

## **1. Blurb**

Hi! My name is Charlie and I am the German rep for AHA society. I just got back from my year abroad in Germany, where I worked for 12 months as a marketing intern with Siemens in Erlangen, Bavaria. I spent most of my year abroad conforming to German stereotypes, drinking beer and wearing a dirndl but also filled my boots with travel all around Germany and Austria. I had a great experience last year and look forward to giving advice to outgoing students about all aspects of living abroad in Germany!

## **2. Updated country guide 2012/2013**

Settling in to life in a foreign country is always going to be challenging. This guide is full of hints and tips which will get you started on your year abroad experience in Germany. Although it has been written by people who were either on a teaching assistantship with the British Council or working with a German company, much of the information is also relevant to studying.

### **Registration (Anmeldung)**

Upon your arrival in Germany, your first direct contact with German bureaucracy, and one of the most important things that you need to do, is to go to the town hall to register. It is critical that you do this as early as possible, as in order to get a bank account (and therefore in order to get paid!) you will need your registration documents. These act as a confirmation of address, so even if you don't intend to stay for very long at any particular address (maybe you are staying with a family/teacher until you can find a more permanent place to live) you still need to register at their address as soon as possible.

What to take with you: You will need some form of ID, ideally your passport. You must also have something with you to confirm that you are indeed living at the address that you are registering yourself at. For example, a signed contract if you are renting, or if you are staying at someone's house a signed letter from them if they are unable to come with you in person. If you change address at any point during your year abroad, you also need to go to the town hall in order to get your registration documents amended. Furthermore, at the end of your time abroad it is important that you go back to de-register yourself. It may all sound like a lot of complicated bureaucracy but there will definitely be people at your university or workplace who will be able to help you out or just ask your study abroad contact back in St Andrews for advice.

### **Banks & Bank Accounts**

Before you open a bank account in Germany, it is important to consider which bank you want to open an account with. Unlike in the UK, ATM machines will often charge you for taking your money out: unless you are withdrawing money from a branch of the bank that you hold an account with.

Some banks are affiliated with each other into so-called “cash groups”. For example, Deutsche Bank, Postbank, Commerzbank, Dresdner Bank, and HypoVereinsbank are all in the same cash group. This means that you can withdraw your money from any branch of any of the banks in the same cash group as your bank, and avoid being charged.

Another option is having an account with Sparkasse. There is literally a branch on nearly every corner. So you should easily be able to avoid being charged, despite this bank not being affiliated with any other bank.

What to take with you: When opening your account you will need those all important registration documents and some proof of ID (again a passport is usually best). If you take evidence that you are doing an assistantship/are studying (for example a document from the British Council’s german counterpart with the details of your placement on it) then you will not be charged for holding a bank account. (Yes, german banks like to charge you for lots of things!) Students do not have to pay to hold an account, and this type of work placement is also considered as a form of further education, therefore language assistants shouldn’t be liable to pay either.

## **Travel**

The transport system in Germany really is amazing...it’s the first place I’ve ever been to where the trains actually arrive early! However, it can seem really complicated at first, especially when trying to decipher the ticket machines!! So hopefully this will help you to get to grips with the public transport!

### Buses & Trams

Most large towns and cities have tram systems, so buses tend to be less common in urban areas. However they both operate on a similar basis. Usually you will be required to buy your ticket before you board at a ticket machine at the bus/tram stop. Often you must find your destination in the list of possible destination displayed on the front of the machine, and type the corresponding number into the keypad, in order to select your journey. Once you have paid for your ticket, (if it does not already have a time and a date on it) it is crucial that you get it stamped by one of the machines on board, otherwise it will not be valid, and if caught you could be fined. Germany and Austria are quite bad for undercover ticket inspectors who perform spot checks and will fine you heavily if you have an invalid ticket. Do make sure that they are authentic inspectors before you hand over your money though! It is also common for the tickets to be valid for a certain period of time after they have been purchased, normally around 90 minutes. So you can take multiple journeys (within the limitations of the ticket you have purchased) with the same ticket.

