

Schwäbisch Hall

My time spent in Schwäbisch Hall has had, and I say this without hyperbole, a significant impact upon my life. The opportunity provided me really was a once in a lifetime event, and I have gained so much; both in the standard of my written and spoken German, but also on my general outlook in life and friends which I have since visited and am still in touch with. I will fully recommend this experience to anyone almost regardless of their ability in German. Even if you can only speak the slightest bit of German you will doubtlessly see a significant improvement on your German and understanding of their culture, not to mention a renewed interest and drive to further improve one's German in the future.

On arrival at Stuttgart airport I took a S-bahn train from the airport to the central Stuttgart railway station, where I was able to take a train to the small town next to Schwabisch Hall. Then a short bus journey and I arrived in Schwäbisch Hall directly in front of the Goethe Institut, less than 2 hours after arriving in Germany. Describing the building which the Goethe Institute is situated in is hard to do justice to; a former hospital it retains many of the period features and adds a certain gravitas to the proceedings. Entering the Institut I was quickly facing an interview and short diagnostic set to determine what class I should be put in, as everyone is put in classes according to ability and is based upon a Alphanumerical ability rating which is the norm for most German courses in general, something I found especially helpful as now I am aware of my level and am able to easily find courses or textbooks appropriate to my level. Once this had been completed I was given the keys to my room and we were taken by minibus to the Wohnheim, a student accommodation block about a ten minute walk from the Insitut. I was also kindly given 250euros for living costs, a sum which I found sufficient to support myself for the 3 weeks as breakfast and lunch are provided in the Mensa Monday to Friday, and cooking facilities are available in the Wohnheim, so it is more than possible to live frugally and therefore have enough money to undertake any excursions that one so wishes to do.

On the subject of which, the variety of trips on offer is very varied, myself I decided to visit the Mercedes Benz museum and visit to the city of Stuttgart, as well as a tour of the picturesque and museum-like town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a town which really does seem stuck in the past with its beautiful architecture. On that trip we visited the Crime and Punishment museum and climbed the somewhat treacherous, yet refreshingly "health and safety" free tower of the Rathaus, giving an unbeatable view onto the surrounding countryside. A visit to Schwabisch Hall's local brewery proved unsurprisingly popular with the participants of the course, and the complimentary dinner and beer was more than welcome after a long say at work.

A typical day at the Insitut would involve waking rather early, eating breakfast at the Mensa and then beginning the days German lessons at the time of 7.45 in the morning. The teacher was one of the most enthusiastic and helpful teachers I have ever encountered, and went out of her way to try and encourage the class to get to know each other. Typically we covered a considerable amount of grammar, as this is an area of difficulty for most students of German. In addition we had frequent speaking practice, as the lessons were conducted entirely in German, however this did not prove to be a difficulty as the patience and explanation of the teacher enabled everyone in the class to fully understand and benefit from the course. Lessons finished around midday, and then lunch would be taken in the Mensa, with a very traditionally German menu which proved popular with all of the students. After this, we were at liberty to do as we wished, most people taking time to explore the town or do a bit of shopping, immersing themselves in the culture. The town itself is absolutely

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stunning due to the amount of remaining mediaeval and gothic architecture; one would be hard pressed to find any modern architecture in the town centre. There is also a great amount of things to do for the students, with two supermarkets and a variety of pubs and bars and the like. The surrounding area is also worth exploring, with me and one of my fellow students walking to a castle in the nearest village.

The Insitute also provides many activities on site, such as a Kaffee und Kuchen even where locals are invited to have coffee and cakes with the students, and also the notorious weekly Goethe parties in the Institut's on-site pub, infamous for the choice of rather dated 90's music like the Spice Girls, which proved always very popular and a great chance to meet other students that may not be in one's class. On the last day of the course there was a rather touching farewell ceremony, in which a video containing pictures of the various activities was shown and most memorably one of the Spanish students providing a hilarious karaoke rendition in the Goethe pub party one week, unaware he was being filmed.

The range of ability levels varied from those with only a very basic understanding of German to some who were actually teachers of German and wanted to perfect their German even more; proving once more that it is not a definite requisite to be very good at German to take part in this scholarship , and I would therefore encourage anyone to take part if they have an interest in learning German, even if they have only the most rudimentary German knowledge at the moment. Regardless of your current ability the scholarship will make a dramatic improvement and give a greater desire to better one's German. The level of immersion of spending 3 weeks in Germany, relatively self sufficient and speaking only German in the lessons and at mealtimes in the Insitut provides an experience that not even the best British universities can offer a comparable opportunity to, and I would thoroughly encourage others to try and take advantage of this incomparable opportunity. I would like to thank the helpfulness of Charnwood Borough council and particularly the Twinning Department, and naturally also all the staff at the Goethe Institut and The town of Schwäbisch Hall for their extreme generosity.