

OBW Exchange 2011-2012 – Studied Linguistics and German at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg im Breisgau, Baden-Württemberg, Germany

Report by: Julia Rosenfeld, University of Western Ontario

How to sum up this entire year into a 2-page report? This was one of the best and most eventful years of my life, and I'm so glad to have been given the opportunity to participate in OBW. I had previously already done the IBH summer language course in Konstanz, and I loved it so much that I knew I had to come back to Germany for longer. For my full year, I chose the city of Freiburg im Breisgau, because it is larger than Konstanz and even though I loved Konstanz, I wanted to try somewhere new.

The university in Freiburg is very old and traditional (founded in 1457 I believe), and the main campus buildings are right in the Altstadt. The city is beautiful, with lots of old architecture as well as some unique features like the Bächle, tiny streams running alongside the roads which are remnants of medieval days. Freiburg is also located in the Schwarzwald, which is one of my favourite things about it. Every student can buy a SemesterTicket that's valid for 6 months for only 79€ and it is good for the public transit in the city, but also on all the regional trains for the zones outside the city! So it's possible to get to the French border or quite far into the Schwarzwald with this ticket, and it was great to be able to go on day trips to swim in various lakes or go on hikes, or just visit the other small towns around Freiburg and enjoy the Weinfests, etc.

Most students in Freiburg have bikes, and there are excellent bike paths around the city. You can often find bikes for under 100€ that other students are selling – I managed to get one for only 20€! I didn't use it as often though, because I found the public transit quite excellent in comparison to Canada. There are streetcars that run every 5-10 minutes during the day so getting to class is quite simple and quick. At night is another story though, they run only every half hour, and stop before 1am. On Friday and Saturday nights there are night buses that go once each hour but you have to pay another 2,50€ for these (quite annoying that the SemesterTicket doesn't cover them). If you have 4 or more people, it costs the same and is more convenient to take a cab. This is where bikes can really come in handy – although walking is always an option too, it takes about half an hour to get back to StuSie.

StuSie, or Studentensiedlung am Seepark, is the student residence where I lived, and in my opinion is the best one! I think all OBW students are put here anyway, or at least we were this year. It is a complex of about 20 buildings, and there is a central admin building that has a bar (Saturday 50% shot nights!). It's also located right behind a huge park with a lake, so you can swim, grill, go for a jog, a bike ride, or just hang out in the sun – it's perfect! Unfortunately it's not right in the centre of the city, but none of the student residences are. It only takes about 10 minutes with the Straßenbahn, and like I said, they come quite frequently during the day.

The city itself is the perfect student city, with lots of cheap restaurants and cool Kneipen. It's big enough that there's always something to do, but small enough that it still feels personal, and you will always run into someone you know in the Innenstadt. The streets were always lively, and every café has outdoor seating that's used quite extensively and quite late into the fall. This is something I really liked, and I wish Canada were more like that – I often find the streets quite deserted at home. People here also love their ice cream – a lot! Even in January. The best ice cream place is called Incontra, near the university, and I wish I had known about it sooner than my last couple of months

here! There are quite a few good places to eat as well, and there's even a restaurant called Brennessel that serves spaghetti Bolognese for 1,80€ every day from 6-7:30pm and after 11pm! They appreciate students here it seems, and there's so many discounts especially for students. The Mensa is also a great place to eat, with cheap hot meals (unlike Western's food court, where the prices are even higher than in the rest of the city!)

As you probably have already heard, there is a ton of bureaucracy and paperwork to deal with upon arrival. But since everyone was going through the same process as well, we all did it together and could help each other out, so it wasn't so difficult. What I did find difficult at first was finding which stores sold which basic items. At home I would go to Zellers or Wal-Mart and everything is in one place, but here, it was almost impossible to find a screwdriver in the Innenstadt! I eventually found a store called Allerlei, which is the closest thing to a dollar store – no screwdrivers but they sold feather dusters and cheap kitchen utensils etc. And there's always IKEA!

On the academics side, I found that you kind of have to go on a hunt to find information about courses, and even once you are in the course, you don't get so much information from the prof. But there is a lot less busy work here, with often only a presentation and a final essay to do for the course. The Germans have to do state exams later on, but as exchange students we don't do these so there is often no exam (at least in Anglistik and Germanistik courses) and so the workload is quite light. Which is perfect for an exchange year, because it's about a lot more than just studying.

Freiburg is the perfect base to travel from because it's close to Switzerland and France, and RyanAir flights and regional trains are cheap! I also recommend getting a BahnCard 25 rather than 50 (student rate is 39€, good for 1 year – but don't forget to cancel it 6 weeks before it expires otherwise it will automatically renew!). If you plan trips in advance, the 25 gives you 25% off the Sparpreis also, whereas the 50 gives you 50% off the full price only, so the price with the BahnCard 25 often ends up being cheaper. I used the trains a lot in Germany, and went to a lot of places all over Europe as well this year, since there are tons of holidays during the semester as well as a two-month break between the semesters – tons of time to travel!

And what would this year have been without all of the wonderful people I met. I was very happy in Freiburg, but I think I would have had a great time at any of the universities we could pick from, because it really is all about the people you experience it with. We had a huge international group who all hung out together, went out at night, had big international dinners, traveled together etc. and now I have friends from literally all over the world who I know I will go visit in their respective countries at some point. And while the default language was often English amongst us unfortunately, we did make some efforts to speak German, and I can tell that my German has improved immensely since September. And I now speak excellent Denglish!

I know this report doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of my experience here, but I hope it's a good summary. Freiburg is a wonderful city with a great atmosphere and the perfect location at the edge of the Schwarzwald. Transportation is excellent and makes travelling, be it near or far, ideal. The student life is great; there is always something to do and someone to do it with – the friends I made on this exchange, I know I will have for life. I am so glad that OBW made this exchange possible – I got the chance to immerse myself in the German language by living and studying in the south of Germany, which really has its own special charm about it. I had an amazing year, and I would recommend this exchange to anyone!