

Account of Experiences in Germany

By Richard Galas

Summary

After completing my PhD in Chemical engineering I accepted a six month DAAD RISE *professional* internship placement at BASF in Ludwigshafen Germany. I worked for BASF in the Fine Chemicals and Biocatalysis department, helping the company with skills I had from my PhD and learning new skills on the job. I felt I was able to experience German culture as an insider, and I was able to travel throughout Germany and Europe.

Decision to come to Germany

I have had an interest in the culture and history of Germany for as long as I can remember. In high school I was able to take German language courses. These courses furthered my knowledge of German culture and exposed me to German exchange students visiting the US. I was unable to visit Germany through my high school because the program was temporarily suspended after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. I spent all of my university and graduate student career looking for a way to come to Germany, and was finally able to through the DAAD program.

Working as an intern for BASF

In Germany I worked for BASF in the Fine Chemicals and Biocatalysis department. BASF was able to utilize some of the lab skills I acquired during my PhD, while at the same time enabling me to learn new ones. It was greatly rewarding for me to be able to use my PhD skills in an industrial setting. I am grateful for the opportunity to see how these skills can be used in an industrial setting.

I spent almost every day in a lab overlooking the Rhine river, working with people from all over Europe: France, Poland, Lithuania, and of course Germany. I found my colleagues at BASF to be welcoming and kind. They not only made sure I understood how things in the lab and at BASF worked, but also that my transition to living in Germany went as smoothly as possible. As time progressed we became good friends and discussed a variety of topics. Some of the lab techs confessed that I had changed their perspective of Americans to a more positive light, and I had certainly learned more about Germans from them. After the first month or so I spent most of my days joking and being sarcastic with these colleagues, as the language barrier, or the fear of being misunderstood receded.

I was able to interact a lot with the other interns at BASF both professionally and socially. Professionally I was able to help two interns finish their Master's thesis. One intern was working in collaboration with my research department and I was able to train the intern on experimental techniques as well as suggest additional experiments that could be performed. The other intern had completed most of the thesis before I arrived, but I was able to assist in editing the thesis as it was written in English. Assisting both of these interns gave me new insight into my own professional development as it helped me integrate into BASF and German culture.

In addition to professional growth, there were many social activities planned by the interns at BASF, such as intern lunches and meet-ups for drinks. The German interns in my building took it upon themselves to make sure I was included in regular activities among their groups of friends: like going out for dinner and a movie. In fact, one of the German interns even invited me to their home town to see where they live and to meet all of their childhood friends. Other BASF related events included trips to local castles and restaurants.

Living in Germany

Even with all of the help from BASF, I still found life in Germany to be quite a shock initially. I enjoyed having windows that opened with multiple directions, but wished they came with screens. I enjoyed being able to try many great German foods, but I still miss being able to cook with a microwave. But I have never quite figured out how to hang my laundry to dry, to pack enough bottled water, or to appreciate lack of air conditioned laboratories.

Even with these struggles I am grateful for this internship because living in Germany afforded me many opportunities to experience Germany as a local, not as a tourist. I came to appreciate the density of German cities, and the ease of using public transport to get around. I began to remember and befriend local store and café owners. And living in Germany, I was able to enjoy local food festivals, wine festivals, and hockey games. Over time, my apartment in Ludwigshafen began to feel more like home.

Traveling in Germany/Europe

Living in the center of Europe was a fantastic opportunity for me to explore a lot of the continent. I was able to travel to almost all of the major cities in Germany, and even made it to Munich for Oktoberfest. Living in Germany helped me appreciate the differences between different parts of the German Federation. Not only did each city I visit have a distinct architectural feel, but I also noticed distinct differences in the culture and food of its citizens. I was also able to travel places in Germany renowned for their natural beauty: the Alps, the Rhine river gorge, and the Rugen cliffs on the Baltic sea.

Because Germany is so centrally located, I was able to visit many other European countries as well. In fact, a few cities in France were included in my local rail pass! Again living in Germany helped me appreciate some of the more subtle differences between Germany and other European countries. I feel that if I had made these trips living in America I would have a much more simplified view of Europe. Additionally, I traveled mostly by rail (and a little by car), so I was able to see a lot of the European countryside (especially the German!), something I feel I would have completely missed if I were just flying from place to place.

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