivals, to music events to food related events. Free time can also be used to travel to neighboring countries like Jordan, the Sinai desert in Egypt or to visit the West Bank/Palestine. Like I said before, it’s very easy to travel the country so many international students use the weekends to plan hiking/camping trips or to visit Jerusalem or go to the beach in Tel Aviv.

Travelling
As mentioned before, public transportation is pretty cheap in Israel. There are buses in between cities and there is a train that goes from Be’er Sheva to the center of the country. Apart from public transportation there are also many Facebook groups for shared rides to any place in the country.

Other
I loved the overall atmosphere of Be’er Sheva. The University is amazing, contact with the office goes very smoothly, the courses offered are totally worth it. The campus is beautiful, people are very direct, friendly and hospitable. There are
many things to do for students around the city, it’s very easy to move around and travel the country. Overall an amazing experience.