



Homburg 2017



Intro

It was the end of January 2017 and I had just arrived in Saarbrücken, the state capital of the Saarland. The temperature was 10-15 degrees below. The few people on the streets were darting quickly to and fro, past the frozen river, and I was suddenly starting to wonder why I'd chosen to come to Germany in the winter. A quick scan of Facebook, from the relative warmth of my hotel room, brought up pictures of fellow medical students sunning themselves on beaches in the Caribbean.

Yet less than 4 months later, during my last week in Germany, those first few days seemed so far away. Now I was at the Freibad (open-air swimming pool) with other German medical students, diving and swimming to cool down from the almost 30 degrees heat, and dreading the thought of having to return to England.

An elective in the Saarland is like none other. You're at the crossroads of Western Europe, yet it can feel like you're in the middle of nowhere. The accent is at first undecipherable, but by the end of the placement you'll consider 'Hochdeutsch' a bit pretentious. You may be the only English medical student to go there, but rather than feeling alone, you quickly get to know people who now seem like lifelong friends. The Saarland isn't always the placement-of-choice with students from Manchester, but after 4 months there, I can honestly say, you shouldn't go anywhere else.

Why I chose to study European Studies

I have to admit that the whole European Studies programme was something of a surprise to me. I remember a parents' evening at Sixth Form, and my A-level German teacher asking me if it was possible to study Medicine and German together. I confidently replied that at no university was it possible to study Medicine and a language. Fortunately I was wrong, and as luck would have it, I ended up at Manchester.

I've always been better at languages than science, and Medical German lessons, even at 6pm after a full day in hospital, were often a welcome break from trying to learn the ins and outs of all 12 cranial nerves. Studying a language with Medicine is not an easy option, but the rewards are fantastic. It can often be a struggle to stay on top of PBL work, when you know that you've got a couple of German essays to write, but as long as you don't neglect your medical work, it nearly always works out ok.

What particularly drew me to studying European studies? I think it's got to be the opportunity to live another culture. Sure, you can spend 8 weeks on elective in Canada, eat the foods, see the sights, and talk to the locals. However, until you actually throw yourself into a different country, speaking a language that isn't your own, I don't think you really 'live' a different culture, you merely experience it.

Living and working in the Saarland

Homburg

Homburg isn't exactly the largest place in Germany. It's also not particularly on the tourist trail. That said, the town itself is fairly pretty. The 'Altstadt' (old town) is situated on the edge of a hill, below the ruins of a castle, and the eastern half of the town, where the hospital is located, is nestled in a typical Germanic forest. Most of the other students described the town as 'hässlich' (ugly), and in all honesty it does have its fair share of post-war quick-builds. By all accounts Homburg used to be a reasonably attractive town, but suffered significant damage towards the end of the war.

The modern town is, however, relatively pleasant, with a picturesque central square, a smart church and plenty of shops. The hill, known as the 'Schlossberg', contains the remains of a medieval castle and baroque fortifications, which are genuinely quite impressive. There doesn't appear to be any attempts to preserve them however, and in the 1960s a large hotel was built in front of the castle, which distracts from the view slightly. Under the castle and hotel, you can find the 'Schlossberghöhlen', Germany's largest man-made caves, as I was told on many occasions.

The overall feel of the town is definitely German, and the amount of greenery (in the form of forests) is impressive. There's a shortcut to the hospital that runs through part of the forest, and it's quite pleasant to see red squirrels scuttling around when you're walking to the early morning meeting. The seemingly endless forest also makes for a nice, if not hilly, jogging route.

The Hospital

The Universitätsklinikum des Saarlandes is situated on a hill behind the town, surrounded by forest. It's not one building, but a collection of over 50 individual clinics over a large site. The size of the site is not to be underestimated – it takes 15 minutes to walk from one side to the other, and running up



the hill if you leave late isn't an easy task! There is a clinic bus that you can take for free around the site, although I never found this necessary.

Whilst most towns in Germany have their own small hospital, Homburg is the major centre for the whole of the Saarland, a large chunk of Rheinland-Pfalz, and parts of neighbouring France and Luxembourg. Subsequently the university clinic seems to specialise in almost every branch of medicine, and I can't think of any particular speciality that it was lacking. They seem to be incessantly building and upgrading, with a large new 'Innere Medizin' (internal medicine) building having been recently completed when I arrived.

