Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Germany

Exchange Program:
Oct 2011 – Feb 2012

Zach
Minors in Philosophy and History
First and foremost, I am very thankful that SFU has given me this opportunity to live and learn in Europe. Europe is one of the many places that I want to go to, and Germany was one of the must-go places if I ever went there. During my exchange I have had the privilege of making new friends, eating new types of food, drink from a wide variety of beers, see places that I would otherwise only see in textbooks and TV, and be exposed to a completely different culture.

**Preparation for exchange:**

**Contacts** - One of the first things you should do once your exchange is confirmed, tell everyone that you know that you are going on an exchange program and ask them if they know anyone who lives in where you are going. One thing you do not want to go through during your awesome time overseas is loneliness. Get as many contacts as you can, get acquainted with them through your friends and family via facebook, email, etc, and set up a time and place to meet with them when you arrive. Another huge benefit of getting to know people beforehand is, depending on your relationship with them, they may agree to have you live with them during your time there. Homestay is generally much cheaper than renting.

**Paperwork** - Another thing you should do is to complete your paperwork necessary for the exchange as soon as possible. You will need to order and send in transcripts to Humboldt so they can accept you as a host university. Keep in mind that their academic semester is completely different from ours. They have a winter semester that goes from October – February, and summer semester that goes from April – August, if I remember correctly. So if you are trying to complete your program within your desired timeframe, you may have to take online courses like I did during SFU’s spring term.

**Scholarships** - As we all know, going on exchange isn’t cheap. So take advantage of as many scholarship offers as you can from anywhere. SFU has grants and scholarships like the International Mobility Award ([http://students.sfu.ca/studyabroad/resources/ima.html](http://students.sfu.ca/studyabroad/resources/ima.html)) Apply as soon as you are able to. I am sure you can find scholarship offers in Europe as well. The DAAD ([www.daad.org](http://www.daad.org)) also offers funding for your exchange and will greatly help out (I mean, a monthly stipend of 650 Euros and more??? You will probably MAKE money because of that). Unfortunately, although I did get some funding from SFU I did not get the undergraduate scholarship from DAAD, so I had to rely on my parents’ and my own funding.

**Familiarization** – Unless your German is pretty proficient, getting through the Humboldt website will be difficult even with Google Translate. Take the time to know where certain pages are; like where to find courses that are offered during your exchange term! Before your semester starts, I would also suggest arriving in Berlin early so you can familiarize yourself with the city, transportation system, and enjoy the sun some more before it disappears for months once the semester begins.

**Bureaucratic Stuff** – Visas are important. If you are a Canadian citizen you can stay in Germany up to 3 months without needing a visa. Any longer and you will need a visa to extend your stay. I am Canadian, so I am just going to write what I had to do as a Canadian citizen in the next part.

**Language Proficiency** – It would be very helpful to have at least a basic knowledge of the German language. This will save you from a serious culture shock and will prove useful in getting around the city. Although Berlin may be the most multi-cultural city in Germany and many people can speak English, the majority of signs are in German and the majority (with the exception of certain foreigners) of the population speaks German. I had taken two years of German at SFU and I still had difficulty at first in Berlin. It would be wise to take a language course in Berlin before or during the semester.

**Travel Plans** – While you are in Europe, I highly suggest that you take the time to go travel around. Transportation is very affordable and convenient. You can travel to different countries by bus, train, car, or plane. Of course, depending on how long you decide to stay in Europe, you should plan ahead on the destinations that you want to go to. In regards to buying tickets ahead of time, do it when you are in Europe to avoid the currency conversion hassle. Also, if you are like me who went during the winter semester and want to go home to spend the holiday with family, plan when you are going to return to Canada. During the winter holiday, students get a week off of classes.

**Money** – Most importantly, make sure you have enough money for your trip! Europe (except the UK) accepts Euros. Convert your money beforehand to save time and make sure you have a credit card or more (be sure to call your banks that you are going to Europe!) in case of any emergency. Cash and card are both very common. I would use card on larger purchases. When I went, I brought about 3000 Euro in cash. Be careful when you are doing this, because you are going to live off of that! Use a money belt, divide up the amount into envelopes, and keep them safe. 3000 Euro pretty much lasted me until the winter break.
When I came back from the holiday, I brought back to Germany another 5000 Euro in cash. The cost of living in Germany isn’t very high as compared to Vancouver. I’ll have a breakdown of my funds later on.

