

## Year Abroad Report – Munich 22/23 - Tom Corley (2008321)

Among the multitudinous expectations and stereotypes people have for a year abroad, one in particular definitely holds true: You will grow. The opportunities in reach, the hurdles put before you and the unpredictable mixture of people you encounter. All of these will, over time, enrich you, and widen your cultural horizons. The aforementioned hurdles, may however, be far larger than you could have previously envisioned, but that does not mean the process is not worthwhile. Equally, there are blessings unforeseen, and these are what make the decision to go on a year abroad, ultimately one that pays off.

For Germany in particular, these challenges may at first seem insurmountable. Firstly, there is endless bureaucracy, and I do truly mean endless. Long meandering words like ‘Wohnsitzanmeldung’, ‘Immatrikulationsbescheinigung’ and ‘Rundfunkbeitrag’ will seem to engulf almost all your time, as you frantically dart between 33 open tabs in chrome, hoping one of them will finally make it all make sense. The university system will confuse you at first, and possibly give you an appreciation for how well-centralised a lot of Warwick’s systems are. You’ll have to do things like, compile your own transcript, personally register for individual exams on various platforms, figure out how to pay fees, set up different online accounts, and the list goes on. All this happens simultaneously alongside numerous other commitments, and it can quickly get overwhelming. As simple as it sounds, writing out to-do lists with key information will prove invaluable, and there is usually someone you can ask, but it might take a bit of time to find out who that is, so try not to leave things to the last minute where possible.

Meeting people may prove more difficult than you expect. I ended up being placed in a student accommodation block with basically no communal areas, and as someone expecting somewhere like the familiar and vibrant halls of Rootes, I was disappointed and struggled hugely with the isolation. Although it was amazing at first to have my own kitchen and bathroom, for only around 300€ per month, with a panoramic view stretching from the Allianz Arena to a distant array of snow-capped mountains, I would have preferred a communal kitchen area, because this enables the spontaneous meeting of flatmates, which I found to be how I made most of my friends in first year. As a disclaimer however, it is worth mentioning that I had other friends who were allocated much more friendly student accommodation blocks and made some of their closest friends there. It is also difficult to make friends in another language, and for anyone anywhere below fluency, you may underestimate the loss of confidence and articulation that comes with this. I will discuss language in more depth later on.

As all the reports before me have included, partaking in a pre-semester language course is near essential. Some of the teaching can be flawed, and it may be an adjustment learning “German from German”, instead of “German from English”, although this makes sense as most people in the course will not be of a native English background but instead from a variety of countries worldwide. You will more than likely make at least one good friend out of this, and it can get your German up to scratch. I personally continued to take more language courses throughout the year and made my closest friends through them. They offer some trips, and it is likely that your group will organise some meetups or trips outside of the context of the course. Over time, people will form smaller groups, and explore other avenues to meet people, but it is none the less a great way to meet people in the early stages of your year abroad.

I would recommend getting involved with some *Servicepaket* events, these are low-cost excursions with other international students run by young tutors (most of them are studying masters or are late in their bachelor's degrees). I personally went on numerous hikes into the alps, some casual drinking events, and to a basketball match. The Bavarian alps offer breathtaking and panoramic views, although dependent on weather, the hikes can sometimes be quite challenging, particularly in the early spring, where there can be a lot of mud and it is necessary to bring a lot of snacks and stay well hydrated. Cash is key in Germany; especially in more rural areas, there tends to be a lot of cash-only venues for "tax" purposes.

It also goes without saying, that you should make the most of Oktoberfest, which is a hugely fun and unique experience, provided you are drunk enough not to mind the surging crowds and the daylight robbery that is the price of a Maß (which is 1l) during the cost-of-living crisis. I would also advise against accepting free drinks, as numerous people I met, including some in the group of people I went with were likely to have been spiked. There is generally a lack of awareness around this issue in Germany, at least compared to the UK, where there is constant talk about measures against spiking. Don't let this deter you however, because in its great moments it is ridiculous and fun, especially if you are there with close friends.

I would also recommend making the most of Munich's central location in Europe. Vienna and Prague are only 5 hours away by coach, and trips can be done fairly cheaply if you plan in advance. Germany itself, of course has many other beautiful cities. Berlin, Dresden, Cologne, and Nuremberg can all be reached in varying but doable lengths of time. Travel using the high-speed ICE trains if you want a quick journey; or use a chain of regional trains if you want to make use of the 49€ Deutschland-Ticket which allows unlimited use all public transportation in Germany for a month (with the exception of high-speed trains such as ICEs.) Hostels in most of Europe are cheap, and you can also book flights cheaply using Skyscanner, or by sticking to Ryanair and EasyJet. I personally travelled a fair bit, and that was the most rewarding part of my Year Abroad, although it can get very tiring, and it is important to stay on top of academic commitments.

Speaking of academic commitments, the courses in Germany are quite different to those at Warwick. For one, lectures are twice as long, which doesn't bode well for our generations increasingly short attention span. Most were two hours, but in my second semester I had two consecutive 3-hour lectures on a Tuesday morning/afternoon, the brutality of which led me to quickly realise I could just learn the content at home. In general, I found it very difficult to stay focused for such a length of time, it adds another layer of exhaustion, when you are constantly translating everything that is said and written out in the notes, and constantly discovering new words and phrases. I can't count the number of times, that a sleep deprived me would see an unnecessarily wordy sentence with three verbs at the end and want to give up. To remedy this, I often opted to review course materials in my own time with music playing, and the opportunity to take a break whenever I started to feel my focus slipping. The exams are difficult, and overall, I would say the difficulty is unambiguously higher than Warwick. In all honesty, I came to understand that we have it a lot easier in the UK in general, with the education systems of Germany, France and Italy for example all being much more tough and comprehensive than ours.

Your understanding of German is going to be vastly important to your enjoyment of a year in Munich. I personally, was at around a B1 level (I naively claimed to be around B2) and was baffled by every government and university form I saw when I first arrived. While it is true, that almost everyone speaks English, you are going to get further with people in German, and they will probably be a bit nicer to you if they don't see you as a tourist. Additionally, for getting into clubs, bars, and other places, it's always best to speak in German. The most key incentive for understanding the language, however, is

of course for understanding your courses, the vast majority of which will be in German. I can personally recommend taking a German course each semester, because I am now confidently a B2 speaker, and have made big steps towards C1 (fluency) level. In hindsight, I would have gone in a confident B2 speaker, because there were certainly opportunities missed because of my German language being slightly worse than it could have been. The language used in practice, especially in our generation, is quite different from what you are taught in a classroom, and I don't think it ever truly clicked with me, but it did for some others I know. Do not underestimate the need for a confident grasp of the German language.

Overall, Munich is a vibrant and diverse city, and there will always be something to do if you look hard enough, museums are almost all one euro on a Sunday, there is a lot of sport on offer, and the architecture is quite stunning in a number of places (particularly the cathedral at Odeonsplatz). However, it is somewhere which presents a lot of hidden challenges, which will seem overwhelming if you are not prepared, I would recommend it to those with a strong command of the German language, who are very on top of their academics, and those willing to do a decent bit of travelling and will make the most out of being at a very central hub of Europe. A year abroad may not be for absolutely everyone, but it is an amazing experience that cannot be replicated anywhere else, and so there is no strong argument, to not at least consider giving it a go.