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RISE Report 2009

This past summer has been one of most exciting summers of my life. As a RISE student at the Applied Genetics Laboratory of the Freie Universitat in Berlin, I was able to combine the experience of working as part of a genetics research group with the excitement of living in Berlin. In addition to exploring the city of Berlin, I was also able to travel and even participate in a two week German language immersion course.

Last winter during the break between first and second semesters, of my second year at university, I sat down and thought about what I wanted to do with my summer. I had heard about the DAAD/RISE program from my organic chemistry professor, and decided that the program was well worth applying for. Several months later, I heard from the DAAD that I had been awarded an internship, and shortly thereafter I was contacted by my supervisor. Any questions I had were answered by my supervisor, and she even found me a spacious room in a convenient neighbourhood. Before leaving for Germany, I felt very confident that I was in good hands and that all necessary arrangements had been taken care of.

I first arrived in Munich, and spent two weeks in a German language immersion course with many other RISE students. I think this language course, taught by the DID, was a great start to my experience in Germany because it gave me a basic understanding of the German language, of which I had absolutely no prior knowledge, and it also allowed me to spend some time getting to know other RISE students. Many evenings after class were spent chatting and relaxing in the famous Bavarian beer gardens, an experience I shall never forget. Aside from indulging in Bavarian beer and pretzels, we also spent a day trip hiking in the Bavarian Alps, and visited several of Munich's captivating museums. For anyone who visits Munich, I also highly recommend climbing to the top of St. Peter's tower, as the view is more than worth the effort. As I later came to understand, the southern German state of Bavaria, in which Munich is located, is culturally and geographically very different from the northern state of Brandenburg, where I spent the rest of my summer. In hindsight, I am also glad to have participated in the language course since it allowed me to experience this unique area of Germany.

Before arriving in Germany, I expected to find that the country would be very efficiently run and managed. I must say that I was not disappointed; public transportation, both in Munich and in Berlin, was quick and dependable. Public transportation in Germany operates on the honour system, where your ticket is only checked randomly. I am a fan of this system, as it greatly facilitates jumping on and off trains quickly, without having to wait in any lines. I also noticed that Germany has specific bicycle lanes, separate from sidewalks and roads. While this can be slightly dangerous for a naïve tourist who is unaware of their existence, these bicycle lanes made me feel much safer while cycling in town. Overall, my experience with public transportation in Germany has made me aware of several aspects of Canadian public transportation that could certainly be improved. I realize that Canadian winters do not facilitate the use of bicycles as a means of public transportation, but I still feel that Canadians could learn a lot from the German public transportation system.

Perhaps the biggest difference I noticed between living in Germany and living in Canada, apart from the constant supply of bratwurst, was the obedience of people's dogs. As an avid long distance runner, I spent many hours running through parks and alongside river banks after work. Only once did I encounter a dog who barked at me. Most dogs completely ignored my existence, and didn't even bother to chase birds, rabbits, or other local animals that live in these parks. I found this level of obedience quite surprising, and was greatly impressed.

A typical day in my internship started at 7:30 am. After waking up I would pack my lunch for the day, eat a hearty breakfast, and then hop on the S-bahn (the German equivalent of a subway). 40 minutes later, after one S-bahn transfer and 5 minutes of walking, I would arrive at the lab. For the rest of the day I would collect data from various experiments I was working on, run gels or PCR's, prepare media for new experiments, or plant more plants for further experiments. I would take about half an hour for lunch, which I would spend in the lunch room eating with other co-workers. My day at the lab would end around 6pm or 7pm, after which I would travel back to my apartment to go for a job before dinner. After dinner I would normally meet up with some friends, normally other RISE students also working in Berlin, or go off exploring some interesting part of the city. I also became good friends with my apartment-mate, and enjoyed many conversations about differences between German and Canadian culture. Looking back on my time in the lab, I always found that the day would fly by quickly, and I rarely found the work boring. There are some aspects of working in a lab that can be repetitive and somewhat boring; however, the variety of tasks and experiments that I completed made the overall experience quite enjoyable. I also feel that I was very lucky to have chosen the lab that I did, since all of my co-workers were great people who were always fun to work with. In addition to chatting and telling funny stories in the lab, I also enjoyed many summer BBQ's and several other celebrations that took place during my stay.

Overall, I greatly enjoyed both my time spent exploring Germany and my time in the lab. I highly recommend the DAAD/RISE program to any student who is at all interested in an internship in science or engineering. Experiences such as travel, working internationally, and learning a new language are much easier to experience as a student, and I cannot think of a better way to spend a summer.

"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."