Sometimes it is possible and cheaper to buy a “City Plus” ticket, which combines your train and bus tickets, giving you unlimited travel for a day in a city of your choice after your train journey.

### Trains

There are many different types of trains in Germany, ranging from high-speed inter-city trains, to regional and local trains. The table below should help to give you an idea of the different services available.

Inter-city Express (ICE)	High speed, long distance services.
Inter-city (IC)	Long distance services. Slower than ICE but stop more frequently.
Euro-city (EC)	Long distance services, that connect Germany with Austria, Switzerland and other neighbouring countries.
Regional Express (RE)	The quickest of the regional services, linking all the major towns within one area.
Regional Bahn (RB)	A slower regional service, that stops at smaller towns and villages as well.
S-Bahn	Common in urban areas. Commuter style trains connecting suburban areas.
U-Bahn	The underground system operating in large cities.

If you are considering doing lots of travel (especially long distance, maybe to visit friends who are also on a year abroad) then by far the quickest way is with the inter-city services (IC and ICE). These trains are often quite expensive, so investing in a Bahncard 25, or a Bahncard 50 is well worth it. These railcards will reduce the cost of your fare by 25% or 50%. Although they are quite expensive to buy, they save you lots of money in the long run. If you are anything like me and love travelling it may even be worth investing in a Bahncard 100, which covers all train travel for the whole year – it can save you some serious money in the long term!

As with the bank accounts, as a student or a language assistant you will also be entitled to a reduction off of the regular price of buying a Bahncard, which usually works out at 50% off.

More information can be found at: <http://www.bahn.de/p/view/bahncard/bahncard.shtml>

### Ticket 24

Another way to travel for less, is to take advantage of the “Ticket 24”. This type of ticket is valid for 24 hours and available for both individuals and groups of up to five people. The area in which you are permitted to travel is defined by the ticket you buy. Some are valid for travel within the entire Bundesland, for example a Bayern Ticket, Rheinland-Pfalz Ticket etc. With others the area of travel is restricted by the zone of travel that you select upon purchase at the ticket machine.

However, they are only valid on the regional modes of travel, although this does include buses and trams. They are especially useful when travelling into cities as it makes it much easier to get around.

You will need to buy your ticket before you board, either at a ticket desk or at a ticket machine. The ticket machines in Germany will at first seem like a complete enigma, because of all the different services and tickets available, which after the previous descriptions should hopefully be clearer to you now! More information can be found at: <http://www.bahn.de/p/view/index.shtml>

## **Insurance**

Healthcare in Germany is privatised. As a language assistant in Germany, you will receive health insurance as part of your placement and if you are doing a work placement you will likely be covered by your company, but it is worth checking the specifics with them beforehand. You will be given a card with your insurance details on it, and it is important that you carry this around with you. In the event of an accident your insurance details will be requested upon arrival, and this process will be made much easier if you have your details with you in your purse or wallet.

It's also a good idea to carry your European Health Insurance Card (EHIC, formerly known as E111) with you.

## **Accommodation**

Depending on where in Germany you are living, the cost of your rent will vary accordingly. It's definitely a good idea to ask your school/company about accommodation as soon as you have contact with them. Your mentor should be able to guide and help you to find somewhere to live.

Some people live with a family or with a teacher from the school they are an assistant at, whereas some choose to rent privately.

If you are going to a German university there tends to be good value student accommodation available, which your host university can inform you about.

## WG life

It is common for German students to live in a Wohngemeinschaft (WG). These are rented properties, in which a group of people live, who don't necessarily know each other. Some assistants choose to live in a WG, especially those in larger towns and cities. Living in a WG is a fantastic way of meeting German people your own age and is often a really sociable environment, with housemates cooking and drinking casual beers together. As well as looking in local newspapers, or at your local university on your arrival in Germany, you can also search for these online, where WGs will advertise for new housemates. You get in contact with the current housemates and then arrange an interview to see whether it is a good fit. Don't be too worried about this process – it tends to be an informal chat so just have some good questions prepared. Also if you are like me and your German is limited when you first arrive then don't be afraid to play the „you

can practice your English with me“ card – most Germans would welcome the chance to have a native English conversation buddy!

