

Report for OBW Exchange
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Preparation

My Preparation consisted mainly of the OBW/ORA weekend at York and a one-day prep at the U of O. Most advice was both pertinent and useful, however, I would suggest that you

- a) Take notes and keep them and condense them into the most vital info that you can review because there is so much info that comes and just keeping the handouts and thinking that you will read them later never ever works. You want something concrete you can use as a checklist before you start packing your bags the week/night before you leave.
- b) At any occasion you can (especially at the orientation weekend) meet people going to your university and hang out with them as much as you can. They will be a very good resource for you when you get there, and, especially if you are clueless and forget everything like me, they are your family and support group once you hit the ground. You can meet people there, but, the more people you know going into the exchange the more people you will meet and keep as friends once you are there.

Stuff to bring

All your forms, most of which you will not know you need to bring unless you take good notes at the orientation. The most important forms you are likely to forget are, 1) note from your bank or your parents that says you have enough money to stay in Germany, 2) your registration letter/letter of acceptance from the HOST university.

Although you will need to register for state health insurance once you get to Germany, get some travel insurance as well. It's cheap and it will cover you while traveling to other countries and if you have to get transported back to Canada for some reason (this is not covered by Canadian or German Health insurance).

Arrival, Registration and the First Month

Arrival to Freiburg is pretty easy. There is a really easy to get to airport in Basel, which actually lands you in France but you can take a bus for 16 euros that takes you directly downtown, the train station essentially, in Freiburg. If you arrive via Frankfurt there is a direct train from the airport to Freiburg, it costs 70 euros or 35 Euros if you have and BahnCard 50, which you should buy before you buy your train ticket. They are essentially cards you buy for 100E then you get 50 off all other subsequent train tickets, which sort of doesn't make sense but it pays itself off very quickly. They are available with your ISIC card or home student ID, depending on the mood of the person working the desk.

When you get to Freiburg you have to find the Second Language Institute or SLI. If you arrive at an odd time, make sure you call someone to meet you or plan on a night in a hostel. The SLI is right down town, near the university, your best bet are to go down

town on the tram (don't bother buying a tram ticket) and ask for directions. People are generally very helpful, especially if you use your innocent fresh German accent. The people running the SLI are all student types so they are cool and really helpful. They will also be the ones who show you around and party with you in the first few weeks so be nice to them.

Once the language course is over in September you have about 2 weeks to do what ever you want. I went travelling, which was fun, went to Oktoberfest and then Czech Republic, but looking back I would have just as soon stayed in Freiburg. Travel is a great option, but, if you want to actually retain what you have learnt at the language course, stay in Germany and travel there. But, it was nice to feel like coming home when I returned to a German speaking country, so, I could go either way. BEFORE you go traveling, register for school. The last 2 days of registration are INSANE and you will never get into an office. I did, but it wasn't fun, and I had to wait forever. I also forgot a form so, go back to your checklist or ask someone who has already registered what you need to register and make sure you have everything – especially a note saying that you have a scholarship – even if it is just a U of O travel scholarship, if you have any scholarship of any kind whatsoever, you do not have to pay the 100euro registration fee. But to prove it you need a note saying so. You can also borrow your friends if you happen to have smart and nefarious friends.

There is also the whole registration with the city thing, and health insurance thing. Do these with friends, and they all require passport photos, so get a million of them printed before you go or just go to a 2euro photo booth when you're there and get 8 printed out the morning you go to register for everything.

My only advice about what classes to take is that you should try to take language courses administered by the University and not by the SLI. The SLI ones fill up very quickly and are bunk compared to the actual Uni ones. The history and philosophy course I took with the SLI was good though, it was slow enough that I could understand everything and I didn't feel stupid if I didn't understand something.

