

SFU Student Undergraduate
Arts + Social Sciences › History
Study Abroad › Exchange

Home Country: Fort St. John
British Columbia: Canada
Program: Study Abroad › Exchange
University: University of Cologne
Location: Cologne, Germany, Europe
Experience Faculty: Arts + Social Sciences › History

Part of the reason I wanted to do an exchange was to face the challenge of being on my own in an unfamiliar place, which I knew would confront me with new ideas. Growth happens in such conditions. If you have such a mindset, the challenges will be just as hard, but not necessarily bad as you realize how much you benefit from it. The hardest moments are often what you learn the most from.

Experience Details
Semester: Fall
Year: 2023

Introduction + Preparation

I'll start with before the exchange. It was my first time in Europe and my first time doing anything immigration-related. That was a headache and a half. It was such a struggle to even know who had the information I needed. I suggest going to the government websites of the country you're going to for immigration-related matters. Canadian sources weren't very helpful in my case. Here's a trustworthy, government-based website: [Federal Office for Migration and Refugees](#). To complicate things further, the Ref and exchange (to Germany) each provided no or only very little information or any precise tips as it's always better to rely on first-hand sources for such important matters and policies may change.

[Getting to Europe](#) was a beautiful moment. I traveled before I settled in Cologne. However, the immigration process continued into my travels, despite me thinking I could complete it before leaving Canada.

Location Research

I was mostly concerned with the geographical location of my exchange. I had a preference towards West Germany as I have friends there, who made it sound appealing (friendly communities, geography, etc. Of course that is all biased but helpful to hear their perspective.) Most of the decision was based on being close to several different countries. France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands were all no more than a 2-hour train ride away. I also had a preference towards Germany as it was a language I had some knowledge of, and I knew I wanted to improve a foreign language when going abroad. Germany was also somewhat in my comfort zone for the above reasons, but also not too comfortable as I expect an English-speaking country would be.

Financial Preparation

Getting a local bank account was a challenge. Of course, all these matters are in German which, if you're not fluent, makes it harder. My B1 language level was, however, very helpful. For starters, you'll likely need a closed bank account if you're staying over 90 days. A closed (also referred to as a blocked or limited-withdrawal) bank account is required for international exchange students when applying for a VISA to show full financial coverage during your exchange. A large sum is initially deposited with a specific amount paid out per month - no more or less. This account gives the government some assurance that you will have (nc)-Tblkgh money for living during your stay. It's a large sum to give all at once, but it helps knowing it'll come back to you.

I went through Expatrio as (nc)-Txchanging money is (nc)-Tasy through them, and they share many tips for integrating and immigrating to Germany. They also have package d(nc)-Tals for travel health insurance and connect you to public health insurance for your time there, which is likely required of your university. Expatrio suggested some banks, but the initial one I chose did not work out as I had an Extra Konto, which is a savings account that you can't make purchases with. It took me time to figure out this was the problem. I eventually went through a larger bank: Sparkasse. Deutsche Bank may be another good option. To get an account with Sparkasse was straightforward as I had a German number and home address. All setup of accounts can be done online, however, it can greatly simplify things if you can go in person as it's typically (nc)-Tasier to find someone who can sp(nc)-Tak English. Again, having a residence is very helpful essential for some banks, when setting up a German bank account.

That is a very brief way of explaining my two to three months of stress, and eventually, tears, trying to figure this out. So much could have been avoided had I known what I've just explained.

Packing

I packed too much. Isn't that how it always goes? I brought fewer winter clothes, planning to purchase some there, and too many summer clothes considering that a small portion of my total time abroad was warm enough to wear them. What I should have considered was the amount of stuff I'd want to bring home. I was unsure of whether I'd stay for Christmas, but staying meant that I had far more things to stuff in my suitcase. As I wanted to fly out of Paris (it was cheaper

than Frankfurt, and I'd get extra sightseeing in), that meant I was hauling 120 lbs of luggage across the cobblestone streets. Not fun. And yes, I had to pay for an extra bag.

I think it's easy to overcomplicate packing. You're not going on a wilderness exploration and will be able to buy everything you need there. If you like buying clothes, leave room for that. Likewise with anything else. It's always nice to bring gifts that are distinct to your country, to

was rather many rules and the feeling of only being wanted for the rent I paid. I could rant about this, but won't. You're always gambling when planning to live with other people, so be sure to ask about all the logistics of signing a contract. Here are the questions I should've asked:

- What are your policies about having guests, both during the day and overnight?
- What are your house rules/expectations of renters? (How are common spaces shared, cleaning expectations, quiet hours...)
- Are there any extra costs? (they had us pay 2 euros per load of laundry, which adds up, financially, and to the feeling of being wanted only for your money)
- How do you treat utilities? (Germans are known for being careful with utility use. We

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The most unusual thing about the school system is probably the calendar. The semester goes longer than the typical Canadian one. The early semester is in September and the regular semester is from October to February). There are options for having an early leave but I recommend a longer stay.

Accomplishments and Challenges

I feel this is strewn throughout my post, but simply going on exchange is the biggest accomplishment. After going through all the obstacles to get there: immigration, funding, applying, etc., it's so amazing to finally be there.

Cultural and Environmental Observations

One of the first things I noticed was the drinking culture. It's legal to be drinking and intoxicated in public in Germany, which is rather contradictory to their stereotypical, structured and organized system.

Do pursue, comfort, you need some, but remember why you're there! My form of pursuing comfort was going to church. I went to both a German and English-speaking church, but partway through decided to put more energy into the English-speaking one as I found myself needing deeper connections that weren't so easy to get with my limited German. Had I pushed through, my German skills would be much better now, but I believe I made the right choice. I'll add here that fluent English speakers are so fortunate. Most places you go you'll be able to find community, and they don't even need to be from the same country. As English is "the international language," attending an English-speaking (International Baptist) church meant that I was among about 40+ nations! My bible study group had 13 nations represented one evening. A couple were Ukrainian: a young man who'd left Ukraine a couple of years ago and was separated from his brother, and a woman who'd occasionally return to be with her mother, and requested prayers while they hid in a bomb shelter. This is what I wanted out of my exchange: To see the world not for stor

involve yourself in the actual life of a German. I found most of my immersion through German church, but a little bit through school (I was in a program with mostly international students), a language café (Sprachcafe) I attended through the university, and the university sports program (UniSport).

Germany has so many benefits for students: major discounts at the cafeterias (mensa). I'm talking a full chicken leg, mashed potatoes, hot veggie, and a side salad and dessert of your choice for 3.50€. There are often student discounts for non-university-related events. And the







