

2011-2012 OBW Alumni Report

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Host University: Universität Tübingen

Home University: Queen's University

An exchange year in Tübingen, or any other university in Baden-Württemberg, is a great experience I would recommend to anyone interested in exploring Europe and experiencing the culture while at the same time learning a language and making friends from all over the world. The initial process of applying for housing and scholarships and so on is daunting, as is the idea of living for an entire year in a German-speaking country halfway around the world, but I can assure you that it is really is the rewarding and exciting experience it is hyped up to be. If you put yourself out there, meet people, and explore, you will very likely have one of the best years of your life (so far).

Tübingen

In a nutshell, Tübingen is a small university town with a classic medieval European feel – cobblestone streets run through an old town centre, a castle on a hill looks out over the buildings, and church bells play in the big Stiftskirche all the time (literally). It's small, but it's fun – there is no shortage of students and therefore no shortage of nightlife or people to meet, German or international. I found it quite central and easy to travel to other parts of Europe, mostly because there is a 5 euro (cheaper with your Semesterticket bus pass) bus that runs direct to Stuttgart airport, which serves the budget airline Germanwings.

START-Kurs

All the other Alumni reports rave about this course, and I just want to mention it again to reinforce their point: It is a must-do. You improve your German, you become acquainted with Tübingen and the surrounding area, you learn how to navigate the German bureaucratic system (maybe the biggest help of all) and you meet a ton of international students who will likely remain friends for the entire exchange. *Sign up early* and make sure you get a spot.

Scholarships and Housing

You've heard it over and over: apply for as many scholarships as you can. They'll help so much and they can sometimes not only be financial aid but also offer you some incredible convenience. In my case, I received the Baden-Württemberg scholarship and, granted, it was very helpful financially, but it was potentially even more helpful in other ways as it reserved me a room in Prinz Karl, a residence only for BW Scholarship recipients, located in the heart of the old town - close to all my

classes, groceries, train station, nightlife, restaurants. Life was easy. The only downside to Prinz Karl was that it was primarily international, meaning fewer Germans and therefore opportunities to practice German at home. But there were still about 4 Germans in the building of 24 people.

As a best-next-alternative, I recommend either Geissweg or WHO, try to stay away from anything else, particularly Wanne-Kunsthalle or Französische Viertel, which both are far from the centre and have pretty limited bus service. Geissweg is nice as it's a 10-15 minute walk to the centre and even closer to most university classes. It also has a lot of students and there is a strong sense of "Geissweg community". I had friends there and hung out there a lot, and found it was easy to get to and the living spaces were big. Another good alternative is WHO, by far the biggest student residence complex. It's maybe an hour walk/15min bus ride from the centre but the bus frequency is very good & reliable. It also has its own swimming pool, grocery stores, bakeries, and nightclub (Kukuck), which is a favourite spot for international students on Fridays & Saturdays.



Photo: Me with my nextdoor neighbor in Prinz Karl

Travel

Travel is so affordable in Europe compared to Canada and from a central and well-connected town like Tübingen, there is no excuse for not getting out and seeing the

rest of Germany and Europe. There is a solid 2 month break around February-April that will offer you a chance to go on larger tour, but for the rest of year, weekend trips are very doable (especially if you try to avoid classes on Mondays or Fridays, although sometimes that is impossible). If you are traveling as a group, the group train tickets save you a ton of money. But, if you think you will be doing some traveling alone, *get a bahncard 25!* Apply for it early, because if you want the student rate you need to send them proof you are a student and they need to mail you a card, which all takes about a week's time – don't wait until the night before you need to use it. It saves you 25% on every individual fare (not group tickets) and even on the saver (Sparpreis) fares that are already often hugely discounted (be warned that the bigger bahncards, ie. Bahncard 50, cannot be used in combination with the Sparpreis fares, and so I found them not worth it). Anyway, get a Bahncard 25, it pays for itself in like 2 or 3 trips. That said, if you think you'll be using the train on your own very frequently and usually buying tickets last-minute at the station (The saver fares are only available *online, before* the day of travel) then get a Bahncard 50 (save 50% on tickets, but costs quite a bit more).

Be warned that the group tickets are only valid for *regional trains*. That means that a group ticket to Berlin is a ridiculously long trip with a lot of connections – you will be feeling suicidal by the end of it. For these situations or for trying to get to places in a neighboring country (where the group tickets are not valid), mitfahrgelegenheit.de is amazing! It's a carpool system and has worked beautifully for me. Look into it!