Miscellaneous – Keep in mind that Europe is different than North America. This means, different frequency for phones and different electrical output for electronics. Buy adapters (Unless you are going to the UK, having just EU plugs are fine) and make sure your cellphone is supported in Europe. I had to buy a new phone in Berlin because my cellphone was blocked by WIND mobile. As for anything else, just think about the things you are packing and whether or not you can use them when you go.

Packing – I brought a lot of stuff to Berlin and it was a hassle. I had one large check-in luggage, a carry-on luggage, and a backpack. When I came back from Berlin I had also bought a guitar with a guitar case, adding to my burdens. If you cannot carry these all these things by yourself, don’t pack so much. Remember, chances are, you will go shopping for a lot of stuff when you are there; perhaps even a new Rimowa (super $$$ but very durable. I couldn’t afford it) luggage to store your belongings. Almost ALL flats in Germany do NOT have elevators. Unless you are fortunate enough to live in a more modern building, you will have to carry everything up and down flights of stairs.

My arrival in Germany:

I had two contacts before I left for Germany. I was supposed to meet a couple, whom I was able to be connected to earlier, but I had the biggest problem figuring out how to dial numbers. In Germany, you do not need to dial +49 because that is only for international calling. Also, say if you called my number 017638845314, you can leave out the 0 in the beginning. Once I finally got a hold of them, I was able to reach them and live with them until I found a flat. I was fortunate that I could stay with them because it wasn’t until the week that classes began that I finally found a flat to stay in. I had to buy all my furniture for my room, which costs around 200 Euro in IKEA, which is fine because that made me feel very independent considering I’ve been living with my parents my whole life.

During Exchange:

Orientation – Being an international student, you have to attend an orientation session so the staff can teach you about the academic system of Humboldt. At Orbis, the international centre, you will also have opportunities to sign up for events designed for international students to integrate into life in Berlin. The program KUSTOS has also been helpful in making my experience at Humboldt easier and enjoyable. Here’s the site http://www.international.hu-berlin.de/an_die_hu-en/wegweiser/09/09_01_03.

Visa - I did not get a student visa until I was in Berlin for a few months. The international centre (Orbis) staff is very helpful and they will tell you need to do. They set up an appointment for me with the local city hall (Rathaus) and gave me a list of the documents I needed to have, such as: Proof of enrolment as student, proof of residency, passport photos, statement of financial security (showing you have enough money to live in Germany), and identification documents. Unfortunately for me, I missed the appointment and so I had to do everything myself and go to the Immigration Office (Ausländerbehörde Berlin) to get it done. Getting the visa cost 50 Euro along with 3-4 hour wait starting around 7am. Lesson learned: Don’t miss your appointments!

Accommodation & Living – I lived in a flat on the 3rd floor in Wedding by Osloerstrasse. It is a very convenient place: it is a 3 min walk from the U-bahn (subway line) and bus stop, the U-bahn was connected to two different subway lines so traveling was faster, getting to university took about 20mins by train, and my flat was 5 mins walk from Kaufland and Poco Domäne. Kaufland is a supermarket (one you will come to love, along with Netto and Lidl) and Poco is a furniture store (although it is a pretty low quality and cheap place, I actually suggest going to IKEA for furniture).

Rent with everything included was 280 Euro per month and food was chipped in with my 3 other roommates for 100 Euro each. You really don’t need 100 Euro per month for food though. Buying your basic necessities like milk, bread, meat, eggs, cheese, etc are very, very cheap. A lot of food you can buy for less than 2 Euros. Beer? Don’t get me started on beer. The stereotype is true: Beer is cheaper than water. You can buy a half litre bottle of beer (the cheapest grade) for just over 30 cents! And you can get a deposit on bottles too to use as store credit.
**Academic details** – The two things worth noting here are about courses and exams. More specifically, courses can be done in modules, meaning that it includes lectures, tutorials, labs, and exams. Other courses can be done just by lectures/seminars without needing tutorials or even exams! Of course, you won’t get the full credits if you just attend class as opposed to writing exams and writing papers. During exam time near the end of the semester, the university will mail you a sheet of paper with a list of codes. You will need these codes to register for the exams in your classes.

