

A Study Term in Baden-Württemberg

Hello, my name is Philippe and I study international relations at the graduate level at Carleton University in Ottawa. When I set out for Konstanz in March 2012, it was the first time I ever was in Germany, and only my second time in Europe. Let me tell you more about my experience – if it can benefit yours even in the smallest of ways, then writing this report will certainly have been worthwhile!

I arrived in Konstanz on March the 1st. Flying directly from Ottawa to Frankfurt is a breeze, and you're almost guaranteed not to lose your luggage. That being said, Zürich is much closer to Konstanz and would thus save you a lengthy train ride through the Schwarzwald – the Black Forest – which is a bit depressing in March with neither leaves nor snow.

The residences in Konstanz are spread out across the city, so make sure you know where you're going when you arrive – it might pay off to get off the train at Petershausen rather than at the main station in the Altstadt, the old town. The bus system works well in Konstanz even on Sundays, but buses stop running quite early at night. Fortunately, the city is not that big: you can walk pretty much anywhere, and it is fairly safe even late at night.

The first thing I did in Konstanz was meeting my mentor, who had my key; she then showed me to my residence. I lived in Sonnenbühl Ost Hochhaus, which is very close to the university. The rooms are clean and have big, nice windows, but you might need to buy missing stuff; my room didn't have a desk lamp, and it took me two weeks to find one! Some things that are easy to find in Canada require more effort in Germany, especially if you don't have a car. Some things can be borrowed from the Hausmeister, who may or may not speak English...

Getting food is easier; there are supermarkets everywhere in Germany, and food is good but not too expensive. I recommend the Mensa for lunch, since it's cheap and quite good. When you opt for the 'alternative' or 'vegetarian' menu, you get to put as much side dishes as you want on your plate, a plus for a guy who eats a lot like me. I ate only simple dishes for diner: one of my roommates was an [expletive removed] who never cleaned his stuff, and so the kitchen was not usable often. I hope you don't face a predicament like that, but unfortunately no one chooses his or her roommates. Speaking of food, the beer is of course excellent and incredibly cheap.

After less than a week, the intensive German course started – it lasts only one month, and believe me, it flies by quickly! The people at the university are very well organized. There were

ten different groups, meaning that I found myself with students with a similar level of German. The groups were also quite small: I got to know everyone very well. For most of you, the language course is a good way to better your German while obtaining easy credit.

The courses take up three hours every weekday for the first month; most afternoons are spent in fixed activities ranging from orientation to just filling out forms together. The bureaucracy aspect of the exchange is obviously heavy, but again, the Konstanz staff provides very valuable oversight. Don't forget to go on the excursions! It's probably the only way you can explore awesome places like the CERN in Geneva or visit a brewery and sample endless beer for just a few Euros!

During my second weekend, I started travelling away from the lake. Konstanz is an awesome city, but I have to say that from the perspective of travel by train, it is not well situated: you have no choice but to endure two or three hours just to get to one of the bigger rail hubs of Baden-Württemberg, like Karlsruhe, Stuttgart or Ulm. No ICEs travel to Konstanz, sadly. Still, it is possible to go from Konstanz to Hamburg with just one train... In nine hours! Deutsche Bahn is very efficient: you'll master their system in no time. Buying tickets in advance when possible can save you a lot of money. Be creative! Adding stopovers doesn't usually add to a ticket's cost: I travelled from Dresden to Wien with a 48 hour stop in Praha for just 29 Euros! The Baden-Württemberg ticket is a good option within the state, especially for groups, but keep in mind that you cannot use ICs or ICEs. Lastly, the Bahncard 25 (or maybe even 50 for some of you) is also a must; it doesn't cost much and there are often sales. Just make sure to cancel it before you leave: I was aware of that, but I didn't know Deutsche Bahn must get your letter (yes, by mail) six weeks before the card expires! That's a long time in advance, especially for a card only valid for four months (it's usually valid for a full year, but I got a special time offer).

I could spend pages telling you what to visit just in Baden-Württemberg. There are a lot of wonderful places around the lake: don't miss Lindau, Meersburg and Singen Hohentwiel (if you use a Baden-Württemberg ticket, keep in mind that for some reason, Lindau is actually in Bayern)! Also close are Freiburg, Neuhausen am Rheinfall (in Switzerland) and Sigmaringen. Be sure to try the Katamaran from or to Friedrichshafen at least once.

Those of you going for a full year will have the chance to travel a lot between the two terms; I was there only for the summer term, but the period between the language course and the regular courses still gave me a solid two weeks to go further out. I chose to visit London in the

United Kingdom. There are a lot of cheap airlines in Europe. Ryanair comes to mind: it flies out of Baden-Baden or Memmingen in Bayern. From Konstanz, this means two or three hours by train: likely more than the flight itself, but it's worth it considering what you save. If you're interested, flights to the Baltic states are especially cheap.

When I came back from London, it was time to start studying at last. While the support you get from the university is great, I found that the course registration system is somewhat stressful. There is no first come first served system like in most Ontarian universities. Basically, you go to the courses you want and the prof chooses randomly if there are too many students. For most undergraduates, this won't be a problem, as your credit transfer should not be too stingy. But as a final year graduate student, my options were a bit more limited. Everything worked out in the end, though.

This takes me to a general suggestion: make sure your university in Ontario understands what you're doing! I ran into tough administrative issues with Carleton about midway through my exchange... I almost had to pay for another semester because of errors made by others! Keeping in touch with your department is always a good idea, as mistakes happen even when everyone is well intentioned.

That pretty much sums up my suggestions. Germany is a nice country, and I'm sure your stay there will be as worthwhile as mine. If you have specific questions, try the OBW Facebook group. Actually, I have one more suggestion: go to Barfüßer Hausbrauerei in Ulm and try their Schweinshaxe, it's the best I had in all of the country :) But climb the 768 stairs of the cathedral before, not after! Have a good one!