

## **Year Abroad Report – Mark Bramble – Universität Bremen, Germany**

### **Why I did the Year Abroad?**

I went on the year abroad in order to have a year living in a different culture and among people from a different nation, and also to get fluent in German. I had learnt German to GCSE before, as well as having done the German 3 module in my first year at Warwick, and decided spending a year in Germany would be an ideal opportunity to get fluent. Because I wanted to study in German but wasn't totally confident of my language level at the start of the year, I chose to do this year as an intercalated year in my bachelors, rather than doing it as part of the integrated masters.

### **Why Bremen?**

When choosing which university to study at for the year, I knew I wanted to go to Germany, and to somewhere where they speak Hochdeutsch most of the time rather than having too much regional dialect to deal with. After praying about where to put down as my top preferences, I ended up putting Berlin first, followed by Bremen and then Bonn. I was told I didn't meet the language requirements to go to Berlin and so I ended up at Bremen. On reflection I'm very glad that I ended up in a smaller city than Berlin because it meant I got to know the place a lot better. I didn't know very much about Bremen as a city until a couple of weeks before arriving when we had some welcome calls with the uni there. It's a very beautiful city and I would highly recommend it (as you'll see throughout this report), but would also encourage you if you're thinking about doing a year abroad, that I enjoyed it despite not knowing very much before arriving – I think you can definitely get a good experience out of the year wherever you get sent, as long as you dive in to life there.

### **Arrival**

My arrival in Germany was probably the hardest part of my year abroad. I knew nobody in Bremen before moving and hadn't managed to sort out accommodation before arriving. At the time Bremen had a very high demand for accommodation in comparison to its supply, especially post COVID and with a lot of refugees from Ukraine, as well as other parts of the world. This was great for making Bremen a very multi-cultural city, but less great when you're trying to find a flat.

START LOOKING FOR ACCOMODATION EARLY. This was one of my mistakes. I was told by the uni to apply for accommodation through the Studentenwerk (they basically sort out the equivalent of halls), which I did a couple of months before arriving, however they have a long waiting list and I didn't get anything through them. Whilst waiting for them, I should have been looking on wg-gesucht (<https://www.wg-gesucht.de/>) and schwarzes Brett (<https://schwarzesbrett.bremen.de/verkauf-angebote/rubrik/wohnung-mietangebote-verkauf.html>) for accommodation, which I eventually did. I found somewhere to live a week into my time in Bremen (I stayed in an Airbnb meanwhile), but it was a very uncertain start! If you can't find anything, there is always the option of living in "The Fizz", which is private accommodation right next to the university and a lot of international students lived there in my year there, but is very expensive and I ideally wanted to live with Germans. I lodged with an elderly couple, along with one other renter and I didn't live in a studenty part of town but it was a very pretty part of the city. When searching, I saw a lot of places early on in Neustadt, but had been put off by the fact it's not that near the uni, but if you're searching, loads of students live there and it has great transport connections. I found the process of knowing how to write a successful application on wg-gesucht confusing but got there eventually. Feel free to contact me (see end of the report) if you want any help knowing what to include, or see here: <https://www.wg-gesucht.de/artikel/accommodation-search-example-of-a-successful-flat-application>

One of my top tips for arrival, wherever you go in the world, is to get stuck in straight away. On my first morning, knowing nobody, I turned up to the Hoffnungskirche in Walle, a church I'd found online, and was immediately welcomed with open arms, invited back for lunch, and made to feel a part of the church family there. This group of people and the time I spent with them went on to be the highlight of my year abroad. There's also various things to get involved in through the uni (see later).

