

Preparation for the stay

Formalities

The formalities to be covered included the visa process as well as the university registration process. The visa process was a fairly long and drawn out process. We had to apply for a student visa which meant that we first applied for a residential visa which took about 3 months to process with multiple interviews in a different city and then once we reached Germany we had to apply for a residence permit which again involved a lot of running around to various government offices and about a month to process. This was especially difficult for us, in a new country, with no real knowledge of the language and I think was very challenging overall.

The other formalities included the university registration process which was fairly straightforward and easy to understand as well as the application for scholarship which was also a simple and efficient process.

We also had to find an apartment to rent as we could not find rooms with the university. This became a major hassle because we did not know the areas from which there would be good connectivity, what kind of rents to pay, what kind of contract terms etc. However, we managed to find a sharing apartment and rented it. It eventually turned out to be about an hour away from the city, but even so it was a nice place to stay.

Language

I undertook a basic language course to acquaint myself with the German Language. The course mostly covered numbers, few conversational phrases, names of common household items, food items, etc. It certainly came in handy during the course of my stay. This was especially true for dealing with the government offices in which the officers refused to speak to us in English

even if they could and so we had to conduct all business in German. Also, opening of bank account, getting a phone connection, etc was made easier by some rudimentary knowledge of the language.

Other preparations

Other preparations included talking to people who had lived in Germany before and trying to understand what the place would be like. We learnt about the weather, the culture, what you get and don't get in shops, whether Indian food would be available etc. This helped us in packing necessary items. We also did a lot of reading about Europe and tried to decide where we would like to travel to. We made travel plans, booked flights, insurance, made sure we had international credit/debit cards and bought a Eurail pass among other things. All of this was a very exciting build up to what we were sure would be an enjoyable exchange term.

Study in Germany

Studying in Germany was a very unique experience for me, especially because I have never studied in a foreign university. The mix of cultures was great and it was really interesting to see how different the academic cultures were. It took a little bit of getting used to, to head the emphasis of all subjects move to Germany and EU from India. Also, the culture of no attendance, course selection etc was really great. Further, I used the opportunity to attend courses out of my subject area that were not really available in India, such as a course on Shakespeare even though I could not receive credit for it.

Also, we found every one very helpful, right from the teaching assistant to the administrative office to the professors. They were very willing to go out of their way to help us out with any problems we might have had even at the cost of their own time.

Stay in Germany

I think more than the academic program, the way this exchange term really stood out for me was in getting a chance to live in a different country. We stayed in a town called Shreisheim about an hour away from Mannheim and half an hour away from Heidelberg. It was a really small town so we managed to meet quite a few of the residents over our four months there. It was a very new experience for us because we all came from the crowded metros of Indian cities and had never really seen small towns, or such uncrowded places.

We enjoyed staying there tremendously. We managed to see quite a bit of German culture – be it the wine festival, Oktoberfest, student parties, Christmas markets, etc. We found all the people to be very helpful and nice even to strangers like us. They regularly went out of their way to help us figure out everything from the public transportation to the ATM machines, etc. Even grocery shopping was very different for us and we had to depend a lot on other people to help us understand labels, contents etc.

Food was a little bit of a difficulty. None of us really knew how to cook and there were two vegetarians amongst us. Finding appropriate food really became quite a hassle till we started learning to prepare basic recipes.

Travelling around Europe was also a real pleasure for us. We visited as many as 14 countries in our time there. Travelling was very convenient and easy to plan, unlike I think what many foreigners tend to face in our home country. Across our travels though, we found that we started thinking of Germany as home, and it was a real pleasure to come back from where ever we were. We found the people were friendliest, the systems more efficient and the weather most conducive in Germany.

Ofcourse, by the end of our stay there, the temperatures had dropped to what, for us, was unheard of degrees. We found ourselves fighting to learn

how to deal with it and still managing to get around everywhere. We also experienced our first snowfall in Germany which was very nice!

Personal Evaluation of the program

Overall, the experience was a very enjoyable one. We learnt a lot in the different academic system but even more through staying alone in a foreign country for the first time and learning to handle everything by ourselves. The cultural exchanges were amazing and the friends we made there, we will stay in touch with forever.

There were definitely difficult patches for us but we managed to navigate them and came out of it with new understandings about the place and ourselves. A truly educational experience for us.