

Travel Report

Heidelberg University
International Summer School

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August 2022

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01 Introduction

For the month of August 2022, I joined Heidelberg University in Germany as a student of the International Summer School of Language and Culture. It is the oldest course of its kind in Germany and uniquely positioned to welcome students of all levels and all background. Every sixth participant was from a different country, with around 350 students joining this year as compared to the pre-pandemic regular 600. Under the backdrop of the European energy crisis, Brexit and all-round turbulent geo-politics, the theme of this year's course was aptly "Germany Between Continuity and Change".

Spending four weeks living in a German university city, interacting with local students, and studying the language every day was an experience like no other. It was immersive in a totally different way to living with a German family; instead I truly felt like I became a German student.

In this report I intend to set out my ever more intimate relationship with the German language, the reasons behind my decision to take part in this course, my objectives, a condensed diary of key events on it, the costs involved and my concluding remarks.

02 Background

My German studies began in secondary school, where I completed my iGCSE. Afterwards I made the tough decision to stop studying the language under any formal curriculum, as my engineering aspirations constrained my A-Levels and I did not find the opportunity to pursue it in the same way as my Mandarin at a Saturday school.

Instead I made friends with those taking German A-Level at Tiffin School, purchased the textbook (which admittedly I never opened) and took my chance to speak where it arose. I ended up making friends with some German students on an exchange program, one of whom I am still in touch with.

On the outset of the pandemic and the abrupt *remotification* of my engineering studies, I spent my hours figuring out how the Deutsche Bahn 'supersparpreis' [supersaver price] functioned. I figured out how to seek out cheap ICE train tickets across Germany, as it was the one country to which you could fly, restriction free.

I distinctly remember flying out on 20 June 2020, on a rather empty flight to Berlin. I visited some friends around northern Germany, before making my way down south to visit the exchange student with whom I had stayed in touch with over the years. The 10 day trip came to an unfortunately-quick end. So I began planning the next. With rock-bottom flight prices, 10 Euro (more expensive than the 9 Euro ticket, true) ICE trains between any city and 10 Euro hostel beds-turn-room since things were so empty, it was all very affordable to a student.

By the end of the summer, I had completed a full loop of Germany and fallen in love with it along the way. At this point I set my hearts on working in Germany the next summer.

That didn't quite become a reality, but I did land an internship with a middle-sized company based in Munich. While the solo travel had functioned well, tech companies were largely still in 'Home Office'. As such I remained confined to my small room in Cambridge and laptop screen. In the weeks after, I did make an independent trip to meet some of my colleagues in Munich and attend an event the company had put on. To my amazement, by this point I was able to understand a whole technical lecture given in German.

03 Motivation

I stumbled across the Heidelberg University summer course by accident. I had been looking to continue to improve my German and was aware there was funding available in Cambridge for language courses. It looked exciting, affordable with funding and finally a chance to see what it would be like living in Germany.

I had visited Heidelberg once before, on a short change over the year before. It seemed like a larger version of Cambridge, with a vibrant and cool old town. I bought a laptop sticker that year and it had followed me around ever since as I had worked on language computing projects involving German in CLIC in the engineering department.

This summer school fitted all the boxes: a language school offering my level, including an intriguing set of extra-curricular activities and set in the heart of a safe, vibrant university town.

04 Goals and objectives

I became aware of the CEFR system to demonstrate language ability to a particular level and that many German universities/companies require a minimum level to join. Cambridge has also taught me that to reach the state of hyper-productivity required to pass engineering, you need clear goals. I set my heart on a summer of language learning and to pass my B2 in German. To be frank, at this point I had no idea what a *B2 in German* entailed.

