

## **OBW Exchange Experience Report**

**Name: Tamara Yantha (Bär)**

**Host University: Universität Mannheim**

**Home University: University of Waterloo**

**Major: German, Business, & International Trade**

**Exchange Duration: September – December 2011**

Let me start by saying if you have the opportunity to do a semester abroad I strongly urge you to do so - you are only young once and this is the best time to see the world.

### **Pre-departure**

The few weeks and months prior to leaving on my exchange were very exciting, nerve-wracking, and overwhelming. Did I remember to send in all the papers I needed? Did I forget to pack something? What courses should I consider taking? Will I be able to make new friends? Was I able to leave my family and friends for yet another 4 month term? (Within the last 2 years I have done three 4 month terms abroad – 2 co-op placements in Europe and this exchange.) This is just the short list of about a million questions that were running through my head. No matter how much you prepare for this exchange, the likelihood is that you will probably forget something to do or to pack. Do not stress it is not the end of the world, I promise!

As a solution to all the questions that were running through my head, the Universität Mannheim has what they call the Buddy System. It is a great program run through VISUM, where they set up an exchange student with a current Uni Mannheim student to answer any questions you may have, help you out once you arrive, and attend special events that are set up specifically for buddies. I strongly encourage anyone going to Mannheim to sign up for a VISUM Buddy.

Packing is another story. Going overseas with only a one suitcase airline allowance definitely sucks, but it is certainly doable. My solution to this problem is simple – I pack a lot of things that when I am leaving I will not mind too much to leave behind in the country I am visiting. This allows you to have space in your suitcase when you return with all the souvenirs and other things you bought while abroad (and trust me there will be a lot of souvenirs!) I left my clothes with a cousin of mine in Germany, my heavy books with friends I made who were staying for the full school year in Mannheim, and threw out most of my toiletries and other trivial items and STILL had a hard time allotting space in my suitcase for everything. However, if this solution does not sound manageable for you, just purchase the second suitcase allowance.

### **Arrival in Mannheim**

Unlike most of you, I assume, I am lucky to have family in the area who were willing to pick me up from the airport and drive me to Mannheim. However, if you do not have this luxury, getting to Mannheim from the Frankfurt Airport is very simple. Once arriving in Mannheim, your Buddy (should you decide to sign up for one) meets you at the train station and he/she helps you get enrolled in classes, get your student card, and find your residence. The enrollment with the Universität Mannheim is all very straight forward and the people from the International Office are very friendly and willing to help you with any problems you might encounter.

Now there is a saying in Mannheim: “You cry twice in Mannheim, first when you arrive and second when you leave”. This first part was certainly true for me. My aunt and uncle dropped me

off in the middle of the night in my shared dorm apartment and everything looked so intimidating, I was not sure what my roommates would be like or if my German was proficient enough to converse with them or if they could understand English. I honestly just wanted to cry and go back home with my aunt and uncle - thankfully they would not let me! After a few days I realised that my roommates were not actually that intimidating and Mannheim as a city began to grow on me.

### **The University & Academics**

I do not think it truly dawned on me that I was going to be studying in a castle until the first day of orientation. Sure, you see the pictures and they advertise it as such, but to actually stand in front of the castle and realise that you will study in such a magnificent place - I cannot even put into words that feeling. To try to put you in perspective just try to envision the university, it is the 2nd largest baroque style castle in the entire world! This is second only to the castle in Versailles; however Mannheim has one more window!

Orientation week was a great experience to meet new friends, other exchange students from all over the world. I unfortunately was not able to attend the Sommer Akademie and therefore at the time of my arrival many people already knew each other so it was more difficult to make friends than I believe it would have been for those who arrived at the beginning of August.

Personally, I found the academic system a little strange to adjust to. I went from taking five courses in Waterloo that required a minimum of three hours each week, to having only an hour and a half per course. In addition, there are not as many homework assignments and/or readings assigned. This was great, as I had a lot more free time to explore Mannheim. The final aspect of the academic system that I found strange was that you had to register to take your exam.

### **Student Social Life**

There is definitely no lack of student life in Mannheim for an exchange student. The VISUM group organized parties on campus on Thursday nights and International nights every Tuesday, which had a different culture each week as a theme. If you go to Mannheim and complain that there is no student life, you are simply not looking for it.

In addition to these organized nights, there are also two cinemas in Mannheim which play some English speaking movies, however I strongly encourage you to go watch the films in German as it is such a great way to improve your German comprehension.

### **Travel**

Although I travelled often during my other two semesters abroad, with the university so close to my mother's hometown I often went "home" on the weekends to visit all of my aunts and uncles and my adorable godchild. Many of my friends travelled to different countries on a weekly basis and got to see so much of Europe. It is so easy to travel through Europe, with the well-structured train system and the cheap airlines such as Easyjet and Ryanair, that it is practically a crime not to go travel on your free time!

The VISUM group also organizes trips to major cities in Germany. München for Oktoberfest, Frankfurt, and Berlin were the trips they offered while I was in Mannheim.

Despite going "home" often, I still managed to travel to Berlin, Hamburg, München (twice), Nürnberg, and Switzerland, as well as many other towns and cities in the Mannheim and Heilbronn regions. Like previously mentioned, I was probably the person from my group of peers and friends who travelled the least. So make sure to take advantage of the experience and

try to see as many cities and cultures as possible - you never know where you will make a new friend.

**Parting Note**

Although I did not cry when leaving Mannheim, the four months I spent on exchange will be an experience I will always remember. I believe I made some lifelong friends while there. I really cannot express how significant the experience was for me and I hope that if you have the opportunity to go on exchange you take it. I hope you have as wonderful of an experience as I had!