Travel and Arrival

I travelled from Manchester Airport to Frankfurt Airport, then by train to Stuttgart main rail station. The train ticket from Frankfurt to Stuttgart was part of the flight ticket and run by Lufthansa (they had their own carriages on the train). Then I bought a ticket from Stuttgart to Schwäbisch Hall Hessental (not just Schwäbisch Hall) at one of the automatic ticket machines in the station. These are really easy to use and operate in many languages. The ticket cost about €15, but Goethe have a discount code you can use, which is in some of the paperwork you receive before coming. They also have a code for Lufthansa flights, but my flight worked out cheaper without the code, maybe because I booked my flight really early. I then took the number 1 bus, but you can also take the 4b, direct to the front of the institute. I had to ask the bus driver to stop at the institute, if he wasn’t going to already, because I wasn’t completely sure where the institute was.

When I arrived at the institute, it was very clearly signposted where I had to go. I left my luggage downstairs and went up for my initial interview. The interview is just an informal chat with one of the teachers in order to see what level your speaking ability is at. They take into account nerves and the fact you’ve travelled a long time. Then I went to do my test, which was a little comprehension exercise followed by a short writing exercise. It’s nothing to worry about. About five minutes after finishing my test I received my result and was debriefed by one of the teachers. They explained the different levels of classes and told me the one I’d be in. If after a day or two you are not happy with your class, then you can talk to the teacher and change to a harder or easier level. We had 4 or 5 new people in our class after about 4 days so it’s not a rare occurrence. I did find my level difficult for the first couple of days, but after that it got easier, so I would wait a bit before you decide to change.

Classes and Education

Class started at 8.15 and ended at 12.45, with a half hour break at 9.45 and a fifteen-minute break at 11.45. My classes were all informal and on a first name basis. All of the teaching was done in German, which was sometimes difficult, but there was an American girl in my class so we would sometimes confirm the activity and some vocabulary in English. In my class we focused a lot on group work, which means we were almost always talking German, whether it was about a text in the textbook or a topic we stumbled across in class. However if you were taking exams then there were lots of opportunities to do exam style activities. Some of the topics we covered included: knowledge, feelings, travelling and day-to-day conversation.

Free Time

The Goethe Institute ran a very varied free time programme, which was full of different activities including historic tours and trips to different towns. There was also a Goethe party, which is held in the Goethe pub in the institute. These parties were so much fun, and a great way to meet new people and to practice talking German socially. On the first week I did a lot of the things on the programme, because I didn’t know very many people and the activities were a great way to meet people. I would suggest reading the free time programme on the first or second day, and then signing up for things relatively quickly.

After the first proper day of teaching there was a “Stammtisch” at one of the local pubs. The people from the Culture and Freetime Office reserved some tables and we would all walk down together and socialise. There were three “Stammtischs” during my course, and they were all super fun. Some activities I did in my free time with the institute included: historical tour of Schwäbisch Hall, going to the local swimming pool, visiting the “Comburg” (a Benedictine monastery), international buffet, trip to Berlin, the cycle tour and rowing boats on the river in the town. The historical tour contained lots of information about the town and explained the historical importance of some of the buildings. Like everything with the Goethe Institute, the tour was in German, but the tour guide did speak slowly and clearly and welcomed us to ask her to repeat things. The outdoor swimming pool in Schwäbisch Hall is wonderful! It has a massive pool with a nine meter diving tower and a massive water slide. I would definitely suggest visiting. I visited the Comburg with some of my flat mates, but the trip with the institute had a guided tour included. The international buffet was a buffet cooked by the students. We would all cook something typically cooked in your home country, and then share it with everybody. You don’t have to cook anything, but if you do you are given some or all of the money back, which you spent on ingredients. Because I was the only person from the UK I teamed up with some girls from America and we baked cookies. All of the food at the buffet tasted really good and quite a lot of it was new to me.

The weekend trip to Berlin was very good. Admittedly, the nine-hour coach journey there and back wasn’t very fun, but it was worth it to see such an amazing city. There are lots of museums and shops and most of all lots of culture. For example we stumbled across an outdoor bar, which from the outside was just old wooden boards and graffiti, but on the inside it was like a peaceful island right in the middle of Berlin! Our time there was split between Goethe activities and free time. The Goethe activities were: visiting the Bundestag, guided coach tour around the city and seeing the main tourist attractions (Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburg Gate etc.). In my free time some friends and me went to a bar and went to restaurants and visited shopping centers. There is so much to do in Berlin that we couldn’t do everything in one weekend. The cycle tour was a trip to a nearby village, but instead of riding along the roads we took a famous bike path, which runs through the beautiful German countryside. It was about 34km (21 miles) in total, with a half hour break at a very nice bar/restaurant in the village.

Accommodation

There were four people in my apartment, two having single rooms and two sharing a double room. We had two bathrooms between us and there are towels and bedding provided, which are changed regularly. We also had an oven, a fridge, a washing machine and a drying machine. The washer and dryer were not free to use and there is no washing powder or conditioner provided. In the apartment you are responsible for brushing the floor and keeping the work surfaces tidy, but there are cleaners who clean the bathrooms. All of the rooms were equipped with a bed, desk and wardrobe and some had a sink. They were all perfectly clean and everything worked in them. We all got on very well in our flat and we are still good friends now!

Goethe Institute Schwäbisch Hall

Everything in the Institute is done in German: lessons, activities or just speaking to people in the office. The building use to be the old hospital, and it is very pretty inside. All of the staff there are very friendly and will help you with anything you need. I had breakfast and lunch at the institute every day, and I was very impressed with the food. Breakfast would always be the same: bread, cheese, ham, cereal and yoghurt. The lunches would change everyday, and there would always be a vegetarian option available. There is also a media library at the institute, and many people who did the exams would study there after class had finished.

Schwäbisch Hall

Honestly, I have never seen such a pretty town in my life. There is an old part and a new part. In the old part there are museums and lots of German restaurants and other foreign restaurants to eat at. In the new part there is mainly shops, including a food shop called Rewe, but just across the bridge there is a cheaper food shop called Kaufland. There is also a very pretty park in the town where you can go for picnics or eat/drink in the pub in the park. During August there was a summer nights festival, which included a parade with muskets firing and lots of live music. There were also live bands and fireworks after the parade. It was a privilege to see!

Conclusion

Spending almost a month in Schwäbisch Hall was the most exciting and fun thing I have ever done in my life! Within the first week I saw an improvement in my German, especially speaking ability. And during the course I have made such good friends with people from all over the world. It doesn’t matter how good or bad your German is, the Goethe Institute accommodates all levels of German knowledge. Everybody I met in the town and the institute were all very friendly and welcoming, and there wasn’t a time when I wasn’t having fun. I would like to thank Charnwood Borough Council, especially the Twinning Department, for organizing such a great opportunity for me. I’d also like to thank everybody at the Goethe Institute for their extreme generosity and also Dr Karin Eißele-Kraft and her team, who work in the twinning department in Schwäbisch Hall, for all of the time and effort they put in to bringing the scholarships recipients together and helping us make the most of our time in Schwäbisch Hall.