

Lucy Mehandjieva TU Berlin 2023-2024 Report

I had never planned to do a year abroad until my 2nd year, when I started thinking about the possibility and then decided it would be an amazing opportunity that I could not pass up on. Now I can say that it was definitely the right decision, I had an amazing year and learned a lot. Before my year abroad I had visited Germany a few times but had never been to Berlin, so I had to base my impressions of the city off what I heard from others. Through this and my research I quickly decided that Berlin was the city I would most like to study abroad in, and TU Berlin the University I would like to study at. This was also supported by the fact that I had studied German in school for 5 years, so had a basic knowledge of the language already.

Application and Arrival

In order to apply, you need to demonstrate a basic competency of the language already, of at least an A2 level. Unfortunately, this is difficult to prove as it must be recent and official, and for me, it meant I had to sit the Goethe-Institute German Test in London. In addition to this, before the Semester starts you must also prove a B1 level of the language. Many of the exchange students opt to participate in the Pre-Semester Language Course in order to achieve this. This runs from the start of September before term officially starts in October and is a brilliant way to get to know the city and meet people before term starts. The course also included a cultural learning aspect and group excursions in Berlin, and Berlin as a city has a lot to offer in this aspect. You sit a placement test and they place you in a group according to your level. After brushing up on my German during the summer I was placed in the B2.2 group, but there were several other groups ranging from A2 to B2.2. The other notable part of the application after you have been nominated is making sure you have all the correct documents, including an in date passport, and a valid health insurance. You can apply for the GHIC (Global Health Insurance Card) if you are a UK citizen otherwise there are private options available.

Accommodation

I opted to apply for one of the Studierenwerk dormitories and was successful in securing a room for the duration of my stay. These are very similar to University Accommodation in Warwick, and I arrived and picked up my key before moving in the same day. Other accommodation options in Berlin are private WGS, or even renting a place with a private landlord, but these are becoming more and more difficult to find, as the demand is increasing quickly. I had friends who opted to rent privately, and they had to move multiple times during the year and spent a lot of time searching for suitable places, so I was very grateful to have my room secured.

Arrival admin

Upon arrival, there were quite a few admin things that I needed to sort. First off was a German sim card and German Bank Account. I encountered a few problems with this, as many companies require a German number to open a bank account and likewise, many phone providers require a German Bank Account to get a sim card plan. However, there are some that don't have this requirement, and some that even allow you to open an account online before you arrive in the country. The next thing that must be done is the Anmeldung. This is the registration of you in your place of residence in Germany, which must be done at the local Bürgeramt (Citizens Office) in Berlin. To do this you need a Wohnungsgeberbestätigung form (letter of confirmation from your landlord- which was provided to me by Studierenwerk when I moved in). You also need an appointment which is notoriously hard to get (not as hard as the Residence Permit appointments however which I will get to later). The trick that worked for me is to get on the website early in the morning and keep refreshing the page until a few cancellations or slots appear, usually on the same day, so if you are flexible and diligent it should be ok.

Studying

At TU Berlin, the Bachelors Mathematics course is officially in German. However, certain maths courses are offered in English, including the more advanced 3rd year equivalent modules. You can view the courses on the TU Berlin Moses website without a login in advance, but beware that these are subject to change when the term starts and vary from term to term. If you are not confident in German I would choose carefully, as another thing that is very common here in Germany, is for the exam to be an Oral Exam Format, which is only going to be more difficult if your German is not as fluent. This was a new experience, and in general although it is time-consuming, it allows the course leader to test the understanding of each student and allows for further discussion and expansion of topics, and I really enjoyed this new aspect of the studies. The course page should detail what format the exam takes place in.

Things to do in Berlin

Berlin is a wonderful city, with a wide range of things to do, particularly for young people. During the winter when it gets quite cold and dark people generally stay inside, in cafes and bars and museums, although when it snows there are some very scenic places to hike, such as Grunewald. Berlin has a lot of famous museums, although the Pergamon is now closed for 14 years. You can also enjoy the popular German Christmas markets, where you can try traditional food and drink. There were always events and things to do, and we got to explore all throughout the city, especially since

my friends lived throughout the city. In the warmer months, the outdoor Biergartens and cafes begin to open. There are many parks all around Berlin, including the famous Tiergarten, as well as quite a few lakes not too far away which make for great lake days, such as Schlachtensee and Wannsee. Berlin has a very nice climate in the summer in contrast to the cold winter, although the U-bahn is famously lacking sufficient air conditioning.

General life

The first thing is the language. At the start, I found it difficult to understand the locals when they spoke to me, and even when I could, they tended to switch to English, so it was difficult to practice. The best way I found to practice my German was to make some German friends, and also practice with other international students because there is less pressure. However, I quickly started to understand the locals, and gradually I started to converse with them. In general, a lot of people speak English, with a lot of the younger people speaking very good English, however, in some places such as at the bank, I found myself having to speak German from the get-go. I continued my German learning with the C1 course at the ZEMS language school, which helped me to further improve my German and I can say I am leaving Berlin having seen big improvements in my German and feeling confident in my abilities. The next thing is the transport. For the Winter Semester, TU Berlin had decided not to issue the Semester Ticket, so I (like many other students) opted to buy the Deutschland Ticket, which costs 49 euro a month and allows you access to all public transport in Germany, except the high-speed ICE/IC trains. However, the summer Semester saw the return of the Semester Ticket, in which the Deutschland ticket is included in the cost you pay for the semester at TU Berlin. This does work out to be cheaper, although not by a lot, especially if you are not in Germany for all the months it covers.

Residence Permit

This was a challenge. Not only do you need to collect all the correct documents which can take some time, but you also need to get an appointment which I found impossible. I ended up going down the route of applying by email and waiting to be given an appointment, which took a few months. There is also the option to apply for a Residence Permit in advance of coming to Berlin, which may be a better option, given the shortage of appointments.

Sports

TU Berlin has a very good sports program offer, and actually, as a Berlin University student, you can attend courses at any of the Berlin Universities (HU, FU etc). The courses range from beginner to advanced. TU Berlin also has a gym on campus in the central building, which is small but has everything you need and is not too busy and is very affordable and convenient for students, although it does get very hot in the summer. They also offer excursions and longer day courses, and overall I would highly recommend participating in some courses.

In conclusion, I had an unforgettable year in Berlin, learned a lot studying mathematics at a foreign university, made new friends for life and travelled to other European countries (Berlin has good train connections to Prague, Budapest and Vienna to name a few as well as nearby German cities). If you are willing to put up with some initial difficulties of settling in another country and being out of your comfort zone, you will benefit from everything Berlin has to offer to students in this amazing city.