

When I first realised that I was actually going to spend 8 weeks studying at the Goethe Institut in Schwäbisch Hall, I felt very privileged and very excited about the possibilities that lay ahead of me. Now that I am back in England, I realise that my time there was more enjoyable than I could ever have imagined.

My first impressions of the Institut are of a small stately home in the centre of town, and it not looking at all like a school. As I went into the Institut to register, there was a friendly face at the welcome desk and I was asked if I would like to be told the instructions for the first day in German or in English. Naturally I opted for the German version and was pleased with myself for being able to understand everything after what felt like a long journey. The "test" and interviews were slightly overwhelming, but the results came quickly and so I was registered and taken to my accommodation fairly quickly. The accommodation which I was provided with was really great. The single rooms were more than adequately furnished since each room had a bed, fridge, desk and chair, large wardrobe and a bathroom shared with one other person. Also during the registration period, I was given my spending money and meal money which I felt was adequate for the meals I was going to be eating.

On the first day of lessons, our teacher explained to us that the lessons were going to be all in German, and that we were to use dictionaries for German as a foreign language. This is quite a scary thought since at that moment, I realised that I couldn't ask the questions that I might have done, since I didn't know the vocabulary. It was also good, since I learnt much more about the German grammar from talking about it in German. Our common topic was to talk about our own countries and cultures which was fairly interesting, and at least gave everyone a starting topic for conversation. As we became more confident with our language, we progressed to other topics learning new grammar, vocabulary and improving our speaking and listening skills. Since I was in Grundstufe 3 (ground level 3) there was a lot of grammar to revise and a lot of new grammar to learn. The lessons in the first 5 weeks of our course consisted of a lot of grammar, which I found suited me, since the grammar was taught in chunks. We were given lots of homework (sometimes up to four hours a day) but all the hard work was worth it, and by the end of the course everyone was asking for more!

Since the lessons only took place in the mornings, the afternoon was left free for us to do whatever we pleased. However, most people spent the afternoons in the Mediothek, where we could do further listening exercises, watch videos, use CD-ROM's or find further worksheets on the topics that we had been discussing during the lessons. The lady in charge of the Mediothek was very helpful, and it appeared that there was nothing that you couldn't learn about. There were worksheets and tapes suitable for every level and she would check your work for you if you asked her. There was access to the internet and e-mail, although these were not free.

Still, my time in Schwäbisch Hall was not just about studying but was also spent enjoying myself, meeting people, learning about German culture and sightseeing. The Institut

employed two young men who were doing civil service instead of military service to organise “extra-curricular activities” and to help any of the students with almost anything, from practising for exams to going to hospital when ill. These activities included Goethe-Pub on Friday nights, sports in the afternoons and a once weekly cinema showing both classic German films and American films with German dubbing. They were also responsible for providing daily information and delivering the post to the lessons.

Although Schwäbisch Hall is only half the size of Loughborough, during the summer months, there seemed to be much more to do there. In the town, the pupils who were just finishing their *Arbitur* at the local music school had to do a final performance. These concerts are free and in the church in the Institut, so made a lovely evenings entertainment. On Thursday evenings at the castle in Comburg, the next village, there were free concerts there too, ranging from Jazz to classical. The Institut arranged discounted tickets to the “Theatre on the Steps” outside St. Michael’s church. I went to see *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and although I didn’t really understand much of the German, I knew the story and could appreciate the costumes and music, and so I really enjoyed myself. In the park there was an open air cinema on certain nights, and there was also a cinema and theatre in the town. There was always information in the institut about which films were going to be shown and when, so there was always something to do.

A highlight of the town was the Schenkensee Bad which was a large swimming pool complex consisting of an outdoor and indoor section. The outdoor section was a huge swimming pool with diving boards, parkland, sports pitches, cafe area and a play area for the younger children. In the warm summer, it was lovely to go there in the afternoon to sunbathe, study and just enjoy yourself.

