

Scholarship to the Goethe Institute in Schwäbisch Hall, 2008

Getting there

The nearest airports are in Stuttgart and Frankfurt, but Stuttgart is the main airport serving Baden-Württemberg, so it is closer. I flew to Stuttgart and then caught the tube and train to Schwäbisch Hall Hesselental. The Deutsche Bahn website is very helpful for advanced timetables (www.bahn.de) but there are ticket machines (that operate in German and in English) at all train stations with up to date information.

Once in Schwäbisch Hall, there is a bus (number 1) that travels to the centre of Schwäbisch Hall with a stop directly in front of the Institute.

The lessons

As soon as you arrive in at the Goethe Institute you are made to take a written and oral test (more of a general discussion) with one of the teachers to establish your knowledge of German and which class is suitable for you. There are people with all levels of German, so whether you are a complete beginner or have studied German for many years, there is a suitable class for all. Lessons are tailored to whatever you want to learn, so if it is your knowledge of Konjunktiv II that you want to improve or if you need to write a CV in German, the teachers are more than happy to help.

Lessons start daily at 8:15am until 12:45pm and after that you are free to do what you will, whether that be homework, watching German films in the Mediothek (media library) or discovering Schwäbisch Hall and its surroundings. The locals are very friendly and are always happy to point you in the right direction, recommend an authentic German restaurant or have a chat about life in Hall.

Living

The accommodation in Schwäbisch Hall is in one of four Wohnheims (student houses) that are a five to ten minute walk from the Institute. Rooms are basic, with a bed, lockable desk, fridge and a bathroom, which is shared with your neighbour. There is internet access in each flat, but it is quite slow and only one of the Wohnheims has a very limited wireless connection. The Institute, however, has plenty of computers with access to the internet, both in the Internet Café and the Mediothek. Each house (of around 20 people) has one kitchen and a laundry room with a paid washing machine (3 Euros per wash) and a free tumble dryer and iron.

Breakfast and lunch are available at the Institute. Breakfast was paid for as part of the scholarship, but what you do for the rest of the day is entirely up to you.

Excursions and trips

The Institute organise many trips to cities all over Germany, and it is often cheaper to travel with them than going alone. The excursions vary from month to month, but I took the opportunity to visit Stuttgart and Berlin with the Institute. Schwäbisch Hall is ideally situated to visit many of the fantastic cities to be seen in Baden-Württemberg, Hessen and Bavaria, so even if the Goethe Institute hasn't planned a trip to your ideal destination, it is easy to go yourself or with a group of friends (as I did to Nürnberg).

Aside from the visits to nearby cities, the Institute offers trips to the local brewery and museums in Schwäbisch Hall, as well as the opportunity to see some of the many

plays at the Haller Globe Theater or the Freilichtspiele (plays that are performed in the evening on the steps outside the main church in Schwäbisch Hall). For the sporty, there is a swimming pool nearby and the course assistants at the Institute are always on hand to recommend other sporting activities in the local area. Furthermore, the Institute show a film every week and there is a cinema in Schwäbisch Hall if you want to watch a more up to date film.

Tips

- Take a couple of big towels, as you only get two small hand towels from the Institute.
- I was given 300 Euros as the beginning of my stay, which would probably have been enough if I hadn't taken the opportunity to go on the majority of excursions that were on offer. I would take an extra 200 Euros, especially considering that you need to take into account train travel to and from the airport, possible illness, food and evenings of socialising. Extra money is also a good idea as you will be required to pay 50 Euros and 20 Euros towards a "caution" for your room and kitchen utensils respectively (a deposit in case you damage anything in your room, lose your keys, or misplace a saucepan).

This scholarship has easily been one of the most exciting and worthwhile four weeks of my life. I made friends from all over the globe (from Columbia to Australia with many more in between) and because the only common language shared is German, you end up improving your language skills without even realising it. This is not an opportunity to be missed, so if you have a passion for German, the drive to learn more and want to meet new and exciting people, there's no reason why you shouldn't apply! You won't regret it!