Humboldt has many campuses, and where you will have to go depends on what courses you will be taking. It’s fairly similar to the different campuses that SFU has. Humboldt has 4 cafeterias (Mensa). In order to buy food and use lockers at the library, you will need to have a Mensa card, which you can buy at one of the cashiers in the cafeteria. This makes life much simpler and faster.

**Berlin** – Many people have told me that Berliners are the coldest and bluntest people in Germany. For me, however, I found the people pretty friendly and helpful even. I have a hunch being able to even speak a little German made people have a friendlier disposition towards me. Many of my friends have also told me that Americans aren’t accepted as well as Canadians are; even those who are themselves American. So I did what was advised: pin a Canada flag onto your jacket and backpack 😊 In terms of the weather, Berlin is like Vancouver, but less rain. From November onwards until spring, Berlin will be 90% overcast and windy. If it wasn’t for the wind chill factor, Berlin would actually be pretty warm. Personally, I never had to wear gloves, and scarves I wore just because it made me look more European.

Berlin has a huge population of Turks, so you will find many Kebab stores around the city where döners are sold. They are very delicious and filling. The average cost would be 4 Euros for a wrap chocked with meat slices. You will also find many Chinese food kiosks, but never tried any. Although there are a number of Asian communities in Berlin, I’m afraid I’ve been too spoiled by the great Chinese food here in Vancouver. Bubble tea is growing in popularity and will cost anywhere from 3-5 Euros per cup.

There are also tons of places to see in Berlin. I can’t mention them all here, but just buy a map from one of the bookstores in a train station and go exploring by yourself. If you want a tour, I can recommend a free walking tour [http://www.newberlintours.com/daily-tours/free-tour.html](http://www.newberlintours.com/daily-tours/free-tour.html) The guides earn money on a tip basis. You will be able to see different sections of the Berlin Wall, the Radio Tower, Brandenburg Gate, the Jewish Memorial site, the Victory statue, Checkpoint Charlie, and more. I also do recommend taking the time to go out to Oranienburg by Sachsenhausen to see the headquarter site of the Nazi concentration camps back in WWII. There are tours that does that day trip as well.

One thing that you will definitely enjoy and you will most definitely not enjoy here in Canada, let alone Vancouver, is the public transportation. You will love the S-bahns (skytrains), U-bahns (subways), trams, and busses. They are super-efficient and are almost always on time. Each stop will usually have a digital clock counting down to the next arrival. Very often you will get buskers getting onto your train to play music for donations. Other times, you will get homeless people announcing that they are selling newspapers which talk about the homeless. This being said, there are homeless people in Berlin and while they get welfare from the government, many of them will go around asking people to buy their newspapers as sort of a day job. Whether you give money to them or not is up to your discretion.

**Social and extra-curricular activities** – Make friends everywhere you go. If you are a partier, make friends with students who are part of the ERASMUS program. These students get funded by the EU to go to another country for school. Let’s just say that academics isn’t the main reason why they are there. I managed to join a number of social circles through churches I attend. I was a regular with the Berlin International Community Church. They’re located in a theatre at Potsdamer Platz [http://www берлинче́рк.org/](http://www.berlinchurc.org/) Whether you are religious or not, I recommend checking this place out anyway as an opportunity to meet tons of people. Another way I met people was through a Christian organization called Campus für Christus. I’m familiar with them because I am also with SFU’s Campus for Christ (now known as Power to Change). The couple I stayed with back in September were missionaries and managed to connect me with the director of the group in Berlin. I am very grateful that I was able to meet them and join them in their activities. That’s how I was able to make American friends too, because the entire team consisted of university graduates in America reaching out to students in Berlin. If you are interested in getting in touch with them, let me know.

