

INSTITUT FÜR PHYSIK DER ATMOSPHERE
GERMAN AEROSPACE CENTER (DLR)

DAAD RISE Germany 2017

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Pre-Arrival

I think the only word that can sum up how I felt when I found out I had received this internship was that I was ecstatic. I was sitting in my university library, and I immediately went home with a spring in my step, eager to tell my family.

I had found out about the programme a few months earlier. It was perfect: dozens of very interesting internships to choose from, so many that I had a hard time even narrowing the choices down to three, and it was in Germany!

Going back to the post-acceptance period, I looked for accommodation near my host institute, the DLR research centre in near Weßling, about 20 km southwest of Munich, over the Easter vacation. I also managed to connect with some other RISE scholars in the area through Facebook.

First Impressions and the German Lifestyle

During my first couple of weeks of the programme, the high quality of life in Germany became apparent to me. Compared to my native UK, it seemed like a paradise. I was blown away by how environmentally-conscious the societal attitude was. Public transport was cheap and extensive, the cycling infrastructure was second-to-none, and litter on the streets was a rare sight.

I found the attitude of Munich to be very relaxed. Walking back to my host family during the language course, passing through the many parks, you would see people spending quality time outdoors playing games, chatting over a beer, or playing with their children. This is far removed from the staying-indoors culture that I'm used to.

Of course, I can't write about my experience in Germany, particularly in Bavaria, without mentioning the cuisine. As a vegetarian, my friends were quick to scoff when I told them about my internship. "It's a shame you won't be able to try any of the local cuisine!" They clearly have never had the wonderful experience of eating copious amounts käsespätzle, kartoffelpuffer, or the very Bavarian combination of "Bier und Brezeln"!

Research

I spent the summer working as part of the Lidar team within the Institut für Physik der Atmosphäre at the German Aerospace Center (DLR) Oberpfaffenhofen site. I would arrive by bike around 8:30-9:00 and work through the morning on a range of tasks involving analysis of lidar and anemometer data such as data visualisation and model-fitting, as well as other miscellaneous tasks like writing programs to transfer data buffers and helping to set up the measuring equipment. At around 12:00 I would break for lunch, before getting back to

work during the afternoon. Each Thursday, I would attend a meeting with my supervisor in which a member of the department would present their research in either English or German. I would cycle home at around 16:30-17:30 and spend my evenings cooking, shopping, learning German, or exploring the local area.

Germany is one of the biggest investors in research and development in Europe, and it shows. The DLR is filled with specialised equipment that enables researchers to carry out scientific research to a high standard. One of the biggest surprises to me was how often I would hear the thunder of the institute's Gulfstream G550 taking off; clearly a lot of money goes into producing high-quality atmospheric research.

Language

In school, I took GCSE French. Since then, I've enjoyed fitting various methods of French-learning into my life in the form of books and videos. Although my French is nowhere near fluent, the idea of acquiring a third language was very exciting to me. In the run-up to the placement, I raced through and completed the Duolingo German tree, but was I really "48% fluent"? Well, no. When I arrived at my host family for the language course, my host mother gave me a tour of the apartment, but I was only able to pick out some key words such as "Zimmer" and "Kühlschrank".

As the summer went by, however, I found myself picking up more and more German. The problem is, most Germans, especially in big cities like Munich, speak English, so will revert to English after your first German sentence with them. Although this is often helpful, it can be quite frustrating when you're trying to learn the language. I decided to turn it into a game: see how long I can hold a conversation before they revert to English. I was rather pleased with myself when I went into a bike shop to try to sell my bike towards the end of my placement and the owner only started speaking English to me as I was leaving!

As I'm typing this, I have three days left in Germany and I can understand, or at least have a good idea of, what is being said in most of the books and articles in German that I read. I can also generally understand what is being said when the speaker is purposely speaking clearly, such as a news anchor presenting the news. My next target is to be able to comfortably read an "average" novel in German, and in the long-term to be able to speak and write in German with minimal effort.

Highlights and Final Thoughts

Throughout my time in Germany, as cliché as it may sound, I've met some amazing people and seen lots of interesting things. I'm going to struggle to fit it all into a single "Highlights" section, but I'll try!

During the language course, being the only Brit meant that I spoke to lots of Americans and Canadians as we explored Munich, so I was able to learn more about North American culture as well as German culture. Meeting up with other Munich-based scholars throughout the summer added to this.

The RISE Meeting in Heidelberg was another highlight. Being able to hear about the research of both undergraduate and PhD RISE scholarship holders in a mix of formal presentations and casual discussions was very interesting. As someone with a physics background, listening to conversations about machine learning and attending presentations about things such as the behaviour of seals opened my mind to other areas of research beyond my own field.

Finally, I enjoyed the opportunities I got to travel. I visited places around southern Bavaria and Austria such as Neuschwanstein Castle and Innsbruck, and while my family were visiting we went on a short break to Salzburg from which we made several trips further afield.

Overall, my experience of living in Germany has been extremely positive. Until hearing about this placement I had never really imagined myself living in Germany, but I am now seriously considering a postgraduate placement here in a couple of years' time. I could not thank DAAD RISE and their sponsors enough for this amazing opportunity. I would highly recommend the programme to other undergraduates in the future.