

## **Bamberg Survival Guide**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most interesting conversations I've had during my time in Bamberg was with another American. We were discussing identity, and whether or not we thought our friends, families, and peers would recognize changes in us once we returned to the US. And the answer was: Of course—how could you spend an entire year in a foreign country and not grow as a person? However, we found a caveat. Even though we'd—at the time of this conversation—spent seven months in Germany and were accustomed to German culture and the German people, we were still Americans. We'd learned to adapt and certainly adopted parts of the culture, but it never meant we had to *become* German.

Studying abroad is an amazing experience full of eye-opening moments that help shape you as a person and as a citizen of the world. But it's important to remember that you are allowed to hold on to your national identity as you discover a new culture. Learn to adapt and understand the new world in which you find yourself, but never feel ashamed of where you come from. I am leaving Germany with a better understanding of the world than I ever had before, and I will most certainly be taking aspects of the German culture with me. And while you will certainly change, learn, and grow through your myriad of experiences, remember to hold on to who you are, as well.

In this “survival guide,” I will discuss some of the initial shocks and difficulties I experienced in adjusting to living in Germany and offer tips and advice for making your study abroad experience in Bamberg the best that it can be. Whether you're still deciding if Bamberg is

the right fit for you, or you've already decided on a year or a semester, you're making a great decision. *Los geht's!*

### **Before You Leave**

Once you have applied to study abroad in Bamberg and are accepted into the University, they will send you a lot of information that can be confusing and overwhelming. This is mostly in regards to housing and what you'll have to do once you arrive in Bamberg.

As far as housing goes, you have the opportunity to live in a student dorm in Bamberg, or you can look for housing on your own. I would recommend living in a dorm because it is a simple process of filling out a form rather than searching for an apartment or a room in a foreign city. Although the University will help facilitate finding a room for you, the dorms are not actually owned by the University. This means you'll be paying rent to an independent company, and if you have any issues, you'll need to contact the caretaker of the dorm or someone who works for the company that owns the dorm, not the University. If you request student housing, the University will email you a form to fill out and you will most likely have the choice between two or three dorms in Bamberg: Obere Mühle, Pestheim (Studentenwohnheim in der Pestalozzistraße), or Collegium Oecumenicum. Regardless of which dorm you choose, you will most likely live alone and have your own room and bathroom with a small kitchen. If given the choice, I highly recommend living in Obere Mühle because it is a dorm with mostly German students. Some rooms also share a kitchen which means you'll have more opportunities to get to know German students. Additionally, the location is hard to beat as it is in the center of the city and right on the river, whereas the other main dorms are farther away from the city center.

The other information you will receive is regarding the initial tasks you'll have to fulfill once you arrive in Bamberg and what you should prepare beforehand. For example, you need to make sure you have medical insurance for the entire duration of your study abroad in order to register at the University and to receive your residence permit. You can receive medical insurance through CofC, but just make sure that it covers your entire stay. You'll also need passport pictures for various forms, and I recommend having some taken and bringing them with you so that you don't have to do it once you arrive. Ultimately, these forms list the following tasks you'll have to complete once you arrive:

- Registering at the University
- Getting your medical insurance validated
- Opening a bank account
- Registering at the *Einwohnermeldeamt* (Resident's Registration Office)
- Registering for your *Aufenthaltstitel* (Residence Permit)

This packet of information will outline each of these tasks as well as what you need for each one. It can be confusing when you're trying to understand it all, but as long as you come prepared with all the necessities listed within this packet (passport, extra passport pictures, proof of insurance, etc.) you'll be able to accomplish everything once you arrive. Additional information regarding studying abroad in Bamberg can be found [here](#).

## **Getting Settled**

Once you arrive in Bamberg, you'll have to jump through a lot of bureaucratic hoops to register with the university and with the city, as mentioned in the last section. It can be difficult and hard to understand, especially during your first few days when you're jet-lagged and trying

to adjust to a new country. Because of this, I highly recommend finding someone who can help you (another German student, a roommate, etc.). After I'd accomplished everything, I realized that I could have done it on my own, but it was comforting to have a native speaker with me.

There are many opportunities to find someone to help you accomplish all of these initial tasks from getting the key and contract to your room to applying for a residence permit. The Uni Bamberg offers a tandem partner program in which international students are assigned to German students who can help you get adjusted to Bamberg. The University also offers a three-week preparatory course for international students of all levels of German that takes place in the weeks before the start of the semester. This is also a great opportunity not only to find someone to help you get settled, but simply to meet new people, make friends, get to know the city, and start improving your German. I highly recommend the preparatory course for all incoming exchange students.

