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ABOUT ME

I'm a third year business and economics student at SFU. I love to travel, meet people from all over the world, learn new languages and have as many diverse experiences as possible. I'm a big believer in having your own path and learning from everyone you meet, everywhere you go and everything you do. In my studies I'm focusing on international business and relations, business ethics and CSR and trade economics.

WHY UNIVERSITY OF MANNHEIM?



There are a lot of amazing schools in Europe and SFU has partnerships with many of them. Personally, I love Germany so I needed no convincing on Mannheim, but once I got here, I realized just how much I lucked out by choosing this place out of so many options. First of all, it is the best business school in Germany and has a great reputation. It also places a large focus on international students. It has changed its system from the previous Diploma to the current Bachelor/Masters to accommodate more students coming from all over the world. The classes I found really interesting and not extraordinarily challenging. The atmosphere here is that you take classes that concern global issues and you gain an international perspective in an international setting. There is a focus on discussions and it is very interesting to hear what other international students have to say.

You will probably read or hear that Mannheim is one of the ugliest cities in Germany. It's true that you won't necessarily describe it as pretty, but it grows on you. It's small and student-dominated and it can be amazing amounts of fun and its location makes it very easy to travel to places not only all over Germany, but also all over Europe.

If you want to go to Europe and study in a good school, meet awesome people, have fun and have interesting classes, while also picking up a language, this is the place for you. If you want to live in a big city (which would be more expensive), with posh clubs, wide boulevards and a very vibrant nightlife, you won't find that here. It's a university town so during the semester, it's a party wherever students gather, be it residence, clubs, or university courtyard (because the university is in a palace), and during the exams it can get very calm because everyone is studying. (we joke that the party is in the library)

Necessary: Formalities

Travel and Visa

Getting a German visa is ridiculously easy for a Canadian. I got mine done in an astounding three days. Canadian and German governments recently signed an agreement which allows Canadian students to study, work and travel for one year in Germany. So when you get your visa you are getting a residence and work permit in one so it makes everything a lot easier. I wouldn't leave it to the last minute (like I did), but it really is quite an easy process. Also, be aware that once you get the visa it's valid for a year so you may consider doing an internship in Germany once you're done your exchange.

For the ticket I paid about \$1000 round-trip. I think it's cheaper to fly in the fall because charters are still operating. I flew in the off-season in February so I had to fly with British Airways (which was lovely, but pricey). You can look into direct flights to Frankfurt (Air Canada, Lufthansa) or through London (British Airways) or Netherlands (KLM). Either way, if you're paying around a thousand round trip that's as good as it gets.

Mannheim has the most convenient location. It is only about an hour away from Frankfurt. (which will come handy when you want to fly for traveling around Europe!). Uni Mannheim will send you a detailed brochure which will explain how to get from Frankfurt to Mannheim. There are two options: by bus or by train. German transportation system is costly so for the train ticket one way you are looking at anywhere from 13 to 30 Euro. But don't fret, in time you will find cheaper ways of doing everything.

Insurance

Germany is very strict on medical insurance so make sure you arrange proper coverage before you leave, or you will have to pay 40+ Euro monthly for medical insurance here. If you have coverage for your stay abroad, make sure you have proper documentation that shows that.

Language

English is widely understood in Germany, so if you have no knowledge of German at all, you will be fine. However, learning the language would make your experience a lot more valuable and less complicated.

Destination: Germany

German Culture

Beer! Germans love their beer (and rightly so). But there is much more to them than this well-known stereotype. They are kind and welcoming people. Personally I've been to Europe many times so I didn't experience much culture shock. The grocery shopping experience is the one thing that stands out. The lines move quickly and you need to pack your groceries with the speed of light because there is no counter room. Also, most stores don't give you free plastic bags so if you don't want to end up carrying your salami in your hands like I did, invest in a material bag that will last you a semester. Also, everything is closed on Sundays and after 8pm the rest of the week. And look out for religious holidays. Everything will be closed in those days so if you don't know ahead, you can end up with an empty fridge for a while. Of course, Germans love football. The Bundesliga is quite good, and the Champions League final was a big event here. I recommend going to watch a game at least once! Germans are known for being punctual and organized and this is true. They value efficiency very highly. In general, just be respectful and you will learn that German people know how to have fun!

