

*No one would have ever said that they are Germans. There was no feeling of patriotism.
But during the World Cup in 2006, everyone was proud to wave the German flag.
The feeling in whole Germany was different; so relaxed, heartfelt and cool"*

-Steffen Kaiser
(Student from Special Needs Education)

The cold Germany: from the warm, Mexican perspective

Introduction

When I wrote this, my experience had not been over in Germany yet. I still had 2 weeks before really saying 'bis bald' to the country which was my home since August of this year. But why 'see you soon' and not 'good-bye'? This has to do with everything I have lived so far in this wonderful country. I can confirm that, not only my body has changed (due to the fact that I had to walk every single day and ride my bicycle once in a while) but my perspective of life as well. I will definitely be coming back to see what I did not get to see.

In a country where the rest of the world sees it as Nazi headquarters, where everyone drinks beers and eats sausages, where the weather and people are cold, and where everyone is blonde with striking, light eyes, there I was mixing with these people and adapting myself to their culture which is very different from mine. I arrived in a warmer weather but cold environment; I left in a colder weather but warmer environment.

My first time in Europe and I got to spend it in Germany when I always thought it would be England. Some of the impressions of my friends when I told them the big news: 'Be careful with the Nazis', 'avoid people who have the Swastika tattooed on their bodies'. I know Germany does not have it easy due to its dark history but it has totally changed.

My experience in Germany in a few words: *Sustainable Development, Mensa, genau, Löffel, Spekulatius, Glühwein, der Hammer, geil... geil... geil, Bremen, Katze, Brot, getting stuck in an elevator, Mexican night, halt die Fresse, Moin, danke, Natascha, the "Loft", Kramermarkt, Frisbee, Kartoffelsalat, Currywurst, mein Haus, "Polyester", Ich spreche nicht Deutsch, falling from my bike, Cologne, Münster, and of course, my German family.*

1.1 Preparing my stay

One day I went to see one of my professors to her office. The previous semester, I worked for her as part of my Teaching Practices so we have a very good relationship in terms of work and outside the school. She told me that there were some plans to send someone to Germany to do an internship but for some reason, the people my university wished to offer this opportunity could not accept it.

If there is something you need to know about Professor Maria Elena Llaven Nucamendi is her level of determination and that she is always looking for benefits for our university and especially, for the Language Department. She immediately looked at me and said: 'what if we send someone from languages? Will you do it?' That took me by surprise but I ended up saying yes and thinking that it might not be possible to happen. She had this amazing idea of creating a glossary of some concepts being translated from English into Spanish from the topic "Environmental Management Information Systems (EMIS)". She then sent the email.

A few days later, I went to her office again and told me that they had accepted the idea and that I should get in contact with Britta Stigge for details about my stay. It actually happened! I was beyond thrilled!

The University of Oldenburg through the network "Developing Sustainability" covered all my expenses: from the flight tickets to the rent of the house where I stayed at. I thank Britta Stigge for all that she did for me when it came to arranging everything. I practically had nothing to do but deciding the time that I would live there. As a Mexican citizen I did not have the need to apply for a Visa for a period no longer than 3 months. I could stay in Germany and move through the Schengen area as I pleased. If you plan to stay for a period longer than 90 days, you must apply for a visa at least 3 months before your departure since it takes at least 2 months to get it ready.

I was in Germany from August 15th to November 8th, 2010. Britta also arranged my health insurance and gave me all the details about how to get to Oldenburg. The flight was from Cancun airport to Amsterdam and from it to Bremen. Once there, I met a Peruvian girl who

had to go to the train station too so we went together. We took the tram which is just outside Bremen Airport to the train station and bought our tickets. She had to get off before me but told me how many stations I should wait to get to Oldenburg.

So I finally arrived to Oldenburg. There was supposed to be someone waiting for me but due to a misunderstanding, they showed up late. Anyway, I got a taxi and went to my house where there was nobody! Luckily, I had really good neighbors who let me inside their house to wait for someone. Laura, one of my roommates' friends, showed up later to give me my keys and explained everything related to the house and how to get to the university the following day.