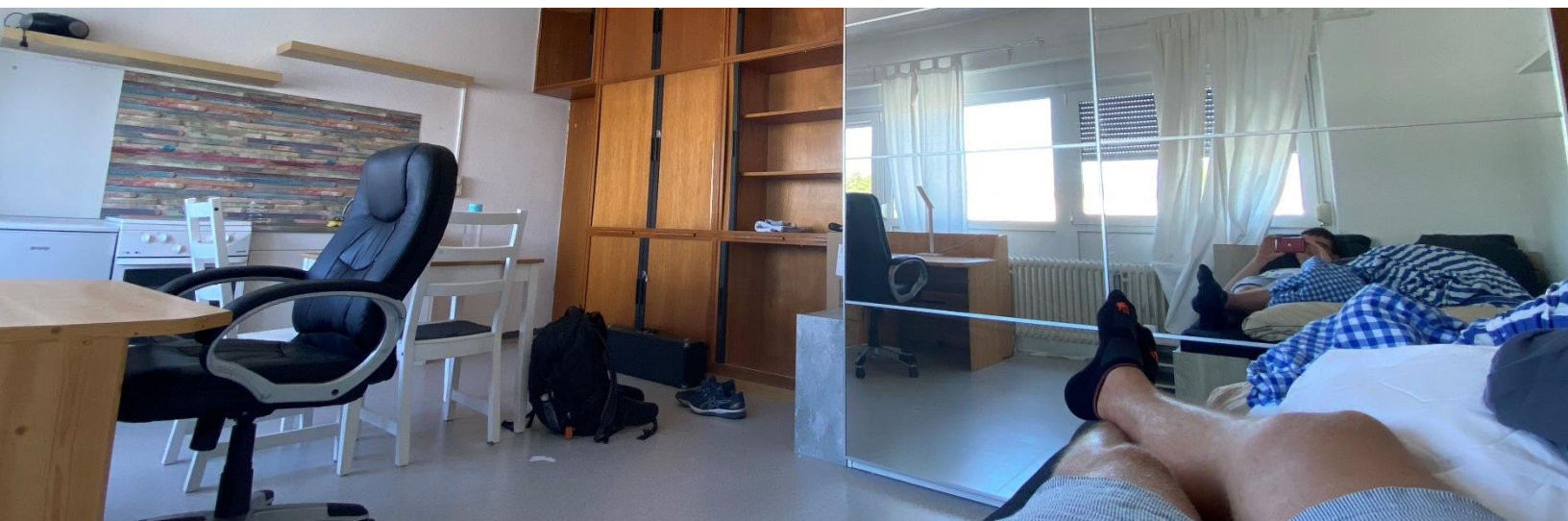
As mentioned, I was also very keen to spend some time living in Germany. I wanted to find out how the German way of living fitted with my experiences travelling through the country and what it might be like to work or study there in the future.

Finally, I wanted to continue my exploration of southern Germany. I had met a Professor from the University of Konstanz at a talk in Cambridge and of course also wanted to strengthen my relationship with the company I had worked for in Munich, so I hoped to visit both. This was partly to compare student and working life in Germany.

05 A diary of key moments

Arrival

I arrived at the 'New University' building in Heidelberg on the first Friday of August. I hesitantly went through the stages of registration they had set up, unsure whether to attempt to use German or resort to English. It ended up being a mixture of both. Eventually I was told to wait a while for someone to drive me to my room. Drive me? Now I was a little worried where I would be staying!



About an hour later, a lovely student drove me the 15-minute journey to the southern area of Kirchheim, where I was to stay. We eventually drove adjacent to the railway tracks and he told me that this was the road I'd be staying on. My eyes lit up - the houses looked lovely.

But we kept driving, quite a way: past the nice houses, past the warehouses and nearing the end of the road. Eventually, he pointed at a small, two-story, tired-looking white complex. He said he'd passed many times and seen fun pool parties going on, but had never been in. Cautiously, I took my stuff in and got to know my new neighbour.

My neighbour was a delight, showing me around my room and even offering to lend me some bedding and a towel. He explained how everything worked in the building. The outside looks had been deceiving: I had a kitchen to myself and we would only be sharing a bathroom between the two of us. My room was spacious, with a double bed, a small dining table with two chairs and a desk to work at. My phone reminded me that it was a hungry 3pm, so I went out in search of food and ended up doing a big set-up shop at the local big REWE.

First days

After the opening ceremony and a tour of town, I met my class for the month. We were a bunch of twelve, from nine different countries at last count.

