

Academic exchange

At Freiburg, Germany 2006/7

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First off, I just want to say if you're reading this because you're interesting on going on exchange, good job! Exchange is really an amazing experience, culturally, personally and academically! And if your thinking about going to Germany than even better! I will try my best to sum up my year abroad and part with some relevant advice:

Pre-departure: I can remember back in the spring, opening my acceptance letter and just going "nice!" I was so excited and happy to have the opportunity to go on exchange, because it was something that I wanted to do since high school.

One of the biggest things that you have to realize is that going on exchange can be an expensive thing, and believe me you there are far too many ways to spend those euros! Not to mention that if you stay for the summer semester you won't have much time too save up before having to head back to school again in Canada.

That being said, I made a commitment to live sparingly over the summer to save up as much money as I could. I would suggest this to everyone who will have to personally finance a large portion on their trip. Another suggestion for generating cash is too ask for financial help and donations from community organizations like to the rotary club and any clubs that support international experiences. I found them to be a great source and am very grateful for their help.

Another suggestion is to start corresponding with other Canadian students going to the same university, just send emails and chat, it'll help make the connection easier when you get there and immediately gives you someone you are familiar with once you arrive. Its also a good idea to make contact with people from your school going on exchange because its you a free place to stay if you ever travel there!

One suggestion for packing is to NOT do it the night before you fly out. And to pack light, taking only what your are SURE you will use, this is especially true for clothing and amenities that can be easily purchased while you are overseas. It is amazing the amount of stuff that you are going to accumulate and at the end of the year try to somehow pack all of it into the same suitcases you came over with! (Believe me it doesn't work!)

I flew into Frankfurt airport, which is nice because it is so easy to fly to and usually the more affordable.

Arrival in Freiburg: I contacted the SLI as soon as I got into town and they were very helpful in settling me into my accommodations in Vauban. If you get the opportunity to live with Germans, take advantage of it, they are great sources of info on the town, uni, and life in Germany in general. All of my roommates were friendly and made me welcome as soon as I got in the door.

I would suggest bringing a few stuff from home you can decorate your room with, to give it a more personal feel because the white walls are a bit drabby. I was a big fan of the Vauban residence and its proximity although it was one of the quieter residences.

Language Course and First Weeks: I cannot stress enough the importance of being outgoing and taking risks meeting people, especially if that's not something that you are not used to doing. The more people you talk to, the comfortable you are and the easier your transition is because you can establish a group of friends quickly. Just randomly going up to people and introducing yourself is a great way to meet people, or taking a new seat in class and chatting up a stranger.

I really enjoyed my time in the language course, even though it was not too intense, it was enough to improve my German skills substantially. I was lucky to have a couple of other Canadian students in my class and ended up being some of the best friends I made during my time. Don't take the course too seriously and don't get stressed out about it, the professors are students like you. Use the time as an adjustment period and to start getting used to using your German.

The SLI had a ton of events, some worth attending, some not. However a lot of them give you a chance to visit a new place or city and at the least another chance to socialize.

Uni life: The bureaucraties at the university can really be a challenge, just make sure you stay on top of them and don't miss any important dates or forms to submit.

I divided my academics mostly between SLI courses and Uni Freiburg courses, both of them have their pros and cons. The SLI courses are at a much slower pace, which is great if that's what you need, otherwise stick to Uni courses and don't be afraid to challenge yourself.

It helps to introduce yourself to your professors in the first class or second, all of the professors I had were very approachable and helpful, and it makes it easier later on if you need a class evaluation or extra help.

Just a specific note to anyone studying business or economics and is interest in Freiburg. There is not a large economic faculty here and the courses they do offer are quite difficult, especially since you will be taking courses above the introductory level and I found that I had to do a lot of learning on my own to catch up to elements of the course that students there already had learned and I had not. So be prepared to work!

Extracurriculars: About halfway through the year I decided to get a job at an Irish pub, The Isles of Innisfree. I had a great experience there, the staff were great and my boss was very flexible. It was also an added bonus because it introduced me to a whole bunch of new people as well as generated money I could use for traveling. Not to mention gave me another chance to practice German with guests, (although quite a few were overly excited to speak English because they were in an Irish pub!).

There are a ton of sports offered by the uni, including volleyball, soccer and hockey. The gym was also a great facility. It costed only 55 euros a semester, which was a steal in comparison to

the going rate of 60 euros a month at a gym! If you are interested in joining a team or gym, make sure you sign up the day of through the website, because they fill up ridiculously fast!

If you plan to travel a lot (which I hope you are!), it pays big dividends to plan in advance, especially for things like booking a hostel and figuring out how to get to it once you arrive. I found the lonely planet guide to be indispensable for things like this. Also, book your flights as early as you can and check out deals from their websites, you can often find some lucrative prices. Also, don't be afraid to travel alone, they can be great learning experiences and forces you to be a bit more outgoing, not to mention gives you a chance to visit a new and exciting place you wouldn't have otherwise.

I used a website: www.couchsurfing.com a couple of times, it's a cool concept and is fairly legit. It also works to give you a network of people in different cities you want to visit. They can also give you insight into the location beyond the big tourists things.

Returning home: I think I adjusted pretty quickly to Germany and didn't feel too much culture shock returning. Just remember that it is a step and experience in your life among many that you will never forget!

Tips and advice:

- Be outgoing! Don't expect people to approach you, in most cases you will have to take the initiative! You will be glad you did!
- Take advantage of every opportunity! Never played field hockey or canoe polo before? Give it a chance! You just might find a new hobby.
- Take lots of pictures. (I think I have over 5000).
- A cool idea is to start a blog or photo blog where friends and family can see what you are up to, it's a lot easier than writing mile long emails. Or write journals for yourself.

A few tips for Freiburg/Germany

- The bahncard is a good idea if you plan to use the train a lot, it usually pays for itself after a couple of trips.
- Check out a soccer game, the energy and excited is just something else. I had the chance to see Freiburg play and again in Barcelona, both were great times!
- Aldi is your best friend!
- Fierelings brewery has by far the best beer in the country, no wait! The world!
- There are few really cool lakes to check out in Freiburg and the area to relax and go for a swim!

My Top 5

- Skiing in the French Alps.
- Watching FC Barcelona dominate at Camp Nou.
- The sunny beaches of Croatia.
- Watching Canada beat Sweden in the World Cup semi finals in Stockholm!
- Relaxing on my patio in Vauban.