### **The University**

German University is quite different than what we're used to in the United States and especially at CofC from the way you register for classes to how the University is spread out. The University in Bamberg has many different campuses throughout the city and depending on the types of classes you're taking, you will most likely have to visit different campuses. This is no problem, however, because all campuses are easily reachable by bike, bus, and even by foot. Similar to American universities, the University in Bamberg has many cafeterias/dining halls that you can use. You simply add money onto your student ID card and can pay for meals which are very reasonably priced. Whether you decide to take advantage of the very reasonable grocery

prices in Germany and cook yourself, frequent the many cafés and restaurants in Bamberg, or visit the dining halls regularly, there are many options for food in Bamberg.

A not-so-simple subject is course registration. The system at the University in Bamberg can be very confusing. Three different systems exist: there is one website that is essentially a course catalogue (UniVis); one website for course and exam registration (FlexNow); and an online-classroom system, similar to OAKs (Virtueller Campus or VC). UniVis and VC are fairly easy to use, but FlexNow can be more difficult. It's a frequent occurrence that classes you want to take do not show up in FlexNow, or you're unable to register for them for some reason. If this is the case, simply email your professor or the secretary of the department and ask if they can manually enroll you in the course. Course registration is a two-part system in Bamberg, in that you have to register once for the class and again for the exam later in the semester. While you register for courses in the week or two before the semester begins, you don't register for exams until towards the end of the semester. Each registration deadline is different, but they are listed in UniVis and your professors will let you know when you need to register for the exam. Although it sounds complicated, you will get the hang of it. If you take part in the preparatory course, your teachers and tutors will be able to help you register, and they even host a FlexNow information session so that they can walk you through the process.

Extracurricular activities are also very different than in the US. University clubs and sports teams don't exist as they do in the US. You can attend lectures and events hosted by the University, and there is an organization geared towards international students (AEGEE Bamberg), but on the whole, you'll have to look elsewhere for extracurriculars. The University does offer a variety of sport classes, however, from Zumba, yoga, and different types of dance, to martial arts and basketball. These classes are another good way to get to know German students.

But if you are looking for activities that meet more regularly, there are many clubs (*Vereine*) in Bamberg that you can join that range all subjects and themes which you can find online. There is also the *Volkshochschule* (Vhs), which can be compared to a community college, where you can take classes in any and all subjects. If you're interested in a language that perhaps the University doesn't offer or want to learn an instrument or take a cooking class, the *Vhs* is a great way to get involved in different activities and to meet people.

The International Office does offer many excursions for international students and I highly recommend taking part in these if you are able. They offer many day trips to cities and sites near Bamberg but also weekend trips to places like Berlin, Neuschwanstein, and Salzburg for very reasonable prices. These are a great way to travel and get to know more of your fellow international students.

### **Initial Shocks**

When I first moved into my dorm, I thought I was the only one there. I thought perhaps I was just early, as the semester wouldn't start for another four weeks or so. It was often very quiet, and I seldom heard other people. After a while, I realized this was not true. German dorms are very different from American dorms, but in the end, it comes down to cultural differences, in my opinion. Germans are more reserved on the whole than Americans, and often use their rooms as serious study spots, rather than social ones. Because of this, it tends to be much quieter in German dorms than American ones. So, if it's been a few weeks and you still have never seen your neighbors, make it a point to knock on their doors and introduce yourself. Additionally, make sure to be mindful of this difference.

Another difference that you will quickly realize is that stores are not open very late, and most are closed on Sunday's. Grocery stores, for example, close at 8 PM and are not open on Sunday's. This is simply something to adjust to and remember (especially on Saturday's when your refrigerator is looking a little bare) but was certainly a surprise nonetheless.

I also surprised myself during my first few weeks in Bamberg at how much German I *didn't* know. I'd been studying German for eight years when I came to Bamberg and quickly realized I knew a lot less than I thought I did. However, this was a welcomed surprise because it meant I had so much room to grow, learn, and improve over my year in Germany.

While each study abroad experience is different, I've found that most people say it was the best experience of their lives and everything was fantastic. And while studying abroad is truly an amazing and invaluable experience, it can also be difficult, which most people don't talk about. If you find yourself having a hard time adjusting or experiencing homesickness, just know that that is ok, and even if other people aren't talking about it, they are probably experiencing it, too.

