

# Report on my semester at UC Berkeley

## LIFE IN BERKELEY

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### *Where to live*

I stayed in a group-house right next to Campus—in fact closer to campus than the official on-campus housing. I would really recommend staying at the house where I stayed—see [joinarcadia.org](http://joinarcadia.org). There are always interesting & kind people staying there and the house has really nice common spaces. They even have three gigantic whiteboards!

In general, Berkeley's lively campus life offered an incredible experience. All students being distributed over a much smaller area seems to have an enormous positive effect on social life, even more so than I had anticipated.

### *Where to hike*

There is a very pretty hike along the so-called “Clark Kerr Fire Trail” right next to campus which I can really only recommend. You will be rewarded with a nice sight over all of Berkeley and a good portion of the Bay.

Furthermore, there is a hiking club at Berkeley called CHAOS. Amazingly, they allow you to rent out tents, mats and sleeping bags for free. I ended up using this with a friend of mine for a three day hike to and along Mount Diablo. The views were truly gorgeous. I find this hard to properly articulate, but not only are the trees and animals all slightly different, but somehow also the shape of the hills? It's actually really fascinating.

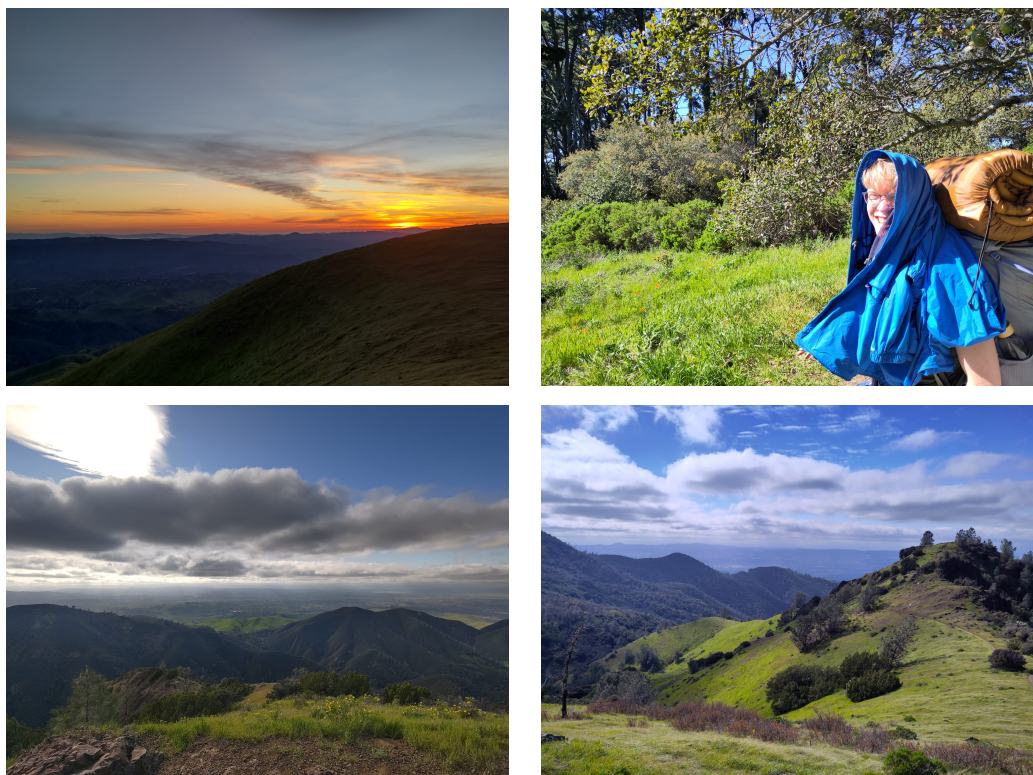


Figure 1: Scenes from the hike on Mount Diablo

### *Where to eat*

You might very well end up missing actually very nice Swiss super markets à la Migros quite quickly. I believe the US just works a bit different here culturally in that people usually have a car and only go shopping perhaps once every one or two weeks, resulting in fewer but larger supermarkets. For example, from where I lived, the closest proper supermarket would be around 20 minutes away by foot.

There are three alternatives for you:

1. Around Berkeley, there are a variety of quite affordable restaurants catering to students. From a Swiss perspective, this initially seemed like a ridiculous extravagance—I went to a restaurant once during all my five semesters in Zurich. But these restaurants actually turn out to be more like a Kebab shop / “Dönerladen”, but with a much greater variety of food. Prices vary from 12 – 19 dollars (10 to 15 francs as of time of writing). I can in particular recommend *Mezzo*, which sells gargantuan and absolutely amazing salads, served with the best bread I had in the US.
2. Amazon Fresh: For just 10 dollars a month, you get free grocery deliveries for orders above 35 dollars. This is an especially good deal since the food is actually cheaper than what you could buy in local supermarkets. While this again feels a bit decadent, it is also incredibly convenient. Welcome to the US!
3. The Berkeley dining hall: You get access to a full buffet for around 12 dollars. This is a really good deal and a nice way of getting to know new random Berkeley students. Get the cheapest meal plan where you just get  $\leq 100$  US Dollars worth of “Flexdollars”. This is the most economical option and still allows you to top up with more money if you want more.

