



Joey
From Ingersoll
to
Germany

Life in the Fast Lane of Memories

Alles Klar! Alright here goes!

Wow, has time ever flown by! I cannot believe that I'm writing my first Beaver Tale. Reading these are what inspired me to apply for and become an exchange student in the first place. I feel like it was only yesterday I was sitting in my grade 11 Biology class with my friend Jon who showed me the Beaver Tales while we were procrastinating on our school work. There truly is no way to describe the true sensation you get when you're an exchange student travelling alone abroad. If I were asked to describe my exchange in one word it is difficult as several come to mind; magical, marvelous and unbelievable!

Three months ago I got on a plane to leave my family, my friends, my home, my town and my country with no looking back. Three months ago I began a new life, not a year, but a life in a year. Three months ago I started fresh; I made new friends, joined new families, settled in a new home, embraced my new city Bielefeld with open arms, explored a foreign country and began a new lifestyle.

As an outbound I always had countdowns; countdown until my first interview, countdown until Camp Wanakita, countdown until Announcement Day and the biggest countdown of all, the day I would take off on my journey of a lifetime and leave everything behind me at Pearson Airport in Toronto. But as the countdowns began to dwindle I realised the magnitude of the adventure that lied ahead of me and had second thoughts on whether or not I was making the right decision to allow myself to step outside of my comfort zone and take on whatever life threw at me.

I remember the adrenaline running through me. The car ride to the airport was really unnerving. I tried to absorb whatever ounces of love I could take in from my friends and family in whatever time I had left with them. I had the dumbest smile on my face that I couldn't get rid of, not because I was happy to be leaving my family, but because I was too frightened to display any other emotions. It was my first time flying alone and outside of Canada. I worked up such a sweat the passenger in the seat next to me offered his complementary blanket to me to use as a towel. When I walked through those gates in Frankfurt with no hope of return, I was overwhelmed with a sensation of freedom. Finally, I'd been let off my leash. Racing through the Frankfurt Airport to find my flight connection to Hannover, leaving a red streak behind me everywhere I went from my bright red Rotary blazer and attracting attention everywhere I went. During my three hour layover I had to take two trains and a bus in one of the world's largest airports. I came to the realisation that I wasn't in little old Ingersoll anymore. Before I knew it I was on my connecting flight passing over the Northern Mountains into Hannover. I made it.

You would think that a country such as Germany wouldn't be that much different from Canada, right? Boy was I wrong. I was served a whole plate of culture shock immediately after getting off of the plane. My first shock hit me when my host parents and I were driving from the airport and got on the Autobahn and drove up to 140 kph in the slow lane and had cars fly by us at 200 kph as though it was no big deal. But fast cars turned out to be the least of my worries. Germans love their bread, sausage and sparkling water. My first time trying sparkling water, it burned my throat so much that I spit it out like I was reacting to a punch line in a movie.

However, it's not just fast cars and food that have my knickers in a twist. The language barrier can sometimes be very stressful. I used to think it was enticing listening to German conversations and having a good guess at what they were talking about, but that game got old really fast. German high school is also a challenge. I go to school Monday to Friday from 7:40am until 1pm. To get to and from school it takes me over an hour; I have to walk, bus, ride one train and switch to another to get into the city centre where I attend Helmholtz Gymnasium. I'm taking ten courses; the ones that I'm graded in are English, French, Art and Geography and the other classes are the ones where I usually occupy my time studying German.

In my city there are nine other exchange students, they are from: Brazil, Argentina, Columbia, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, Taiwan and the USA. Together we take German classes for 3 hours on Monday and Thursday afternoons. School here isn't the same as in Canada, students here take anywhere from 10-14 courses a year and only have six weeks of summer vacation. Students rotate classes the same as we do however they can have free lessons and may arrive at the school in the early morning and stay until late at night. I only picked classes where I finish early enough during the day to make room for more activities such as volleyball, going to the gym and hanging out with my German and exchange student friends. Germans are a very direct and punctual people and they're also very reserved and closed. This forced me to break outside of my comfort zone to make friends and it also forced me to open up to new things.