## **Tips**

Whether you'll be studying in Bamberg for one semester or two, you'll naturally want to make the most of your time. Because of that, I highly recommend that you attend every event, dinner, party, and activity that you're invited to, especially if German students will also be attending. Making friends with other exchange students comes fairly naturally and easily, but making German friends can be more difficult because they tend to be more reserved and don't often take the first step in introducing themselves. If you hear German students in your classes or

your dorm discussing plans, invite yourself. It might sound weird as an American, but many people will give you this same advice once you arrive in Bamberg. It's simply different getting to know Germans, and you will often have to make the first step, but it is completely worth it.

A great way to get to know Germans is through the StiPf Programm (Studierende in Patentfamilien = Students with Host Families). If you'll be studying in Bamberg for two semesters, I highly recommend this program. It pairs up exchange students with families in Bamberg with the expectation that you meet up from time to time for various activities and I had great success with it. My host family was a great match for me, and we met up weekly for dinner or different activities. I met so many people through my host family and we even had a German Thanksgiving. Not only did they help me improve my German, but I now have a second family in Germany. This was one of, if not the, best experience I had in Bamberg and I cannot recommend it highly enough. I truly got to experience German life with them and could ask them any and every question I had about the language and the culture. This was an invaluable experience and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Making German friends and getting to know Germans is beneficial for many reasons - not only will you have people who can help explain cultural differences and give you tips about Bamberg, but it will be immensely helpful in improving your German. Along those lines, try to make friends with exchange students who also want to speak German. It can be difficult to avoid English in Germany if you don't actively seek to avoid it. It was a high priority of mine to speak as little English as possible in order to improve my German as much as I could, and I was highly successful because I'd made this a goal of mine before I came. Although almost every single exchange student and German student speaks English, I made it a point to tell friends as I was making them that I wanted to speak German. One of the best friends I made in Bamberg was also

American but we only spoke German together. The best way to avoid English is to set yourself a goal of speaking German as much as possible, and letting others know that you want to speak German. It is, of course, impossible to avoid completely, but I believe that if you set yourself that goal and actively pursue it, you will be successful.

Taking German classes is another natural way to improve your German. The Language Center (Sprachenzentrum) at the University has great German courses for exchange students in all levels from grammar and phonetics courses to courses about the culture and history of Bamberg. I highly recommend these courses as well, because they are low-stress environments where you can really improve specific areas of your German speaking skills. The more classes you can take in German, the better.

Reading and watching shows and movies in German is also extremely beneficial. Set your Netflix to German as soon as you land in Germany, even if you need subtitles in English or German to start off. I expanded my vocabulary greatly just by watching shows in German. The more often you actively pursue activities in German, even watching shows or reading books, the greater and quicker your German will improve. Before you know it, you'll be understanding and using new words you've learned from watching and reading things in German.

I believe it goes without saying, but another good way to improve your German and feel at home in Bamberg is simply to explore and learn about the city. Bamberg has a ton of history and is absolutely beautiful. Although the medieval streets can be confusing at first, once you get used to them and have the feel for the city, exploring and making discoveries around every corner becomes a daily occurrence. By exploring and keeping your ears and eyes open, you can also pick up on German words and phrases and cultural differences that you might not have

otherwise. Bamberg is an incredible city with so much to offer, and you should take every opportunity by the horns.

### **Final Words**

Studying abroad is ultimately all what you make of it. I highly encourage you to set goals for yourself before you come of what you hope to accomplish, especially in regards to improving and learning German. As native English speakers, people will want to speak English with you, but if you are set on your goals, people will usually respect them. Additionally, never be afraid to ask questions whether about the language, the culture, or anything in between.

Come to Bamberg with an open mind and an interest to learn from others. It's incredible what you can learn from others--especially in such an international context--if you are open to it. My worldview is radically different than when I arrived in Germany due to all of the discussions I've had with people from all over Europe and the world.

But ultimately you should have fun. Enjoy your time in Bamberg, learn as much as you can, travel as much as possible, and soak up everything while you're abroad. The time will fly by, but you will gain so much if you set yourself goals, put yourself out there, and make the most of your year or semester. I hope this guide helps answer some questions and offers productive advice. *Viel Erfolg in Bamberg!*