That's how my adventure in Germany started.

1.2 Within the University

Before arriving, my professor in Mexico told me that I will be working for Professor Jorge Marx Gómez. However, he was not in Germany when I arrived; he came back two days later. Moreover, Britta Stigge got sick since there was a virus which affected many people from the university. She sent me an email to tell me that I had to meet Julia Franke, professor Marx's secretary. She would be in charge of giving me the first payment for my daily expenses.

I went to Oldenburg University the following day after my arrival to meet her. I was welcomed by Liane Haak who was very nice in giving me a tour and introducing me to the department. The next day, they arranged everything so I can get a library card since I needed some books and also, set up my computer so I could have internet access. They provided me with a work station within the office of "The Cubes" (PhD students from Cuba) so I immediately started working on my project.

When I first met Professor Jorge Marx, I got the impression that he is someone who knows exactly what he wants and will find a way to get it. He is someone who imposes rules without saying them aloud so working for him is such a big opportunity. Moreover, he is a very friendly person outside the university. He plays the guitar and will show his Spanish roots when necessary. He made my stay comfortable within the department during the time in Germany and whenever I needed something, I just needed to ask him. He will also expect the best from you when working for him.

The university life is very demanding, either as a professor or as a student. I felt a very stressful environment among all students. Some students will work and study at the same

time but one of the advantages of being German is that you get to organize yourself in an efficient way. Classes and seminars demand all your attention and the library is always full of people.

The university's facilities are incredible. The library has 4 floors so it is very likely you find the book you are looking for. It has personal and group work stations so you can focus on your assignments. If you are student, you get to use the photocopy machine but be aware of the fact that depending on the book, you will have to use the normal photocopy or the one for books which are old and fragile. Mensa offers a variety of food for everyone from a pizzeria to an alternative menu for vegetarians. The food is really good and is not that expensive. You can also get together with your friends at the cafeteria which is located downstairs. The sport center is absolutely amazing; they have pretty much everything from a swimming pool to a gym; lockers and showers are available for the students; it has also rooms for dancing and doing Yoga as well as basketball courts. There are some other sport facilities in campus Wechloy such as a jogging track and beach volleyball court. Some parts of the university are old such as some elevators. Be careful when using them; you don't want to get stuck inside as I did. Although I must admit, it was part of the adventure.

The whole department was really nice to me. Everyone treated me well and invited me to get part of their presentations and trips. One day we went to a very important photo printing factory for a tour to get a presentation about their TI department. Something worth mentioning is the presentations of the department. People will show their research topic and advances in front of the whole department to get feedback and suggestions. I had to do this once to present myself and my topic to all of them. They liked my topic and suggested some improvements and directions my project should take.

1.3 Outside the University

Germany is full of history. It is an old country which has gone through a lot and therefore, it had to start all over again after everything was destroyed after World War II. Oldenburg is a very quite city with about 160.000 inhabitants and probably one of the safest place to live in. Between Cozumel and Oldenburg, I would say the latter is the most quite; Cozumel, either because is a tourist place or not, is more alive.

Life in Germany is completely different from the Mexican life. Germans have to plan everything and it's quite difficult to take them out of their boxes. They seem cold and since most of their time they are kind of busy, their attitude is quite closed.

I lived with two German girls during 2 and half months. One of them was really nice to me and was always open to help me. She lived in Nicaragua for a while which is why I think she felt sympathetic to me. The other girl seemed nice at the beginning, but after a while, she

started showing her true colors. I felt she was not being honest with me and she would have this attitude that only confirmed what I suspected. Anyhow, no one said it would be easy to adapt to a new culture. I explored the city by myself during the first 2 months. It was really good since it was one of the reasons I wanted to come to Germany: it meant I had to live on my own and learn how to live in a new environment with the help of no one. I would grab my city map and get lost.

