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Goethe Institute Dusseldorf, Germany
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1&3. Before leaving for your destination, make sure there are no festivals or large events going on in the area that would make it likely for all hostels and hotels to be fully booked. I recommend staying with a family from the area you are visiting, because you will be immersed in the culture and language much more thoroughly. Also, it will usually be cheaper than any hostel or student apartment/dorm, and if you check ahead of time you should be able to use their kitchen to cook in. The exchange program that you will be attending should have a list of families that want to host students that you can contact ahead of time. The main key here: double check everything ahead of time directly with the person you will be interacting with.

The orientation at the Goethe Institute included help with getting a student discounted public transit pass, what services are offered at the Institute (Library, Internet, Adviser/General Questions) and an introduction to two young employees at the Institute who lead all sorts of extracurricular activities, such as trips around the country, what nightlife there is in the area, sports, museum/arts-- basically anything fun that you could want to do after classes they were the ones to go to for advice and they would usually put together groups of people to go places so you could meet people easily.

2. The classroom structure was very similar to language classes at UW. The teacher used visual/oral presentation of information, answered any questions we had, and then tried to get us to practice it with each other and with the teacher. The teachers there were very easy to interact with, friendly, down to earth, and had amazing qualifications for teaching. We used textbooks and workbooks, standard of most language classes, and we had very little testing to worry about. Most people there were learning German for employment, and the rest were very dedicated students, so there was little need for incentive of testing to get students to study and actively learn. However, if a student wanted ANY further homework or assistance, the teachers were very kind with their time and would work through different aspects of the language until you the student understood. Also, we had two teachers, so we had a variety of styles of teaching and speaking. Our second teacher was much more focused on individual learning needs. We would pull out a tape recorder, have a conversation about a topic in German, then all listen together and write out together what our strengths and weaknesses were, then we would pair up according those strengths and weaknesses, whether it be pairing opposites or similar strengths/weaknesses, we would work through very specifically what each of us needed to work on in German. I learned more about speaking, reading, writing German than any other course I ever took at UW. Lastly, the students were from about 15 different countries, so we had an opportunity to learn from each other in ways much more enriching than any language course at UW I could ever take. Also, the library was small, but very "dense" so to speak in its usefulness, and the computers were almost always available/modern. The institute itself was very modern and clean.

4. Dusseldorf is a midsized city, about the size of Seattle, with very good public transportation

(not as good as Berlin, but definitely good) and one of the best places for nightlife in all of Germany. The Altstadt section of Dusseldorf has many different types of bars and clubs to go meet people and really get a chance to practice German with a large variety of people. During the day, Cologne is a much better city (depending on the train about half hour to hour from Dusseldorf) with extremely outgoing people, lots of museums, and a much more visually appealing architecture. Dusseldorf still has many things to offer, just not as much as Cologne.

5. Dusseldorf and Cologne were some of the safest cities I've ever been to (I've been to New York, Amsterdam, Vancouver). I traveled to almost every neighborhood in Dusseldorf and never felt nervous or in danger. My roommate from Spain had a very serious medical problem (his spine had internal bleeding!) and we had a little bit of difficulty with the language barrier, but overall the experience was good. Our landlord helped us with translation and they also brought in a doctor who spoke better English than some of the other doctors we met.

