

I was in Tübingen as part of the OBW exchange between August 31st 2006 and August 17th 2007. Here are some of my thoughts on the experience.

Housing

When I applied for housing, I asked to be put in a one bedroom apartment. I was almost 25, had been living on my own since I was 18 and I never really had roommates. I skipped the dorm experience and was quite happy about it. However, the housing office wrote back to tell me that the single units were for families or married couples, so I would not be getting one. Although I was placed with 5 flatmates (we shared a kitchen and bath), I still felt better off than those who were placed on floors with 25 to a kitchen.

For the first month, I didn't have any flatmates. As exchange students, we arrived at the beginning of September, but most German students didn't show up until shortly before classes started in October. When my flatmates (four girls and one boy) did arrive, I was pleasantly surprised. In the beginning, there was some awkwardness before we got to know one another, but by the end I got along great with my flatmates and was very happy to have had them. Although they all spoke some English, I did talk to them in German most of the time, and it was nice to practice in a non-academic setting. It was also nice to have people to ask about general living-in-Germany when I was confused.

Unfortunately, it was not all wonderful. We did have some disagreements on cleanliness, and dishes did tend to pile up for days at a time. There was a weekly Putzplan, but that tended to be viewed as suggestions, rather than actual tasks by some, but there was no point in making a fuss about it.

September

The first month was certainly a bit overwhelming with getting used to Germany and trying to get bureaucracy to work in my favour. I had signed up for a Mentor before coming and I would definitely encourage others to do so. She met me at the train station when I arrived from Stuttgart and helped me to get to the housing office, as well as get my things to my apartment. She was great because she knew the simple things that I really didn't know, from where the housing office was located to which bus we needed to take there and how much it cost.

I arrived on Friday, but didn't start the intensive language course until Monday. I have to admit that I was not impressed with this course. I had heard from other students that it was ok if my German wasn't perfect, that this course would get me up to speed before classes started. This was not the case. There were twelve of us in the course, all of varying levels, so it was hard for our instructor to cater to everyone's needs. We did do some grammar, and I'm sure I learned something during this course, but not nearly as much as I had expected to. On the plus side, we received about 400€ at the end of the course, so I shouldn't complain too loudly.

Although we were taking classes in September at the University, since the semester didn't officially start until mid-October, we weren't considered students until then. This meant that we could not by the discounted bus pass or get health insurance (though we did end having to pay for that until the end of the Summer semester, long after we had all gone home). We had to fight to be able to get internet in our rooms, as we

weren't supposed to get that until we were officially students, though we were enrolled and had paid our fees. It was at this time that we learned the importance of stamps. Always get a stamp. If there is any dealing with officials and paperwork involved, have them stamp your paperwork. This will save hassles later on.

Courses

There were two types of courses offered at Tübingen: the courses for German-as-a-second-language students and the normal classes. We could enrol in either, though we were not allowed to take more than two per semester of the former, and it was always better to identify yourself as a foreigner in the latter. I did do four of the GSL classes, two per semester, and found them to be quite easy, again because there were people of all levels in the courses. I had come to Germany as part of my BA, even though I had finished all my requirements in Canada, so it really didn't matter what kind of courses I took. I enjoyed the GSL courses as a lighter load, which allowed me to explore the other aspects of Germany. I did do some of the regular classes, but as two of these were in Russian, it didn't really matter that I was taking them in German. I also tried an Old Church Slavic course, but as it required translating into or from German, I eventually dropped it. My German was simply not at a high enough level to learn a new foreign language. I also managed to avoid writing any essays in German, other than in my GSL courses, so I can't really comment on that aspect. I had a few exams, including a few oral exams, which were for the most part as difficult as my exams in Canada would have been, except that they were in German. On the whole, I found coursework in Germany to be easier. It seemed that I went more often or had more hours of class per week, but I actually did less. Again, this might reflect the courses that I chose to take.