Everyone rides a bike here even when they go to clubs and bars. That was really funny to me since you will never be cool in Mexico if you ever go to a club by bike. However, I really love the culture of using it. My roommates lent me one so I used it sometimes. It didn't work that well so it required more effort; the brightside of that, more exercise for my legs!

I saw the trees changed their colors from green to yellow and finally brown. I liked walking down a path surrounded by trees and see the leaves fall. I love that you can notice when a new season has started which I don't get to notice in Cozumel; it always seems the same season there. Moreover, their awareness of recycling is really impressive. At first, I didn't understand why they charged me more when I bought a bottle of water, for example. I learned later that they charged you a fee for the use of *their* bottle. When you returned it to the store, they will give your 25 cents back. I also liked that you have to bring your own bags when shopping or pay to get one at the store. In Mexico, they are free which means more pollution. This is because Germany is getting greener and greener in every aspect such as politics.

One day I went to *Mensa* to have lunch. As I don't speak German I sometimes had some problems but I always managed to understand the menu. That day I went to the pasta section and there were three different kinds of sauces. I asked the person in charge if he spoke English and he said yes. When I was about to ask something, this woman comes out of nowhere and started speaking in German about the sauces. I had no idea what she was saying so I had to accept her tomato sauce. The people next to me started laughing. It was so embarrassing. Nevertheless, the next day they approached to me and we started talking. That is how I met new Germany: my really good friend and one of the reasons I didn't want to leave Germany, Steffen Kaiser.

Thanks to him, I love Germany as much as I love Mexico. He and his friends were really nice to me. I had so much fun with them, even though there was this language barrier. I learned how different the friendship culture is from Mexico's. Still, friendship is a universal feeling so we share certain characteristics. For example, I don't get to cook to my friends in Mexico; it is more like going out with them to eat somewhere else and then, go for a ride around the city. I can show up late at my friends' house and that would be okay. I don't

have to call them to ask them if I could come over. I guess we like being visited unexpectedly. At least, I do.

My classmates and I would skip classes to go to the beach or go for a drink. Sometimes we will stay in the school's cafeteria (when we are supposed to be in class) talking about what is going on with other friends or working on the homework we didn't do the previous night. As Mexicans, we love to procrastinate everything! German students don't do this very often. They have always a schedule to follow and skipping classes, it's not common.

The breakfast: In Mexico, the breakfast is considered the most important meal of the day. Here, my friends would eat *Vollkornbrot* with different jams, cheese, salami, cucumber, tomatoes, butter, etc. In Mexico, I would never eat just bread for breakfast. I eventually got used to it and now I really love this kind of breakfast. I didn't like that bread at the beginning but with time, I started feeling the need to eat it. Now it's one of the things I'm gonna miss the most about Germany.

Yes, it's true. Germany is famous for its sausages. I had to eat them every time they were in the Mensa menu. *Currywurst* is definitely my favorite! Nevertheless, sausages are not the only specialty in the German cuisine. I also ate *Kartoffelsalat*, *Grünkohl mit Pinkel*, *Wirsingentop*, *Frikadellen*, and *Schnitzel*.

As in every country, every city is different. Steffen along with some other friends took me to visit some of the surroundings. We went to Bremen for a day and it was full of people due to the *Freimarkt*. I liked its train station and the view along the Weser River but most of all, the area called *Schnoor*. It is an area of old, small houses with really narrow streets. I told Steffen that it felt like 'Diagon Alley' from the Harry Potter movies. Then we made a road trip during a weekend. We visited Köln where we stayed at Alex's father's house (Alex is one of Steffen's roommates) where we were warmly welcomed. Since it was Friday, the city was full of life! Everyone was going to bars, clubs, etc. We went to the famous *Kölner Dom* where the rests of the "Three Magi" laid, the river Rhine, the *Hohenzollernbrücke* where along its side where you can walk, people can also put some locks with their initials. These are mainly done by couples. We took this tour in a small train which I don't recommend that much. However, it was so funny!! Something worth mentioning about Köln is its Roman heritage which you can still see nowadays. The next day, we went to the anticipated city of Münster. Although at first it seemed a little bit quite, it came to life later on. It was good, though; Steffen could say and describe everything about the city which I think it was really impressive. Münster is also famous for being a bike city and because the Treaty of the Westphalia was signed there which ended the Thirty Years' War. We also visited St. Paul's cathedral which has a fantastic astronomical clock and St. Lambert's church which still has the three cages that were used to display the corpses of the leaders