### **Bremen as a City**

Bremen is a beautiful and very multicultural city, and lies on the Weser river, about an hour and a half's train journey west of Hamburg. I lived in Habenhausen, which is south of the river and lies right next to the beautiful Werdersee (a big lake). Well worth a visit for a pretty walk, and in summer there's a beach along the Werdersee (and one on the river), where you can relax with a barbecue (Germans love their barbecues) and a swim. On the other side of the river is the football stadium, and if you're in Bremen when a Werder game is on, you will see a lot of green shirts and scarves all over the city. The city centre itself has two rather beautiful areas which are slightly older (Schnoor and Viertel), and you're also able to walk along next to the river. You should definitely visit these places, as well as the cathedral (insider tip: see if you can spot the mouse carved into the stonework in a doorway just to the right of the altar), the Bremer Stadtmusikanten (four animals standing on one another – look up the Brothers Grimm story), and the Sögestraße (where you'll see sculptures of a man with some pigs around). Nearby to the Sögestraße there's also a pretty windmill, and the "Moin" sign (moin is a typical north German greeting). Going further north you reach the Bürgerpark, a very large park, which runs most of the way from the city centre all the way to the north of the city where the university is.

One fantastic thing about Bremen is its transport system. It's a very bike-friendly city and there are cycle paths along most roads, as well as the river, Werdersee, and parks being easy to cycle along/through. Some of these locations are also great if you enjoy walking or running. If you're not the cycling type, the bus and tram system is fantastic as well. As part of your fee for the semester at a German uni you get reduced meals in the cafeteria, and free transport around Bremen and even to/in other nearby cities such as Hamburg and Hannover. I didn't live that close to the uni but there were buses available not too far from my house going directly to both the university and the city centre. Getting to the city centre from the uni is very easy with the tram number 6, and this same tram takes you all the way to the airport, which is conveniently on the edge of the city unlike a lot of airports which are further out. If you book flights from Stansted with Ryanair, then you can get some very cheap flights to Bremen which is a bonus.

I loved different aspects of both of my semesters in Bremen. In summer, it's very beautiful and there's a lot going on. As already said, the Germans love their barbecues, and they also love their wild water swimming (something I sadly didn't do but wish I had). There's also a lot of random concerts and events going on at different points. In winter, Bremen is also beautiful but in a different way. Temperature-wise it's fairly similar to the UK most of the time, but the winter I was there it did get down to -8 degrees centigrade. This gave me the chance to go ice-skating on a lake with some friends from church which was great fun. Other highlights of my year abroad were the Christmas market and the Bremen Volksfest, the Freimarkt. This took place in the second half of October and is the biggest festival of the year in Bremen. It's fairly similar to a Christmas market, but a lot bigger, and there's more fairground rides. Don't miss it if you do go to Bremen!

## **Other places to visit**

Doing a year abroad is a great opportunity to do some exploring of other places near wherever you go. I personally enjoyed visiting Hannover, Hamburg and Kiel (I had a friend from Warwick doing a year abroad in Kiel), as well as trips further afield to Mainz and Denmark. Bremen is also well situated should you wish to visit the Netherlands. I would thoroughly recommend getting the €49 euro ticket, which allows you to use all regional trains and transport in the whole of Germany (this was only available in summer in my year, and you should make sure that you don't get any of the non-regional trains such as ICE).

## **Studying at Bremen University – the modules**

Arriving at Bremen I really wanted to get close to fluency in German. In the winter semester, I therefore chose to take most of my modules in German, but to take one easier master's module in English (I think all maths master's modules are taught in English at Bremen) so that I could have a break from the German. Because I knew that the year didn't count towards my final grade I was able to take courses which I might have been less likely to take back at Warwick. In my first semester, I took a language module (German B1.2), Einführung in die Kryptographie (Introduction to Cryptography), Funktionentheorie (Complex Analysis), and Algorithmic Game Theory. In my second semester, I chose to take all of my modules in German: German B2.1, Funktionalanalysis (Functional Analysis), Stochastik (Stochastics – covers similar material to Warwick's Probability A & B), and Fundierungen der Mathematik (Foundations of Mathematics – covers logic and set theory, building on the Warwick Foundations module a lot more, as well as the basics of category theory). I'm intending to take mostly algebra modules on my return to Warwick, of which there weren't as many options at Bremen, but then Warwick has a much bigger maths department overall. I could also have taken Topology, but chose Stochastics instead because of when the lectures fell, so that I'd have longer weekends for travelling.