Weather

I came in February and it was gloomy weather. But as time progressed it got better and better. Winter was mild. It was about 10 degrees every day with some rain, but definitely more sunny than in Vancouver. Spring came with the beginning of April and since then it only got warmer and warmer with some rainy breaks in between. So in general, it is a mild continental climate. But I heard it can get very cold in the winter so make sure you pack warm. As for the summer, I can say, it is hot! Another note, if you're used to the humid coastal climate in Vancouver, bring lotion. It is very dry here.

Places to Visit

Make sure you visit Berlin, Munich and Hamburg at the very least. Berlin is unlike any city in Europe, cheap, fun and draws in all kinds of people. Hamburg is the number one party town in Germany and you won't regret your visit there. Munich is a must because of its old history and fantastic beer. But if you can, don't stop there! There are tons of picturesque toy-like little villages (Heidelberg, Nuremberg), metropolitan cities (Köln, Düsseldorf), the alps with the gorgeous Neueschwanzstein castle (which the Cinderella castle is based on), the fairytale-like Black Forest and Lake Constance in the south, the romantic road in Bavaria, etc. You will notice that south Germany is much more traditional and conservative, whereas north Germany is much more modern and metropolitan.

Experience: Exchange

Arrival and Orientation

Mannheim is located in the state of Baden-Wurttemberg in southern Germany. The best way to get here from Canada is to fly into Frankfurt International Airport (Frankfurt-am-Main). From the airport there are trains going directly to Mannheim. (The cost varies from 15 Euro to 27 Euro depending on which train you take). All main stations in Germany have the word "Hbf" after the name of the city. For example: Frankfurt Hbf (short for Hauptbahnhof) means Frankfurt main station. Once on the train from Frankfurt wait until you reach Mannheim Hbf (takes about an hour). Get off at Mannheim Hbf. From the main station the easiest thing would be to take a taxi to your destination. Within centre it shouldn't cost more than 8-9 Euros. But if you want to save some money you can try to figure out the extensive tram system. When you exit the train station you will see tram station on your left. The orientation of the city is very simple. I recommend checking out a map and looking at Google earth to get an idea of where everything is. The university itself is in the centre of the city and if once you exit the train station you continue to go in the left direction you will eventually (in about 10 minutes) stumble onto a huge baroque palace. (That's the university!)

Some helpful tips:

- The #1 tram is the most frequent and runs through the heart of the city.
- Within the city centre everything is labelled in letters and numbers. For example: an address can be L5, or M3.
- If you're unsure where to go, just ask! People are friendly here and most speak English.
- If you will choose university residence accommodation (there are about 10 different ones) the university brochure will have detailed explanations on how to get there

I suggest arriving at least a week before classes start. It may seem like a long time, but there is a lot to do: get enrolled, register with the city, attend info sessions, figure out your accommodation and basically settle in. The earlier you get to Mannheim, the easier it will be in the first weeks of lectures.

Accommodation

I missed all the deadlines for university accommodation so I didn't get a room with the university. In my case it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Basically you have two choices: you can arrange a room through university or find one on your own.

I had friends living in different university residences so I can give you an idea of what they are like. Of course keep in mind that this is my opinion and is based on what I saw and perhaps your experience of the place will be different.

My first choice was Hafenstrasse. It is closest to the university and it is definitely the party res. It's quite nice; the only thing is that there is no oven so you are looking at eating boiled or fried food the whole time. It's not a hall style residence; it's more of an apartment feel. The common room and kitchen have a good layout for partying, but I've heard a lot of people complain that if there is a party it's not possible to sleep or study (because the common room is in the middle). So if you are not a fan of parties, living at this res would be a challenge. Only bad thing to note about this residence is that it is in a very shady neighbourhood. For girls, coming back at night around there was dangerous especially if you were alone. Walking distance to university is about 20 minutes. Not too close but not too far.