Each class had a main teacher (75%) and a secondary teacher (25%), alongside a student mentor who visited class everyday for 15 mins to remind us what was going on for the day, deliver post and look after us. We played some ice-breaker games with our mentor and then parted ways after some lunch.

Classes were every morning: 09:15 - 10:45 and again 11:15 - 12:45. Afterwards we often sat down for lunch in the university cafeteria, where food is amusingly sold by weight of your plate. Each afternoon there were seminars, all labelled with German level of difficulty and on a range of topics: 14:00 - 15:30 and 15:30 - 17:00. Finally in the evenings there were workshops (dance, singing, theatre, journalism) or film/music nights to attend, if you wished. There was also a whole schedule of sport that one may choose to attend. It became quite apparent in my first week that if I continued to attend everything put on for us, I was going to drive myself to the ground. But for the first week I drove myself to the ground and gave it all a go.

My accommodation was also a little while away from the old town. Following recommendation, I rented a bike from SwapFiets for the month and made the 20-minute cycle each morning and evening. Without this, it would have been a 45-minute commute to town, which could have been a little difficult for some. By the end of the course, the daily cycle did get somewhat tiring. This was especially because I did not go back during the day. Instead I would cycle in for morning class and not return until after the evening activities or stint in the library at 9 or 10pm.

Seminars

As mentioned, I attended a seminar in almost all of the slots during the first week. From writing-skills to German politics, there were seminars on almost all aspects of German life and culture. For each seminar, a detailed PDF handout was made available to all students on Microsoft Teams. They were all also very accessible to people of all backgrounds, perhaps except for the 'Grammar for Experts' which for some reason I don't remember much of.

One seminar which I particularly liked was given by Andrea Brunner, M.A. on the topic of the international phonetic standard. It explored the rules for sound formation and standard pronunciation of German. It was a unique opportunity to learn how sounds are correctly formed in German, from an expert in the field.



Other activities

The organisers had put together many other activities for us. In the first week, we all received tickets to the castle and we walked up together as a class. We also enjoyed two 'class evenings' which our teacher joined us on. These were all opportunities to speak more German, under the guidance of our mentor and teacher.

Each Tuesday, there was a film evening. They would stream an English-subtitled German movie in one of the lecture halls, which was a chance to practice your listening skills. An arrangement was also in place where students could buy tickets to the nearby cinema for only 7 Euros. Each Thursday, there was a musical concert put on in a beautiful building in the center of town. This ranged from classical cello-piano performances to unique combinations of non-German music.

Excursions

The organisers of the summer course had put together an excellent selection of excursions each weekend. On each day of each weekend, there were two destinations that a ticket for 5-25 Euros could be purchased for. The prices this year were particularly low as all local trains were covered by the 9 Euro ticket.

On my first weekend, I went on a hike to a local brewery to taste some of the local beer. At first this was rather daunting, as I had not made any friends that were also going on this excursion. But I quickly met some other students and ended up chatting with them for most of the journey. The beer tasting was an unlimited supply to a huge vessel of beer, to which one could top up a glass given. We were also given a very cool tour of the brewery to hear about some more of their traditional methods.

Another standout excursion was my trip to the nearby Ladenburg. While neither I nor many of the other German students had heard of the town, it was a delightful cycle away. A friend from Amsterdam had come to visit for the weekend, so he joined without any troubles. We all sat down in a café for a couple hours on arrival, and then were given a very entertaining tour of the town. Turns out a certain Frau Mercedes Benz lived there for her whole life, so many automobile-related stories entailed!

Goethe B2 Prep

I mentioned my registration for the Goethe B2 to both of my teachers, to mixed reactions. My main teacher was very supportive and said I should work hard but would make it. The other suggested it was rather ambitious, and I needed to bring my A game to pass. While I was at first set back by the second reaction, the balance between the two was very motivating to get on with some revision.

This year there was no official B2 preparatory course being run on the course, only B1. On attending that, the trainers recommended some books. I ordered an 'Express' preparatory book that clearly set out what was to be expected in each section and how best to attempt them. It also contained two



practice tests: one which it went through with you slowly and another to practice. This formed the bulk of my work (alongside class homeworks) for the next two weeks.