For destinations a bit more out of reach of a quick car ride or train ride, fly! Yes, it's actually affordable. Often you can find a cheap flight through Germanwings or a very cheap blind booking (very popular with me and my friends) which you choose a category (eg. Eastern Europe Metropolis, Party, Culture, etc) and you are given your destination *after* you pay, ie. you pay 'blind'. If you simply want to go out and explore Europe for a weekend and don't care where, this is a great option. Tübingen is a bit far to get to the airports that serve Ryanair. The closest Ryanair airports are Memmingen, Karlsruhe, and Frankfurt-Hahn, but if you are traveling with a group of friends, again the group train tickets are lifesavers and make it do-able and often still the cheaper option. If you are keen looking at flight websites, you can snag amazing deals – for example, I flew Madrid to Amsterdam for 12 euro with Ryanair, actually! Do be warned, though, that you may face hefty charges with budget airlines (especially Ryanair) if you haven't studied their regulations (only a carry-on bag under certain size and weight, print out the ticket ahead, online check in, bring a passport, etc)

Life in Germany and learning German



Photo: Stuttgarter Frühlingsfest (Spring festival) – essentially Oktoberfest in spring

Overall I loved my time there, I really did. That is not to say though that there were not obstacles, challenges, or things that bothered me about the culture or people. I really believe I did go through the “stages of culture shock”. My first 2 months were fantastic – meeting new people from all over the world all the time, traveling, exploring, living in a new country in a new way I’d never thought I could, etc. But, after that initial ‘honeymoon stage’, things became more challenging. My German was awful at the beginning – all I had was one semester of intro German going in. No German family, no real prior exposure to the language. So after that ‘honeymoon stage’ I fell into a series of depressions. It was frustrating – I couldn’t go to the grocery store without having some sort of misunderstanding and getting laughed at or belittled. I felt inferior and incompetent when I tried to do simple things I always took for granted in Canada. It’s tough to be that useless, inept foreigner.

But I pushed through that stage of the exchange (which of course coincided with German winter – depressing, but not as depressing as Ontario winter.. ha ha) and sucked it up and really made a push to learn the language. I regretted not doing it earlier but I am glad I did it at all. In my first term, I went to a series of DaF courses to learn German, but in general, outside of the classroom and simple situations like the grocery store or Döner shop (which you will come to know, love, and hate), I really didn’t speak much German. My friends were all Americans, British, Australians, or other nationalities that I spoke to in English (Brazilians, Mexicans,

Russians, Japanese, etc). It's not that Germans are so hard to make friends with, as I found out later, it's more that I was simply too embarrassed of my level of German and too afraid to step out of my shell. If there is one piece of advice I can pass on to you – don't fall into this situation from the beginning; it's a hard routine to break. Yes, English-speaking friends are good and they comfort you, and that is actually important in coping. But you won't improve your German, end of story. So make friends with Germans. Get a part-time job dish-washing or something that requires minimal prior German knowledge – for example, a Mexican girl on my floor who had as little German as me got a job washing dishes and preparing food at a local pub in the first month. What a better way to expose yourself and make friends, while making money for traveling? Also, a paid job is the one time you are truly *forced* to learn.

In January, I had a bit of a turn-around and became more serious. I decided to get a bunch of tandem partners (who are in high supply – Germans want to practice their English!), join some clubs, go out for intramural sports, read Harry Potter auf Deutsch and apply for a job. I got a position at the Neckarmüller beer garden as a bartender and was forced to pick up the language, fast. One of my tandems ended up being really cool and introduced me to his friends who I ended up hanging out with quite a bit. From about January onward, my German absolutely skyrocketed. Within a few months, I hit that stage where I no longer needed to translate a sentence in my head before saying it or translate one word at a time when someone else was speaking. It was instant – I understood and I spoke, and I even started dreaming German. By no means am I fluent today – when two Germans are speaking quickly and with lots of idioms, I'm lost. Fluency takes years, but I came a very long way, and you can too if you are serious about doing so.

Culturally, I can say a few things about the Germans. Yes, they fit some of the stereotypes – they love their beer (they love it) and festivals, they are efficient, they need structure and organization, they love setting and following rules, they are on time, and they expect you to be on time. No, they are not racist, they don't bark orders at you, hold you at gunpoint, or parade around with swastikas – WWII is long over, and you may have to remind some of your more ignorant Canadian friends of that. Nonetheless, it's interesting to see how the new German generation deals with it's past – some of the Germans our age struggle with it and feel embarrassed when they tell someone they're German. As Canadians, it's hard for us to relate. A German I dated often confided in me as to how hard her identity was to overcome and make sense of.

Against the stereotypes, I personally found Germans very friendly. Some people say Germans are cold and hard to make friends with – I disagree. The biggest roadblock is your own fear. They are always patient and supportive of you learning their language and understanding of how difficult it is. I think a lot of my fear stemmed from how we in Canada treat foreigners who speak very poor English – we often see them as stupid or incapable and are impatient with them. Germans are happy

you've chosen to learn a language that carries so much stigma, and are just plain supportive of you.

Wrap up

I feel like I've said a lot, and though I could say a lot more, I don't want to write a novel. If you have any questions for me about a possible exchange in Germany, I'd love to answer them. Shoot me an email at atkinspw@gmail.com

To conclude, your experience is what you make of it. For now, get as much advice as you can and research the facts to educate yourself about all aspects of the exchange, and when you get to Deutschland, push yourself and step out of your shell and you may have the best year of your life. Good luck!

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