There is also Ulmenweg and Steingarten. These two are out of the city centre so for me that was right away a "no". At SFU it takes me an hour and half to get to university each day, so I wanted to make sure that on exchange I live as close as possible. However, if you don't mind a little distance, these residences are not too bad. They have nice barbeque areas where in the spring people threw parties. You can get here by trams or buses, or about 15-20 minutes on a bike. However, there are times when trams are not going and I've heard of a lot of people having to walk to residence after partying in the city centre because there was no transportation. Either way you will be sharing accommodation with other international students, so you will have fun, but, I have heard a lot of people complain about these two residences.

There is another 5 or 6 residences throughout the city. I personally arranged accommodation in a private residence called Alfred-Delp-Haus and it was the best decision I made. Aside from having the lowest price (210 Euro a month), it is also located in the centre of the city (I calculated 7 minutes by foot to get to the uni) and is known in Mannheim as the ultimate party residence. Another nice thing is that it is about 60-70% German and 30% international students, so you really become more immersed in the culture and get a chance to learn some German. I cannot say enough good things about this place. The rooms are nice. It's a hall style residence, but everyone is social and respectful and you will make friends very quickly. In the beginning of each semester they have a party on each floor. It is up to the newbies on the floor to throw the party but residence gives the newbies a budget of about 120 Euros for food and alcohol. So each week there is a party on a new floor and you get to know people in the whole residence. There is also a bar downstairs where people come to drink every Thursday night before the big university parties and everyone is welcome. When I was there the residence threw a huge party in April – about a thousand people came. But of course, you don't have to party all the time; there are tons of things to do. They organize sports activities, concerts and barbeques. It's very social and fun and you will have the best time here.

So, of course, if I could recommend a residence, I would say apply to Alfred-Delp-Haus. Everyone that lives here absolutely loves it. But exchange is what you make of it, so no matter what residence you live in you can have fun and meet amazing people if you stay positive and open-minded.

Social and extra-curricular activities

There was always so much going on at my residence that I barely had time to do social activities outside. But here's some mandatory information:

- VISUM (international students organisation) holds tons of events, from International nights to city trips (Prague, Stuttgart, Hamburg, etc) to Running Beer contests to movie nights
- Every Thursday night there is a Schnekenhof party in the university palace courtyard (or catacombs when it's cold). Everybody goes. After that it's usually the Ritz club.
- Every Tuesday, VISUM throws parties at the Zimmer nightclub.
- The International office organizes very cheap excursions to Strasbourg and Frankfurt
- There are tons of free sports activities and fitness classes through the university
- There is a very nice park by the Rhine river where people often go biking or jogging and when warm, barbequing
- I would recommend investing in a bicycle. (you can buy a cheap one for 20-30 Euro). The city is very flat and perfect for biking and also there are a number of pretty towns near by if you want to do a bike trip.
- Beautiful Heidelberg (one of the most famous old towns in Germany) is only 20 minutes away and is a must-see
- Mannheim is in a perfect location for travel: France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Czech Republic, are all very close. Most of the international students I knew (including me) traveled almost every weekend.
- You will find that most of the events happen during the week and during the weekends people study or travel so if you can squeeze studying during the week you have the weekends for exploring Europe!

Uni Mannheim

University of Mannheim is considered the best business university in Germany. I found the classes very engaging and interesting. Taking international business courses in an international setting with other exchange students from all over the world is an unbeatable combination.