## **STUDIES, SIMONS, AND STARTUPS**

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### *Simons Institute*

The Simons Institute, funded by Berkeley theoretical physicist turned Wall Street billionaire and science philanthropist Jim Simons, hosts researchers and symposia on various topics in computer science. It was incredibly fortunate that the institute hosted a series of five week-long workshops on large language models in the semester I attended.

I cannot overemphasize how rewarding attending these workshops was. For reasons that are entirely beyond me, Berkeley undergraduate students essentially do not attend them. This meant I could always pose questions directly to the lecturing professor and during breaks converse with postdocs, PhD students, or professors. It would not be unusual to go for dinner with four fellow attendees I had just met, only to discover they were all postdocs soon to be offered professorships. Through these workshops and discussions, I got a broad overview of current research on, for example, training cooperative but not easily manipulable agents, DeepSeek’s R1, or where AI could accelerate drug development<sup>1</sup>.

### *Startups*

Your exposure to startup culture will completely depend on how you spend your time at Berkeley. More concretely, I get the impression that this is only a “thing” at certain events and in certain social circles.

But if you do want to get exposed to it, you would be hard-pressed to find a better place than the Bay Area. Why this ecosystem seems to be flourishing much more in the US than here in Europe is

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<sup>1</sup>For example, I had no idea 90% of clinical trials fail. Thus actually even if we don’t accelerate drug development per se at all and “only” predict which drugs would pass clinical trials, we could accelerate drug development by an order of magnitude.



**Figure 2:** A group photo at the Simons Institute. The man in the center of the front row with a beard and dark blue shirt is Yoshua Bengio, winner of the Turing Award for his work in machine learning. To the right of him in light blue is the Chief Scientist of the British Institute for AI Safety. And right in-between, you can find your very grateful scholarship recipient (blond, tall, and wearing a scarf).

a really interesting question. Here a list of observations I made in an attempt to provide a partial explanation:

1. The belief that making the economy work better has, on average, positive effects is much more widespread in the US. In particular, working on a project that is supposed to significantly improve the world *and* generate massive profits is not seen as contradictory
2. Americans seem to have consistently higher baseline levels of optimism
3. *You can just do things*: There's a sense that you can achieve ridiculously ambitious things if you really set your mind to it. In particular, the Bay area culture encourages doing things that seems really scary or quite weird in order to achieve one's goals
4. Positive examples: Meeting people no more qualified than oneself who sold a startup for 500 million US dollars does change one's view on how much one can achieve when sufficiently determined
5. Access to capital: Getting \$500,000 in initial funding for 7% of your startup—with just a good idea, two twenty-year-olds and perhaps even something vaguely resembling a prototype—is not at all unusual
6. Bay area contrarianism: The believe that you can have insights the vast, vast majority of other people did not yet have. Naturally, then acting on these insights can yield significant impact

Note that I think 4. and 5. result from there already being startups, so one could plausibly already get the wheel spinning by getting (most of) the other factors right.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS

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### *The exchange program itself*

I was an exchange student as part of Berkeley's so-called *Berkeley Global Access (BGA)* Program. As this exchange was self-organized, this meant I had to pay tuition fees to the tune of 13 000 USD. This is an insane amount of tuition fees to pay from a Swiss perspective, but actually turns out to be less than half of what other non-Californian students pay per semester.

But then what is the catch? Unfortunately, you will only get to choose your classes after Berkeley students have chosen theirs. This is a much more significant downside than it would be at ETH

as there are course registration limits for practically every lecture (and, because of this, Berkeley students initially register for way more courses than they actually want to take).

Concretely, I found I had absolutely no problem getting into hard math courses, but popular computer science courses are quite difficult to get into. Furthermore, you will only know for sure whether you got in by around week four or five, which is very stressful. Though, to be fair, I then did then end up getting into the courses I wanted to get into.

Note that being very motivated in class and then begging the professor to let you in week three can be a very effective tactic here.

### *Remote exams*

Because the Spring semester at Berkeley begins in January, I had to write my exams remotely. I had initially assumed I might have to charm (or bribe) some poor PhD student to supervise the exam, but it turns out this is just “part of the package” in an exchange. Just send a mail to the program coordinator a good month ahead of time and you will get your exam supervision.

### *Various other tips and remarks*

1. Once you start missing proper bread, go to *Mezzo* and ask for their “bread ends”. While you only get the ends of the bread, they are often still warm, legitimately the best bread I had in the US, and also it’s only one dollar per bag (!!!)
2. Don’t rent out a room in the basement at Arcadia
3. If you go to San Francisco, do not stay in the Tenderloin neighborhood. Even if you are very enthusiastic about saving a bit of money
4. Despite the current political situation, the process for obtaining a student visa was completely hassle-free (with the small exception of the one form where they ask you to confirm fifty times that you really never participated in human trafficking)
5. Visit Golden Gate Park, especially the Botanical Garden which is free if you show proof of living in San Francisco. The art museum *Legion of Honor* in that Park is also really worth a visit