The German modules were both run through the Goethe Institute, and they felt fairly easy in their online format with in person sessions once a fortnight, but I could also notice myself getting better so it was probably at the right level. I found Cryptography fairly tricky because it built on some computer science knowledge which I didn't feel I had, but it was still manageable and I came out with a good grade. Complex Analysis built on well from where Analysis 3 had left off, although for my year all the lectures were online due to the lecturer not being very well, which meant I didn't learn as well as I could have. Algorithmic Game Theory was my favourite module of the year as I'd never done any game theory before and I really enjoyed getting to know this area of maths. Despite the fact that it's advertised as a master's module, it's very manageable as an undergraduate if you have a good general mathematical basis. I found Functional Analysis very fast paced and thus quite difficult, but once I'd eventually got my head around some of the earlier concepts I rather enjoyed it. I took Stochastics because I wanted an easier module so I'd have more time for social stuff and travelling, and also because I wanted to recap the stuff that came up in first year probability lectures. As already said, it covers very similar material to Probability A & B. Foundations of Mathematics was my favourite module of the second semester, and I really enjoyed getting down to the roots of assumptions we make and the language we use in maths. Learning some of the basics of category theory as part of this module was very cool as well for seeing an overarching view of mathematics.

Most of my exams were assessed orally, which was a mostly new format to me, but actually works out very well once you've worked out how to do them well. Rather than exercise sheets counting towards your grade, most modules required you simply to have got at least 50% on average across the sheets and to have presented one or two solutions during exercise classes in order to be allowed

to take the exam. Because the exam is oral, there are often multiple times throughout the two and a half month semester breaks when you can take the exam. My lecturers were all fine with me taking my exams in English as well after I'd asked beforehand.

As I said, the semester breaks in Germany are very long (the two semesters are also 14 weeks each), and I enjoyed the opportunity in the middle of the year abroad to come back to the UK and be able to spend some extended time with friends and family before heading back for the second semester.

### **Studying at Bremen University – the rest of the uni experience**

My top tip for getting on socially on a year abroad is to throw yourself into activities. Whilst I enjoyed my year abroad for the most part, there were points at which I felt very lonely and there are ways I could have gotten more involved. If I did the year again, I would probably have joined one of the many sports clubs or orchestras on offer. There's often a lot of demand for the sports societies, so make sure to research them in advance and get in there early once signups open.

I did get involved with a society in the form of the Navigatoren, a group of Christian students at the universities in Bremen. I enjoy being a part of the Christian Union at Warwick and felt having Christian community among students was important for me abroad as well, and so I got involved with this group. As well as weekly small group Bible studies in people's houses, I also enjoyed the Christmas party, an afternoon canoeing, and multiple barbecues in the summer.

I'd highly recommend to any students doing a year abroad to get stuck in with coursemates as well. I did this much more in the second semester and it made my experience much more enjoyable, but struggled more in the first semester with making friendships with those on my modules. The MENSA is the university canteen and serves good hot meals for a cheap price (€2-€5) and was a great place to hang out with fellow maths students.

As an Erasmus student at Bremen University, there were a lot of events put on by the Erasmus Initiative so that we could socialise and meet fellow international students. I enjoyed getting involved with some of these in my first semester but didn't go along to them in the second semester, however they were a great opportunity to meet new people and get to know some friends.

Meeting other English people through the Erasmus Initiative events was great for when I felt far from home, and I especially enjoyed watching the Qatar World Cup games together. I also met so many people from other nations that I was able to watch the USA and France games with students from those nations, and I got to watch the Iran game with a bunch of Iranians and Afghans who I knew from helping out at a beginners' German language cafe at a local church.

### **Churches**

If you do end up going to Bremen and you want to go to a church there, there are lots of great churches in the city including the Hoffnungskirche (say hi from me!), Hoop Kirche, the Bibel Gemeinde, and the Christus Gemeinde.

### **Contact**

I'd love to help you out if you have any questions about Bremen or life in Germany or want any tips if you're planning on moving to Bremen. Feel free to contact me by email: [markdbramble@gmail.com](mailto:markdbramble@gmail.com)