Humboldt University offers an enormous variety of sports activities. You can sign up for a sport from swimming to ultimate Frisbee to running, all for a very low price and lasts for the duration of the semester [http://www.zeh.hu-berlin.de/angebot.html](http://www.zeh.hu-berlin.de/angebot.html).
Reflection After Exchange:

Lessons and Challenges – One thing that really shocked me when I was in Berlin was seeing a Chinese community where people spoke German and not English. That totally threw me off. Growing up in Vancouver, you expect to see Chinese people who can speak Chinese and English, right? In Berlin it’s German and Chinese. Obvious, I know, but it never fails to surprise me to see my Chinese-German friends speak fluent German. Spending 6 months away from home really taught me how to be independent. I really enjoyed the time by myself and with my roommates. I never really got homesick, but I know my parents missed me dearly. When I first arrived in Berlin, I felt like I had so many things to do that I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. One of the staff at Humboldt reassured me that although it may feel like there are tons of things to do, everything will eventually work out. And it did. So if you are panicking during your first few weeks in Berlin, it’s okay. It’s normal.

A challenge that I definitely faced was the language barrier. Although gradually my ears became attuned to the German language, I still had difficulties expressing myself in German. If you are studying in Berlin with no knowledge of German, I HIGHLY suggest that you begin learning. Not only will this make your life easier when you are over there, but you will come to appreciate the German culture and people so much more. The courses that I took in Humboldt were taught in English, so it was a definite disadvantage to my learning German. If your language ability permits, take courses in German instead of English and you will be fluent, if not more proficient, in no time.

Another challenge was balancing work with play. I was taking 4 courses (3 Philosophy courses and 1 language course) and when January came around I took on 2 more distance education courses at SFU. If you really want to enjoy your time overseas, don’t take on so much work!!! I can’t keep track how many days I spent holed up in my room doing readings and papers. If you are trying to graduate on time and need the credits, keep in mind that you will miss out on your travels because of school work. If you’re not in a rush, take maybe 3 courses at most so you can enjoy your exchange.

Words of Wisdom: Fewer courses = More time for leisure traveling and exploring. Make lots of friends. Take time to travel to different cities and countries. Be open to the culture. Speak German as often as you can. Have fun!
**Breakdown of Costs**

**Airfare:** $3500
- Vancouver > Berlin - $700
- Berlin > Vancouver > Berlin (Christmas visit) - $1500
- Berlin > Vancouver - $1300

**Cellphone (with provider Fonic.de):** $260 for phone & $40/month pay as you go
- Humboldt Orbis centre will give you a free phone card with 10 Euro start up. However, I bought another phone card when I bought my phone which I think is better. Fonic charges 9 cents/min or text for local, and 19 cents/min or text anywhere outside the EU. Free incoming calls and texts. 9.99 Euro of my monthly bill goes towards a data plan.

**School Fees:**
- Exchange Program (12 credits) – $2231.38
- Humboldt Student services fee, enrollment fee, and semester ticket (transit pass) – 194.70 Euro
  - All my reading material was online without extra cost
- Spring semester courses at SFU (2 courses) – $1379.44
- SFU bursary - $1934

**Food & Entertainment:** $100/month
- At Potsdamer Platz Cinestar theatre, they have a 5 Euro Sneak Preview night where they show a random upcoming movie before it hits the European theatres every Thursday night at 8pm.
- Museums give a discounted student price and cost 10 Euros or less for entry
  - Museums in the UK are free admission
- The clubs in Berlin are phenomenal. Cover fees are cheap (average club charges 5 Euros and Erasmus events offer free entry) and the clubs are huge. Many clubs have 4+ dance floors with different music genres.
- Check out the orchestras, operas, and live shows in Berlin. There is always something going on each week.

**Travel:** $2500 - At the end of the semester I took two weeks to travel to Liverpool, London, Canterbury, Paris, and Cologne.
- Flights cost a little over 100 Euro or $130 (the earlier you book, the cheaper it is) and are usually cheaper than train tickets
- Coach buses (when I traveled between cities in the UK): Around 16 pounds ($25) per destination
- Train from Paris – Cologne: $75
- Rented a car at Sixt to drive to Hamburg and back: $470
- Stayed at hostels in the UK and Cologne: $400

**Souvenirs/Shopping:** $700
- I recommend buying Milka chocolate bars and bringing them back to Canada. There are days where they will be on sale at Kaufland and costs around 60 cents/bar!
- Berlin has a number of huge shopping malls, and almost every mall has H&M, C&A, and Zara. I got a number of really good deals on winter clothing at C&A.

If you have questions about Berlin or anything else, feel free to shoot me an email at ztam@sfu.ca