The town also has its share of pubs, bars and beer gardens which were visited mainly at the weekends. The beer garden was on the larger of the two islands in the middle of the town and is only open during the summer. It sold local beer and soft drinks, aswell as *Wursts* of all shapes and sizes and was very popular with the locals. At the end of July, there was a fair called the *Jakobi Fest*, which consisted of a large fair, similar to Loughborough fair, and a beer festival inside a huge marquee with a band playing. The usually sleepy Schwabisch Hall became full of people. Another huge event for the town was the “*Sommernachts Fest*” where the entire park was covered in candles on the Saturday night, bands played and there was a fireworks display. On the Friday and Sunday, there were also bands playing in the park to the guests of the enlarged beer garden.

There were a group of local people who formed a group called “The Friends of The Institut” who organised some of the day-trips for us. The first one was to Rothenburg, a place famous for its Christmas markets. This day trip consisted of a short guided tour, a break for dinner and then a visit to the Criminal Museum. The whole trip cost very little money and everyone had a great day out. Other trips organised were to Berlin, Heidelberg and to other local sights.

The Berlin trip was fabulous, even though we spent Friday and Sunday as travelling days, only having Saturday actually in Berlin itself. On Friday night, we were left to our own devices and went to explore the area. Luckily the hotel was close to the Kurfurstendamm area of town, and so there were lots of places to eat and explore. On the Saturday we had a guided tour of the city in German by a tour guide who was specially selected to guide people in German as a foreign language. This tour comprised all the major sights in both the east and west, along with a brief history of the city. After lunch we went off in our own smaller groups and could do what we wanted. We opted to visit Ka-De-We (the Harrods of Berlin) and then move onto a museum about the last 50 years of German history. This museum was amazing, but I felt a bit sickened by the things which had happened. On the Sunday we returned home via Leipzig which was also a lovely city.

Alongside the organised trips, the proximity of the railway station to the town centre made it very easy to visit places on the train. The computers in the mediothek had a rail timetable package, so it was very easy to plan a weekend trip using the train. This combined with the "Wochenende karte" which was approximately £12 for up to 5 people travelling anywhere in Germany, made it possible for people to explore the nearby towns and cities. I personally visited Stuttgart and Munich independently using this ticket, which proved very good value for money.

I felt that I wanted to make the most of my stay in Germany and endeavoured to visit many places, museums and concerts. I was able to go to the premiere performance of the Stuttgart Ballet's summer season since a friend of mine at the institut was a journalist for a dance magazine and got complimentary tickets. I have a friend in Vienna, and so took advantage of the special train fares to Austria and went to visit him. My friend in Vienna is also a chemistry student and was working at a conference for Chemists, so I was able to attend part of this conference. Other students in my class used the night trains to visit Prague and Luxembourg for the day, but these students came mainly from Asia, and wanted to see "Europe" during their eight weeks in Germany.

On August 11th, at 12.32 p.m. the eclipse could be seen from Schwäbisch Hall. The town was in the band for the total eclipse, and so we were privileged to be able to see everything. We all bought our protective glasses, made our pin-hole cameras and walked up one of the hills near to the town. As the moon covered the sun, the whole town went dark, all the lights went on and it became very cold. You could hear everyone cheering and the car horns were blaring too. We only managed to see the total eclipse for a few seconds before the clouds covered everything up and then everything became light again. It was all over.

In conclusion to this short report about my stay in Schwäbisch Hall, I would like to say that I have found it fairly difficult to write about it in English. This may be difficult to understand, but I have spent two months in that town, always speaking German and will always associate that stay with speaking German. I feel that this is probably the best indicator of how much German I have learnt and so I am pleased that I automatically think in German every time I'm asked about my stay there.

I had a brilliant time there - I made lots of friends from all over the world and I learnt about more than just a different culture. I intend to do some research with a German car manufacturer next year as my final year project, and will hopefully be working alongside German speakers on this project. They are aware that I have been to Germany on this scholarship, and so I think that I will be using my German to its full use in the near future. I also feel that I am a much more cultured person than before I went and that can only be beneficial.

I would like to thank everyone in both Loughborough and Schwäbisch Hall for giving me this wonderful opportunity, and for making my stay there thoroughly enjoyable.