

A change of seasons: researching in Germany

I arrived expecting spring and received a heavy dose of winter. In fact, on the train ride to Bayreuth I could see snow on the ground through the window. This was not what I prepared for! Going about one's day when the temperature is around zero was a novel experience for a South African such as myself, but fortunately it was not too long until spring arrived. Watching trees gain more leaves by the day and seeing wild flowers in every patch of grass was another of the many new experiences I have had in Germany. Arriving in a foreign country not knowing anyone can be quite difficult, but with the support of the fantastic International Students Office at the University of Bayreuth I soon had my bank account and cell phone sorted, had made friends (both German and other exchange students) and had learnt how to order a beer in German.

From careful observation I have discovered that several stereotypes about the Germans hold true. There is a certain national fondness for beer, punctuality and *wurst* that cannot be denied. It is not at all uncommon to see students enjoying a casual beer on the lawns of the university in the afternoon before (presumably) heading off to lectures, and I discovered the hard way that if you agree to meet a German at a restaurant at 7pm, and you arrive at five past 7, you are late! As for the *wurst*, well lets just say that every supermarket has a dedicated *wurst* section, sometimes half an aisle! Such foibles aside though, I have found Germans to be friendly, helpful and welcoming, and always willing to speak English when they realise you speak little German.



Daniel with other international students at the Bayreuth Volksfest

Arriving in Bayreuth speaking no German resulted in several difficult situations which in hindsight are amusing; such as trying to describe to a hairdresser what I wanted her to do using only the international language of pointing and gesturing. This did not go well and I had to wear a hat for the next week until it grew out a bit. German is not an easy language to learn, especially for English speakers who are not used to distinguishing different genders of nouns, but it is not impossible. Through a combination of a German course offered by my university, podcasts and a German copy of my favourite comic (Asterix and Obelix) I have scraped together enough German to hold a basic conversation, order a meal or ask for directions and I am learning more daily by talking to the German friends I have that are kind enough to talk with me in German and correct my poor grammar.

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One of the great things about Germany is how easy it is to move about in it. Thus far I have made weekend trips to Nuremberg, Bamberg and Berlin and am planning trips to Munich and Prague. The trip that left the greatest impression was my weekend in Berlin. It really is one of the most dynamic cities in the world and one weekend was far too short to see it properly. The highlight for me was the Pergamon museum, where German archeologists have reconstructed an ancient Greek temple from fragments that they excavated. It is truly awe inspiring. And of course the Berlin nightlife was not too bad.

Altogether coming to Bayreuth has been a great experience, and I am extremely grateful to DAAD for providing me with this opportunity. I think that every young South African would benefit from spending a few months living in a foreign country such as Germany; there are many things we can learn from the German way of life. I am also thankful to my research group (or *Lehrstuhl* as they say in German) as they have gone out of their way to help me fit in. The standard of academia here is very high, and through the courses and seminar that I am taking I have learnt a lot of exciting new mathematics. Furthermore, with the help of my supervising Professor I have been able to conduct research here that I could not have done in South Africa, and which will form a central part of my masters thesis.

*** Daniel McKenzie is a DAAD-NRF In-Country Scholarship holder. He received the short-term research grant available within the programme to complete a research visit of 4 months at the University of Bayreuth. Daniel is completing his Masters in Mathematics at the University of Cape Town.**