Rotary in Germany has a very different system than in Canada. In Germany, Rotary isn't very involved in your day to day life. So if you want to go places and see things it is either up to your host parents to take you there or you need to figure it out on your own. Luckily enough the public transportation system here is one to be admired. In Germany, students can buy a monthly train pass called a 'fun-ticket' for a low price that allows you to travel anywhere within your state. The other exchange students and I have all taken advantage of this luxury. With this pass I've been able to visit surrounding cities such as Paderborn, Dusseldorf, Cologne and to Dortmund for another exchange student's birthday party on Halloween!

It was unfortunate to hear from my first host family not long before I took off for Germany that they would be unable to host me for my first couple of weeks because of a problem with their home. This had me concerned at first because I had no idea where I'd be living. But the family who was scheduled to have me for the second half of my stay stepped up and volunteered to take me in until my first hosts' home was repaired. (The two weeks has turned out to be three months, I will be moving in mid-November). My current hosts are some of the most generous and sincere people that I've ever met. My host parents are Heiko and Katharina and my host brother is Moritz (15). Also living with us is another exchange student, Meg from Taiwan, and we have become very good friends.

Living with another exchange student for my first few months has been a blessing, as well as someone to always hangout with, I always have someone dealing with the same problems that I do. Every Sunday our host mom pulls out a map with all the sites to see in our area and has Meg or I point to one and off we go! We've been everywhere from cathedrals and museums to zoos.

. Germans love soccer. When Germany is playing all the shops are closed so everyone can watch the games. Sports have always had a large influence in my life and it has continued here. However, I don't have the skill to play soccer at a competitive level here, so I decided to continue playing volleyball and am now playing in the third league Bundesliga with the Telekom Bielefeld Post. This has had a big impact on my exchange as the best friends I've made, outside of the other exchange students, are my teammates on the volleyball team. Luckily enough I'm not the only foreigner playing for the team. There's Alberto from Italy, here on exchange attending university, as well as a man from Poland and another from Romania. Therefore English has become the official language of the team because it is spoken by all.

One month ago I returned from my bus tour around Germany with 50 other exchange students. There truly is no way to describe how I feel following this trip. The friendships you make with other exchange students are indescribable. Exchange students give up their families and friends for a year. I think the reason we exchange students get so close with each other is because we all have this hole to fill in because our friends and family aren't with us. The other exchange students act as your new family, and that's just what happened.

We aren't just there to share the laughs and smiles; when someone was sick, there'd be someone there to help, if someone was sad, another would be there with a tissue. If someone was hurt others would be there to help them. I never truly understood the bond made with each other by my oldies back in Canada until now. It's as though I'm just one member in this large family, there's not one person who I wouldn't be there for and don't love.

Germany itself is absolutely beautiful. I went to five of Germany's largest cities; Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden, Munich and Nuremberg. I also had the opportunity to visit Potsdam and the Dachau Concentration Camp. Berlin is by far my favourite German city. It is Germany's capital and holds a lot of history, including the Berlin Wall and the events and results of World War II. The city is filled with historical sites and memorials that really help you gain a good understanding of what life was really like before and after the wall was put up. People are very proud to say that they come from Berlin; they refer to themselves as "Berliners". In Berlin we got to see the Brandenburg Gate, The Berlin Wall from the East Side Gallery, The Stone War Memorial, The German Federal Parliament Building, The German "Dome" Church, the largest shopping centre & strip in Europe and we also went to a disco!

On the rest of my tour I swam in the Hamburg Harbour, visited the historic and breathtaking architecture of Dresden and Nuremberg. Climbed in the mountains of southern Germany and walked the halls Schloss Neuschwanstein.

Our last stop on the Germany tour was Munich where we attended Oktoberfest, toured a typical Bavarian Brewery and visited BMW's top car dealership. While in Munich it was the very first time that I really felt like an exchange student, we climbed to the top of Olympia tower at night and the view was so breathtaking. I finally felt the warmth and knew that going on exchange was one of the best decisions I had ever made. Overall, this was one of the greatest trips of my lifetime; those eleven days will be ones that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I'm thankful to Rotex, Rotary, my host parents and my parents back home for making this trip possible.

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Many thanks! Vielen Dank!

Joey