The Libraries

I do feel that the libraries at Tübingen deserve their own section, as they were quite different from what I was used to. To begin with, you're not allowed to bring much into the library with you – no backpacks, no coats, no large purses. At the main library, there were lockers available at the front, either for a returnable 2€ deposit or you could bring your own lock, but other libraries, such as the one in Brecht Bau, only had cubby holes for your things. I never had anything stolen, but the whole system seemed unsecure to me. On the other hand, in the main library, there were baskets available, like the ones at the supermarket, so you didn't have to balance everything in your hands.

The main library was also strangely organized. I'm not sure if it's true, but I was told that the books were arranged by the order in which they came in, not by subject. This made for frustrating searches, as you couldn't just get one call number and hope to look in that section for other books on your topic. You needed to look up the call numbers for each book that you wanted, and there was a good chance that you'd be running all over the library to get it. The Modern Languages library in Brecht Bau, (the only other one I dealt with), seemed to be organized by subject, but it had its own quirks, namely that you could not remove books from this library, except over the weekend. This was rather frustrating when I found that out.

Relatives

I'm the first one in my family to be born in Canada, so I have many many relatives in the Fatherland. Almost all of them expected me to visit. This sounds like a nice idea in theory, but it does get expensive paying for the train tickets and it's rather time consuming. I can't remember how many times I had to say to friends, "Sorry, I can't this weekend – I have a family function." My advice to others who are in similar situations is to try and arrange get togethers of various members, so you can see more at once. Also, don't be afraid of declining some of the invitations. Yes, you'd love to see them all, but a year goes by rather quickly, and I'm sure there are other things you'd rather do than visit with every distant relative whose bloodlines intermingle with yours. Plus if you don't see them all now, you have an excuse to go back to Germany.

Travel

Although I met lots of people and made lots of friends, I ended up doing a lot of my travel alone. I went to St. Petersburg, Russia for four weeks, Prague for four days, and Berlin for four days, each time by myself. I had a great time. I would definitely encourage others, who might be afraid of travelling alone, to just do it. You can still have a great time, and if need be, some random trustworthy-looking stranger can snap that picture of you in front of that landmark. If you stay in hostels, there's also the chance that you'll meet up with other travelers, so you won't really be alone the whole time.

I bought a BahnCard 50, which cost about 100€ but let me pay half-price on all my train travel throughout the year. I would encourage others to do this as soon as possible as well. You will need to show student id to get it at that price, as well as provide a picture. As for travelling further abroad, flights within Europe are quite cheap. There are several different providers out there, all competing with each other, which means better prices for you! (A good website which searches for the cheapest price within different airlines is www.fly.de but there are other options out there). You can also check out places like L'Tur for cheap last minute deals on flights and hotels. If you don't care where you go, you can specify a price and they can search from there. Other travel agencies tended to need a destination before they'd search.

Mail

In Canada, I never bothered to put my name on the mailbox. There was an address and an apartment number, why would I need to put my name? That logic works in Canada, but not in Germany. If you do not have your name on your mailbox, the postman may not deliver things like Christmas cards or that all-important BahnCard. Oddly enough, I did receive some mail, so I didn't realize anything was amiss until January, when I checked why the BahnCard, purchased at the end of September and supposed to be delivered in four-six weeks, still hadn't arrived. Save yourself trouble – put your name on your mailbox.

Mail does not travel at the same speed in both directions. I sent several cards/packages to Canada, and most arrived within one week (one arrived within two days!). Packages/letters from Canada take longer – a lot longer. Usually four to five weeks. If people are sending you things from Canada, ask for non-perishables and pray

that it isn't something you need right away (not sure if XpressPost would actually make a difference).

At the end of the year, you will probably find that you have accumulated quite a bit of stuff, more than will fit in your suitcases, so it's best to expect that you will be mailing this as well. When I was there, you could send up to 20kg per box, though there was no restriction on box size. I believe there was also a special rate if you were only sending books, but since I didn't do this, I'm not sure. Of course, it's always better to look into restrictions before packing things up.