Some useful websites are:

<http://www.immonet.de/wg.html>

<http://www.studenten-wg.de>

<http://wg-gesucht.de>

<http://www.immobilienscout24.de/> (this is probably better for looking for 1-person apartments)

From personal experience if you want to really get to know your housemates then it might be better not to live in a WG with more than 5-6 people. Larger apartments can be quite impersonal and it is difficult to make good friends.

### **Other useful tips for life in Germany**

#### Photocopies of important documents

It's a good idea to take photocopies with you of any important documents, especially things like the photograph page of your passport etc. Just in case you lose anything! It's also worth taking lots of passport size photos with you. They come in very handy in the first couple of weeks!

#### Mobile phones

Many people on a year abroad will choose to get a German mobile phone number, in order to make the cost of texts and calls within Germany itself cheaper. Just as in the UK it's possible to buy a new phone at a relatively low price. Another option is to take an unlocked phone and to simply buy a new SIM card once you arrive in Germany. Just as in UK there are plenty of deals out there – but getting a mobile on a pay as you go basis might be easier than getting locked into a contract.

#### Crossing the road

Simple as this may seem, crossing the road was something that I struggled quite a lot with at the beginning of my placement! Apart from the obvious fact that the traffic comes from the opposite direction to that which you expect, there are some other rules which you should be aware of.

Jaywalking is an offence in Germany, and if caught by the police you can be fined. The overwhelming majority of people will obey the signals at road crossings, even if there is no oncoming traffic. If you do jaywalk...expect to be looked at disapprovingly by parents with small children for setting a bad example!

Secondly, it is important to be aware that even if the light is green for you to cross at a pedestrian crossing, that traffic turning right can still turn into the road that you are crossing. Although you do have right of way as a pedestrian, you shouldn't just rely on the road users to see you at the crossing!

## Bikes

German towns and cities have fantastic provision for cyclists. There are cycle routes all over the place and it is one of the best ways to keep fit and get places cheaply whilst on your year abroad. Second hand bikes are not only good value but they are easy to get hold of – your best bets are searching online for your local fleamarkets (Flohmarkt) or bike auctions, which take place regularly in student towns and cities. Make sure you invest in a good bike lock and lights though as the German police will stop you if you have no lights at night. They are pretty strict when it comes to drunk cycling as well.

## Teaching Materials

If you are going as a British Council Language Assistant then it's really useful to start collecting materials that will help you in your lessons as early as possible. For example, pictures, brochures, postcards (going to tourist information can be helpful!) anything that you can use to talk about your home town, something of local interest, St Andrews, or the UK as a whole. I found that one of the most useful tools in the classroom was a large map of the UK, as London was the only place that most pupils could point out to me on a map!

## Deposit (*Pfand*) for bottles and glasses

When you buy a bottle of drink, be it from a supermarket or a convenience store, a soft drink or an alcoholic one, you will be required to pay a deposit for the bottle. This is usually an extra 15-30cents on top of the price, which you will get back when you return the bottle empty, to the shop or to one of the machines at most supermarkets.

This deposit is also applicable to the glasses at outdoor festivals and Christmas markets. At these sorts of events it is usually around 2€, which you will get back on return of the glass – if you decide to return it. Many people choose to keep the mugs etc. from Christmas markets as a souvenir, especially as some are particularly pretty!

## Going out

There are two main rules for going out in Germany: don't start too early and dress down! Coming from a small university town like St Andrews it may be difficult to adjusting to nightlife in Germany where a standard night out lasts until about 7 or 8 am. The second rule is most relevant for girls - British party gear is far too dressy and revealing by most German standards. The usual attire is dressed down jeans and a nice top. As a general rule it is safer and less embarrassing to go with „less is more“. Similarly fancy dress is not so popular – the only real exceptions are carnival and beer festivals, when it is actively encouraged!