

A little over 10 weeks – that was the amount of time it took to change a perspective. That was also the length of my stay in Germany through the RISE program. I landed on German soil bright-eyed on a Sunday morning ready to start my endeavor. To those planning on entering Germany on Sundays, don't. Just don't. You will quickly find that most shops are closed. That's culture shock for you. But I must admit, that was probably the greatest inconvenience (if one can even call it that) I experienced during my stay in Germany. The fact that my mentor was there to pick me up, take me to my dorm for the summer, and even give me food (and German chocolate) definitely helped ease the Sunday eye-opener.

Before I delve into the specifics of research, I would like to note a couple things about Germany. German people (at least from what I experienced in the North) may appear a little cold and private. Get to know them though, and the term hospitality takes on a whole new meaning. Everyone I had the opportunity to meet was nothing but kind and courteous to me. The fact that I spoke no German didn't bother anyone. Someone capable of speaking English was usually at a hand's length to help serve as a medium of conversation. Also, reading context clues, facial expressions, and hand gestures became an important part of my communication process. It's something that most people often overlook but it is definitely a very effective mode of understanding someone and conveying ideas. German universities for the most part were a central part of society. Students definitely enjoyed a lot of perks (such as cheap transportation). And they made up a good portion of the population I was in contact with. Thus, finding common interests was not difficult and conversation flowed easily. That was one of the most important things I found out – conversations never seemed to come to an end. There was always something to talk about. They wanted to know about American culture and I couldn't ask enough questions about German culture. A good trade-off.

Public transportation. Those two words will become synonymous with Germany. Getting around is very easy and relatively cheap. It gives one a sense of freedom not shared *stateside* if one does not own a car. A blessing really as it affords one the opportunity to really get to know the city. Take a map with you, a train or bus ticket, and you're set to explore the city. The best way to explore a city as I quickly found out was to get lost. Of course, as long as that handy map is nearby, one's not every really lost, but it's the freedom that comes with knowing there's few boundaries that is liberating. Also, in the bigger cities, train and bus stations are so common that if you walk a block or two in any direction, you're sure to run into one of them. You just have to walk far enough. The last topic is food. For vegetarians and non-alcohol drinkers, fear not, there's plenty of options. Still water (non-carbonated water) is a little hard to come but that's have the fun about traveling around – learning to cope and try different things. A word of warning though, German bread is very addictive. Try at your own risk.

On to research. I worked pretty long days, starting around 8:30 in the morning and going on until 6:00 or 7:00 PM. Of course, there's a lunch break in which the majority of the lab went down to the *mensa* (translation – dining hall or cafeteria) to eat. A couple of tea breaks were also thrown in there. Although it may seem long, the time flies by. My research was particularly interesting to me so I never got bored with it and had lots of fun. I was fortunate that I found a topic very similar to the one I worked on back home so learning how my mentor and her lab went about working on the project shed some new light for me. Also, my mentor gave me a lot of independence that I fully enjoyed. That's not to say that she wasn't there when I needed her – she was always there to answer my questions.

The dynamic of the *working group* (lab group) was also more social than what I was used. The whole lab got together for a number of social events. The entire Chemistry Department at my host university got together for a *football* (soccer) tournament – in part due to the Euro Cup 2008. A fundraiser event for a charity organization was thrown that featured lots of food and beverages. In my last week, the whole lab (including my professor) went canoeing. Things like these events just made my stay that much better. I never felt left out since the people in my lab went out of their way to make me feel part of the team. One of the many things I'm truly grateful for.

I will finish by mentioning my favorite memory. During the internships, I visited the hometown of my Ph.D. mentor. If you get the opportunity to do this (stay with a host family), I highly recommend it. The village was very small – less than 500 inhabitants – and was in stark contrast to my home back in the USA. My weekend with my mentor's family in East Germany affected me profoundly. Though the family spoke no English, there was never a lull in our interactions. They treated me as if I was a longtime family-friend, not a guest. Through them, I learned a great deal about myself and that to me, was the most important part of my whole experience. The academic growth, no doubt, was important, but this personal growth, in my opinion, is the thing I will carry with me for a long time to come.

As I stepped back in American territory after nearly two-and-a-half months, I realized a part of me was glad to be back home. But another part of me was sad to have left Germany. I found solace in the knowledge that the person who had left for Germany did not come back quite the same person. The people I had met, the places I had seen, had changed me. I will always carry a part of Germany with me now.

For those considering RISE, just do it. You won't regret it.

Sincerely,  
Viswatej Avutu

*“I agree that my report and accompanying pictures are used by the DAAD in printed materials, presentations, and on the website in order to inform funding organizations, sponsors, and students about the RISE program.”*