Housing Food and Accommodation

I lived in the Stuhlinger Wohnheim which is way way cooler than the Stusie Wohnheim, but, either one is just fine. The student housing is generally very accessible to the rest of the city because the public transport, i.e. street cars (strassenbahn), are awesome. It is also quite easy to ride and buy a bike in Freiburg. If you can, try and wait till the first Fluhmarkt, which is a flea market, there should be one in the first week or two in September, but you have to keep an eye out for them. That is by far the cheapest way to buy bikes. On the lower end are your 20 Euro WWII klunkers, which may or may not last you the year, and on the high end is your 50 Euro road bike, which may or may not last you a year. It is law that if you ride at night you need a light on the front and the back of your sweet ride. But the worst the cops will do is make you walk, it is much safer though. And, watch out for those street car tracks that are just the width of your bike tire! By the way, if you ever get into a situation with the cops, for instance if you get caught watching the sunset on top of the foot bridge over the train tracks, just be polite and go along with their nice little good cop bad cop routine, they won't actually give you a 200e fine and they just were board. Which, seems ironic because people can be as drunk as possible in the streets and they won't say anything.

On that note, ladies, watch yourself on the dance floor, some men do not have the inhibitions of nice North American boys. If you act all crazy and dance a little close with some random boys (or girls) they basically take this as licence to grab whatever part of you is closest.

So, I lived with 6 other German students, two of whom I couldn't understand then entire time I was there on account of the fact that they never said anything serious and my German sarcasm radar wasn't fully developed yet. But the other 4 I would call my close friends. They are great. They generally like to plan things, such as excursions and meals and movie nights and are not so in to doing things impromptu. They also have a lot of time just to hang out and have a drink or two, which is nice as well. Most of my friends I met through them, through the classes I was in or through the exchange (language course) people.

Grocery shopping can be interesting and you often feel rushed cause you think you are in someone's way cause you spend the first hour of grocery shopping just figuring out what cans say on them and where the baking powder is (still a mystery to me). But, the sausage, cheese and yoghurt sections are amazing and fairly easy to navigate so if you want to get in and out quickly without any exposure of your grocery insecurities, then stick to them. If you want a prewrapped coffee cake that actually tastes good, you can sniff one of those out too. Milk is either 1.5 or 3%. Chocolate milk is generally 3%. Yummy.

The University, Library, Research, Profs

The university is rebuilt, but still beautiful. The Library is perhaps the ugliest and most inaccessible building I have ever seen, but it is conveniently located and does the sufficient task of holding books. However, most faculties have their own library so you will likely have to wander around until you find that. If you are studying philosophy, the library is quite good, and a good place to study too. If you want to use the Husserl-Archiv, you have to decipher exactly when they are open and hope that the necessary grad student running it that day actually shows up.

Your main source for information and help is the tutor or TA. They are great and I think are at much more of the student's disposal than the actual prof, who likely only has one hour a week for office time and will likely refer you to the tutor for help anyway. If you do have the good fortune of tracking down a prof and asking for help, as was my experience in the philosophy department, they are quite nice and approachable, but tend to take much effort and reminding if you want anything from them.

Freiburg has a great lecture series and colloquim, and there are generally other conferences at universities not too far away as well. I attended two conferences directly in my field of study, one in Leuven, Belgium and one in Koln. At both I made contacts and friends in my field that are the top researchers and writers. So, have a look around and you will find gems!

One of the most attractive parts of Freiburg for me was its location in the Black Forest. There was tons of climbing and hiking and in the summer paddling (though I didn't do any I heard all about it). There is also an Ultimate Frisbee team I practiced with and many other nice locations for biking and trail running. It is beautiful and very accessible by bike, bus or regional train (also cheap).

Returning

I spent one semester on exchange and it really was too short. Having just learned the language and made friends with the people it was time to leave! So, plan on a year, and enjoy the summer semester. And, if I could do it again, I would leave a thousand dollars rolled up in a sock under my bed that I could not be able to spend while over there so I had at least a bit of money when I came back (it is good that the OBW had a secret scholarship that they “just found out about”, more like, “we knew you would come back broke and in debt so we didn’t tell you that you would get some money when you get back”. Nice.). Actually moving out can be stressful, so make sure you have a plan and set up an appointment with Herr Frank the Hausmeister long before you actually have to paint your room and clean out your cupboards...