

Heidelberg University

2015 Semester One (Summer Semester)

LLB/BA (German Major, Japanese Language Minor) 5th year

I had been planning on going to Germany on exchange ever since I did a short stint as a high school student in a Nordrhein-Westfalen Gymnasium. As soon as I touched ground back in New Zealand I started organising how I could get back and found out that I could do a university exchange. Choosing Heidelberg University was an easy decision; the photos and the history of the city and university capturing my attention.

To be honest I was so focused on arriving in the state of Baden-Württemberg safe and sound with all the relevant documents at hand to make that part of settling in as smooth as possible, I forgot to create any concrete expectations of the city or think about the array of people I might be meeting. I think that this is a good thing. I went in with an open mind and heart, keen for getting to know new people and experience new places.

My exchange abroad was without a doubt some of the best five months of my life and I met people I will strive to meet again. Studying abroad challenged my ideas and thoughts about the world and the people in it. It challenged me to take responsibility for myself and represent myself and my home country, the good and the bad, and it provided me with ideas for my own future, some which I would never had known existed had I not taken this opportunity. Something I never knew would happen, I even started learning Italian while I was there and plan to continue!

The Baden-Württemberg scholarship proved indispensable, so you should definitely apply for it. Although I had saved up for my exchange, it is not cheap getting from one side of the world to the other. I was able to use the scholarship to pay for my rent and some of my food expenses. This allowed me to travel more and see more of Germany, in particular Baden-Württemberg and parts of Bayern, and even some of Germany's neighbouring countries (Italy, Czech Republic).

The student organisation of Heidelberg organised my accommodation for me and I found out when I arrived in the city where that was. I recommend, if you're a humanities student then apply to live in a Europahaus in the Altstadt. I lived in Europahaus I, the most enviable of all the student locations. It is right in the centre and the people, international and German, who lived there were amazing. It's a neat wee community and I became very good friends with some of my neighbours.

I wasn't entirely sure when I was expected in Heidelberg but I needed to book my flights so I chose a rough estimate date (I found out soon after that the exact date) which ended up being a week before I was expected. Therefore on arrival in

Frankfurt airport I took a train to Leipzig where I stayed with a friend of mine for a week and got over my jetlag. I would recommend arriving in Germany or Europe earlier than you should so you have time to adjust your bodyclock as there is a language test the day after you are expected in Heidelberg, which it is best to be cognitive for! However do not rush into the first flight deals you see as there are always better options. Something I would now consider doing is stopping over at one of the stopover cities on the flight route.

STUDYING AT HEIDELBERG:

Enrolment and registering with the city, setting up bank accounts etc is a lot easier and less of a worry that I had imagined. The host university had very detailed information on this and all the exchange students completed it together. On departing the host city however it is up to you (though with a checklist that is emailed out to know what needs to be done) to complete these steps. I am lucky in that I have European citizenship so I did not have to apply for a VISA. So look to what other people have written about this.

Definitely take part in the intensive language course in March before the semester officially starts in April after Easter! Even if you speak no German, the classes are divided by level (I did B2 in March and then C1 during the semester at the evening Monday and Wednesday (2 hours each) course) and there are plenty of others who may only know Guten Tag! It is an invaluable experience. It's a month of language class and you will meet some of your closest friends while on exchange there. There is also a half an hour break in which a free breakfast (pastries, sandwiches, muffins, donuts, German specialities, tea, and coffee) is provided. Every morning! Also, as exchange students, it is paid for my Heidelberg University so it's silly to miss such an opportunity in my opinion. There is a course in September too for the Semester beginning October.

There are different organisations which focus on providing exchange students with good deals for travelling to places and taking part in things such as wine tours, city tours, and even activities with the local children. Of course there are also plenty of international pub nights and a few pub crawls which were good social events.

The university had various organised trips to cities in the region and a wee bit further out (usually travelled by bus together) at good prices. These were conducted in German and were very enjoyable. There were a few longer weekend trips (there were a few long weekends during the Summer semester) but I did not take part in these but I heard from my friends that they are worthwhile.

There is also ESN, the Erasmus network (European students studying abroad in Europe), which organised many trips, one of which was to Strasbourg, a city in France where German is also spoken.

DeutscheBahn, the train system, has some offers too such as a discount when you travel in groups of five, and even a weekend discount, so make use of this to go to cities like Trier (a beautiful old Roman UNESCO heritage city).

The study system is a lot different to Otago in that it still follows an old way of researching classes online (the website is difficult to navigate and I recommend going to the meeting which talks about this) and then emailing the professor or simply turning up to the class and then registering there. At my home university everything is done online and can be done up to a year in advance therefore this was quite unusual. Also it is up to the student to organise collecting the Scheine (pieces of paper which state you took part in the class and the grade you received) which you must then hand in to have your transcript created. I am used to this being done automatically by my university. The courses are not all just lectures either. They can be run in different ways, sometimes with more focus on student participation like a running debate. If, like me, you have to go straight back into classes as soon as you return after exchange, I would recommend not taking classes which require a Hausarbeit to be written. These are research papers usually done after the semester has finished during the long break.

LIVING IN GERMANY

I loved living in Heidelberg and in Germany. I met so many different people from all over the world and with their own unique stories and takes on life. Heidelberg is a very international university city therefore it is a perfect place to study. I found the food and everyday necessities such as bathroom products etc to be cheaper than in my home country. This was a nice surprise. The majority of people use bikes as their main form of transport and the public transport system comes regularly (there is a semester ticket you can get for the Rhein-Neckar region allowing you to travel on buses, trams, and trains) and is easy to navigate. Germany is very central so it was also fairly easy to travel to other countries which many of my friends from America in particular took the opportunity to do. Whatever Germany offers, it is up to you to recognise and experience.

There are lots of small differences and some big differences but I feel you need to experience them for yourself. One thing I can say is even if you don't like the taste of the tap water (I think the sulphur content is higher than in Dunedin), stick it out, otherwise you could find your room full of plastic bottles which I initially did (I got over 5Euros back when I returned them for Pfand; a recycling system you will experience and most certainly be taught about by your German friends and neighbours!).

If you choose to go our semester one, be aware that in mid-Summer (July) there are lots of wasps! They are more annoying than dangerous but I heard a few stories of friends being unfortunately stung.

HANDY TIPS:

Do not be afraid to be spontaneous. Say yes to opportunities and meet lots of people. Do not be afraid to be yourself and relax in your surroundings. When things get difficult or you miss home, then get out of the house and be with your friends, as everybody feels like this occasionally and it is better to make more memories and connect with others, than to mope about the house feeling sorry for yourself. You will find things you take for granted back home and things and customs you wish you could take home with you. Remember that you are always learning. Remember to be courageous and to speak your mind when the time requires it.

Look forward to the grill parties (a.k.a mini BBQs) along the Neckar (at the Neckarwiese) with friends in Summer! Try the different beers (cheaper and nicer than here in New Zealand) and enjoy a Radler or two 😊

Don't hesitate to contact me with any questions. I'm always happy to talk about Heidelberg!



A goodbye gathering on the Neckarwiese



Walking across the Alte Brücke on the way to class at Max-Weber-Haus