6. The main way I met members of the community and integrated into the culture was through traveling alone and being an outgoing person. I would strike up conversations with people at museums, cafes, beer halls, restaurants, late night food places. I highly recommend Cologne for socializing, because the people there are very open to complete strangers talking to each other out of the blue and then hanging out for an entire evening-- that happened multiple times when I was there. Otherwise, the "field trips" we took at the Goethe Institute gave us an opportunity to spend a full day with our fellow classmates and get to know them at a museum or just wandering around a new town with a guide telling us about its history and we would all usually end up at some place to drink beer and have delicious food. After the first field trip we would all organize our own trips on our own to get lunch or dinner almost every day. Also, the Goethe Institute had a Stammtisch, which implies the same group of people (any of the students and staff who wanted to come) would go to the same bar, sit at the same reserved table, on the same day and time and drink together. It's a huge German tradition that keeps close friends in touch every week. Our extracurricular activities director knew a bar owner from Israel, so we had a table reserved at his bar every Thursday and would all hang out and just have a good time really getting to know each other. In Germany I did not have a problem with cultural differences. Any differences that I encountered were fun, exciting, intriguing, and were very easy to adjust to. The only differences that one might have trouble with is the social norm to always be punctual and the fact that everything is closed on Sunday, so you have to plan ahead when it comes to grocery shopping and train schedule, because Germany businesses almost completely shut down all day on Sunday. But, everyone is walking around with their family and enjoying the day off, so a few cafes and restaurants will be open, but that's it. Took me a little while to get used to the European kiss on both cheeks, I kept giving people a really big hug and they would try to pull away to give me a kiss on the other cheek and I would completely forget. It was always funny for the Germans.

7. Bank of America tells you that you can go to the Deutsche Bank and retrieve money from there without any problems, because the two banks have an agreement. Apparently Bank of America did not let the Deutsche Bank know this, because the manager there had no clue what I was talking about and said I had to have a bank account at the Deutsche Bank to get money from there. I had a very difficult experience with getting money in Germany. It is still unclear to me

the best way to get money while in Germany, so my best advice I can give is transfer a huge sum of money at the airport (if you're not worried about it getting stolen) and hope that you can figure out some way to get more money without getting lots of ATM withdrawal charges like I did (\$10 per transaction). The easiest way I can guess is to go to your bank ahead of time and have them take your daily limit off of your debit card, so you can withdraw more than \$200 Euro per day. In Germany almost everything is payed for in cash, so an international credit or debit card from AAA or any other place that offers them is not going to be ideal. Traveler's cheques were also not easy to cash. It seemed like banks, credit unions, and Western Union had never even heard of them. The amount that you will need per month completely depends on which city you are staying at, how often you go out and drink or eat at a restaurant, whether you smoke or drink lots of coffee, what your housing situation is, and how often you travel outside of your main city (hostel costs, etc). The amount I spent per month was about \$2000. I decided to go on this trip literally one week before I ended up leaving, so in 7 days I booked a flight, filled out all the paperwork, and gave my friend the keys to my apartment and hopped on a plane to Germany, so there were little "learning mistakes" that I had to suffer when I got there because of my spontaneity. If I could go back, I would do exactly the same thing, it was amazing and fun. My next trip, however, I will plan ahead much more thoroughly and make sure I don't spend quite so much money.

8. The IPE was amazing. They helped me very quickly and very efficiently to get me to Germany. Like I said, I applied a week before I left and even though the deadline was past, they made it work. However, they do not hold your hand the whole way and do everything for you. YOU have to double check everything on your own ahead of time and make sure everything is in order. They are of course there to help if you ask for it, but you have to be an adult and make it happen with your own two hands. Which is the way it should be. It's part of the learning experience. Now, I'm sure with other countries it would be different. I would not travel to a country with such a different culture without some serious guidance, like the Far East, Middle East, or Africa, but with Germany-- they are very similar to us and are very helpful to foreigners, so it's not a big deal.

9. The Goethe Institute is suitable for almost any student. It can be a challenging experience academically, or one can learn at a much more laid back pace. One can be shy and still find a way to meet lots of people and have an amazing cultural experience or one can be outgoing and flourish in an environment of friendly, equally outgoing people. It is an experience that is equally beneficial to anyone in completely unique ways according to their state of mind.

10. My expectations were completely surpassed. I had no idea what was going to take place when I arrived and it ended up being easily the most amazing experience of my life. My teachers were amazing and not only taught me German, but techniques for learning German I had never encountered before. I learned more about myself on this trip than any other I had been on before. I was over 5,000 miles from my family and closest friends and I had an opportunity to do things entirely on my own in ways I had never done before. It was a very strengthening experience. When I met new people, I had an opportunity to reinvent myself and grow as a person in any way I wanted. The doors of possibility were endless for my state of mind and my understanding of myself as an American and a human being on this planet.