in charge of the Münster rebellion. But my favorite stop has to be Steffen's birthplace: Steinfurt. Although we didn't see the city, we went to his house to have something to eat. I met his family which treated me nicely. It felt really good to be there where his father wouldn't stop talking and his mother would show me the pictures of her lovely family. It felt like home!

1.4 Do's and Dont's

As every country is different, there are do's and dont's between Germany and Mexico. Here are some that I learned throughout this experience:

Do:

- Learn basic knowledge of the German language. It will really help you!
- Feel comfortable when they speak only in German between them.
- Try the German cuisine!
- Invite them with anticipation to an event or get together you want them to be in.
- Recycle
- Walk through a lonely, dark street with no fear during the middle of the night
- Bring clothes for the rain and cold as well as pajamas!
- Arrive on time; this is not Mexico where you can show up an hour late!
- Tap water is drinkable
- Show them your culture, many people are interested in the Mexican culture, because they don't know much about it – except: Tequila, Sombreros y cactus.
- When drinking beer, at the moment of saying "cheers" (*Prost* in German), you must look at the other person's eyes. Otherwise, you'll get 6 years of bad sex!

Dont's

- Hugs are for closest friends. Shakehands are the most common greeting and farewell in Germany.
- Don't show up to their houses without making an appointment.
- Don't believe the stereotype about Germany
- Don't judge anyone without really knowing him/her
- Don't stay on the way of the bicycles. Especially if old people are riding them!
- Don't ride your bicycle at night if it doesn't have lights. Otherwise, you'll get fined.

1.5 Final thoughts

Deutschland ist wunderbar. That's all I can say about it. One has to go there to really understand this old culture and country. I got from it a whole new family, a whole new love for my country and a new perspective of life.

I don't think myself as an adult but this trip really made me mature in many aspects of my life. Being with people who are learning to be teachers of kids with special needs meant seeing life differently, even though that was not their intention. I had my experiences before with this kind of extraordinary people but to be honest, I haven't really thought about it.

When we went to Münster, we went to a place where people with special needs are taken care of. Steffen's sister works there so we were able to get in. I think that was one of the most special moments I had in Germany. There was this girl who was with Vanessa. She gave me so much peace and joy and made me realize how happy I truly am by seeing how happy and full of life she was. I didn't understand what she was saying but her gestures, smile and expressions told me the necessary. It's a shame that in Mexico we take these amazing people for granted. In Germany, it is a big deal and they try to make things equal for them.

My final words for this report are that I am sure I am coming back to Germany next year. Not only because I didn't get to see important places there but because I promised it to my friends and to myself. And now, sitting on a bar in Cancun airport, waiting for the next day to take the bus and the ferry to Cozumel, I see and understand that my heart belongs to Germany and to you all, who made all this possible.

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Home university: Universidad de Quintana Roo, campus Cozumel

Host university: Carl Von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg

Host country: Germany

Subject: EMIS (Environmental Management Information Systems): A Glossary of Terms

Duration of your stay (day, month, year): August 15th, 2010 – November 8th, 2010

Type of stay (studies, research, internship): Research

I agree that my email address can be given to prospective exchange students within the project:

Yes Email address
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No

I agree that this report on my experiences abroad within the project Developing Sustainability may be published on the project's homepage.

Yes

No

Date, Signature:

November 16th, 2010