My main teacher was kind enough to correct my written work and even went through a whole practice speaking exam with me. Alongside this, one of the other students in class who was training to be a language teacher offered to help me. She'd done the exam a few years back and was an instrumental part in passing the test.

Overall I was delighted to receive 81% in my speaking, 68% in my writing, 77% in my reading and 70% in my listening. Given the pass mark of 60%, these marks were a testament to the impact of the three weeks of classes and seminars I had attended in the summer course so far.

I took my B2 test on a Friday in Munich, so decided to continue with some travels that weekend. In the end I travelled across into Austria and then round into Switzerland to find the Professor in Konstanz, returning to Heidelberg that way. Southern Germany is extraordinarily positioned in Europe and it was a delight to enjoy that on this weekend.

Closing activities

My summer course ended up being structured with a fun week to begin, two weeks of hard work for my test and an exciting and sociable final week. Notably there was a closing party on the last Wednesday. Our class had prepared a rap song, which I've attached the lyrics to at the end of this report. This ended up being a big hit with the crowd, and great fun to practice and perform! At the party there was also a lovely chance to say some goodbyes and dance the night away.

The following morning, we had a class breakfast with our teacher at a local breakfast café. This ended up being delightful, with the course organisers paying for most of the meal and our teacher kindly covering the rest. We had grown close as a class over the four weeks and so this was a final chance to come together in each other's company.

06 Costs

The following costs are only approximate and given for reference only. The majority of payments in Heidelberg were made by cash, including rent. The overall costs of the one-month summer course, including the Goethe B2 test were a little over £2,000.

Item	Cost (Euros)
Course fee	730
Accommodation	365
International transport (Train)	265
Local transport	30
Books + study equipment	50
Set-up (incl. Kitchenware etc.)	200
Excursions	20
Swimming	20
University service card	150
Food	250
Goethe B2 test	259 + 60
Bike rental	40



07 Concluding remarks

Attending this course was a once in a lifetime experience to study alongside people from all over the world. This diversity came with challenges as well as enjoyment, but these were challenges that have led to a great deal of personal development. The additional challenge of integrating in a university environment abroad has been a new experience for me, but I feel stronger and more able to confidently interact with Germans as a result of it.

I find the improvement in my language fluency remarkable. Speaking almost all everyday, switching between structured and unstructured environments was perfect to propel my German forward to its next stage. I now feel significantly more comfortable being able to bridge language gaps to hold a full conversation in the language. I importantly also feel much more acquainted with German culture, with a much better understanding of the customs.

I am immensely grateful for the support I received to make this adventure possible. I warmly look forward to returning to Germany in the near future to put my newly improved skills to more use.

Heidelberg, ich bin verliebt
Weil es keine Bessere gibt
Diese Stadt ist voller Schönheit
die mir stets den Atem nimmt
Und ich werde dich vermissen
Dieser Kurs ist jetzt vorbei
Aber eines sollst du wissen
Du wirst immer bei mir sein

Heidelberg ist ein Geheimnis,
wie ein Märchen, das man liest
Hier liegt Zauber in den Gassen
der um uns wie Neckar fließt
In vier Wochen kann man lernen
wie die Sprache funktioniert
die schon Eichendorff und Goethe
einst bezirzt und inspiriert
Cash auf Täsche heißt Kohle haben
Mäuse, Mücken, richtig Fluss
9 Euro Ticket Touren
Mit der Bahn und mit dem Bus
Aber die Insekten nerven
Wespen schwirren in der Luft
Kakerlaken in der Wohnung
Zuza haut mal richtig druff
Volleyball und Schwimmen gehen
Schwing das Tanzbein - Cha Cha Cha
Beste Dancemoves, leckres Essen
gibt es von Manars Mama
Keine Hinterlassenschaften
Unter Klassenzimmer glänzt
Jeder Werwolf wird getötet
wenn die Hexe grad nicht pennt
Manchmal sitzen Hass und Liebe
näher als man glauben mag
Sie in einem Wort zu fassen
ist was unser Kurs vermag
Doch was wären wir ohne Mutti
Wir haben uns an sie gewöhnt
Henni, wir vermissen dich
Verweile doch, du bist so schön