In the beginning I had trouble figuring out how the system works. Just like at SFU, there is a portal for all the information (similar to go.sfu.) and there is a Uni Mannheim email as well. Beware that not all classes start exactly when lecture period begins. Some classes start later, some end earlier; some are only 4 day seminars, etc. The best thing to do to guarantee a headache-free enrolment is to attend all the information sessions. Especially go to the business orientation session. (I missed it and lived to regret it). The international office is also really helpful.

In general most courses that can get transferred to SFU are in the international business, human resources and marketing areas. However there are some finance courses as well. Important: be very careful in your planning. Many courses that are on

the SFU Transfer credit database have now become graduate level courses and as an undergraduate you may not be able to take them.

Student Life

There is definitely a lot of partying in Germany, but don't let that fool you. When exams are coming close everyone lives at the library. In general I noticed that German students study very hard and take school very seriously. Unlike us, they rarely have a part-time job. And extra-curricular involvement such as conferences, competitions, etc. like we have at SFU is not common here, so studying is the main thing. It actually felt quite luxurious to do nothing but study. I also have to note that breakfast is a sacred meal here. No matter how late German students go to bed they always wake up for breakfast.

Finances

Living in Germany is ridiculously cheap. Especially after travelling to other countries in Europe, you will be amazed at the affordability here.

Accommodation: You are looking at about 210-300 Euro per month for rent.

Food: If you are willing to buy groceries and cook, 180 Euro a month will easily cover you. Otherwise, there are restaurants with 5-6 Euro pasta. The Mensa (student cafeteria) has meal options from 2.75 to 4 Euro. (and the meals are quite big, I could never finish one). There are also fast food, kebab and sandwich places with average cost of about 3 Euro.

Travel: In North America we have a culture of last-minute sales and last minute travel and usually think that is cheaper. Erase that mentality for Europe. The more ahead you plan your trip, the cheaper the transportation cost will be. Look into www.eurolines.com or the German rail system www.bahn.de. Also you can look into a Eurail pass if you already know where exactly you want to go. Transportation in Germany, France and Switzerland is perhaps the most expensive. Italy is quite affordable. Airlines like www.ryanair.com offer ridiculous discounts, but with strings attached: you can only bring one bag of 10 kg with you, the airports they fly into are not the main airports, shuttle buses will cost you, and the general rule of thumb is if they can charge you for something, they will; however, in many cases it still ends up being cheaper.

Local Travel: The semester ticket costs about 110 Euro and covers a large area around Mannheim (including Heidelberg) and also makes it cheaper to travel to more distant places. I didn't invest in one because I lived 7 minutes away from university and didn't need to take the tram every day. But if you do need to travel frequently it will probably be well worth it.

Budget: Personally I survived easily on 400 Euro a month food, accommodation and party included. I then spent about 150 Euro on the weekends for travel. (If you can't

afford always paying for hostels when you travel, just wait until you make some international friends, and stay with them!)

Learn: My Lessons

Best and Worst Experiences

My exchange was amazing and I can't come up with any bad experiences except for some travel anecdotes.

What I learned & the challenges I faced

I learned that I prefer to travel to a country with a purpose rather than just rushing through the sights. I also relearned how much I love Europe and meeting new people. As for the challenges, I can't think of anything monumental. It was the first time that I lived on my own and in a foreign country but I didn't find it challenging at all. The biggest lesson I learned here is really to do exactly what you want.

Words of Wisdom

- Be open-minded. Sometimes you will get frustrated with little culture differences, but it's normal and will pass and you will learn more about yourself in the process.
- Time will fly! If you want to do something, don't put it off!
- Travelling from Mannheim is very easy, do as much as you can.
- Try to get to know some German people, not only international students and take at least one German course.
- Plan on getting everything done in the morning as most university offices are only open from 9-12
- In terms of accommodation, the closer to the university and city-centre that you are, the more fun you will have.
- Registering for courses can get confusing here, ask for help and don't leave it to the last minute!
- Don't worry if in the first week or two you feel like a confused and lost puppy, that's completely normal and everyone feels the same. Stick it out, have fun, learn and you will have the best time of your life!