There are various places to eat across the site, with most staff eating at the Personalkasino, which requires a Kasinokarte. During your induction, you'll be given a form to obtain a Kasinokarte with. The benefit of eating at the Kasino is that you receive 4€ a day onto the card to buy food with. This more than covers the cost of a meal and dessert, so you'll likely end up with too high a balance by the end of the placement. The Mensa, on the other hand, is where most of the students go for their dinner. You have to put money onto your student card to eat here, but the food is cheaper, and it allows you the opportunity to socialise with other students.

The Accommodation

One of the major benefits of studying in Homburg is the price and availability of the accommodation. The university offers you a place in a Studentenwohnheim (student hall). It cost 206€ for 1 month's rent, bills included, and you have the security of knowing that you're transferring money to a university account, not an unknown landlord. You can choose between Wohnheim C, about half way between the hospital and the town centre, and the Max Kade Haus, nearer to the hospital, but further away from Homburg itself.

In the end, I was allocated Wohnheim C. The university website describes it as being "old, but still much-loved", which conjured up images of a German equivalent to Owen's Park Tower Block. The accommodation is certainly Spartan, but you don't need much for a 4 month stay, and free heating in the winter is certainly appreciated! Being about 10 minutes walk from the entrance of the hospital site, and less than 5 minutes from the nearest supermarket (Edeka) is extremely handy, and at no point will you need to use public transport to get around Homburg.

The area

Another huge benefit of the Saarland has to be its location. The Saarland itself is actually quite pretty. Like I mentioned before, you can get the feeling that you're in the middle of nowhere, despite being in an area where four countries meet. The western part of the Saarland has sights such as the Saarschleife, a spectacular bend in the Saar river valley, which I'd definitely recommend visiting in the spring time. Saarbrücken, the state capital, is worth seeing at some point, and offers an unbelievable amount of shops. Apart from that, the major draw of the Saarland is its forests. The vast majority of the state seems to be covered in dense Germanic woodland, which makes for a nice walk or jog through the rolling hills.

The main attractions, however, are slightly further afield. This region of Germany boasts some of its most beautiful and well preserved towns, and if you learn how to make the most of Deutsche Bahn's ticket offers, you can get around relatively cheaply and quickly. Some personal favourites were Mainz,

Marburg, Tübingen, Koblenz and the Black Forest. All of these were extremely easy to get to from Homburg's surprisingly large train station, as were places in France, Switzerland and Luxembourg.

Although I visited a huge amount of places, my absolute favourite city has to be Trier. It was my first trip out of Homburg, the weather was awful, and unlike future trips, where I'd often travel with other ERASMUS students, I was travelling alone. At this point I was also still having second thoughts about being in Germany, and would probably have taken a return flight to Manchester, had it been offered to me. However, almost as soon as I walked into Trier's main square, saw the medieval buildings, the impressive cathedral and all the roman ruins and palaces, I quickly changed my mind. I think these little day trips out help, and if you're a fan of seeing traditional German towns, Homburg is definitely the best base to choose.

The Placements

The layout of the German medical course is very different to that in Manchester, and it took a bit of work explaining to the Erasmus office there why a final year student wanted to do 4 4-week placements. At Homburg, however, you are essentially given free choice of what you want to do. My aim was to do placements in areas that weren't taught as well in Manchester, and to end on a placement that would involve a lot of practical skills. One word of warning – sometimes the Chefarzt will want a CV before you start, so make sure that you pay attention during the 'Lebenslauf' lesson in 3rd year!

Radiology

This was my first placement, and whilst good, it was probably the least rewarding. I chose radiology first, as I figured that, with limited patient contact, it would give my German abilities time to improve in a more relaxed setting. The main problem was that it was a bit too relaxed. I wasn't given access to the computer system to write reports, so most of my first week was spent looking over the shoulder of an Assistenzarzt, whilst they were typing up reports.

Towards the end of my first week, the Chef suggested that I go to the interventional radiology department and help out there. This was a lot more interesting, and final year students in Germany are essentially meant to act as an ODP in the radiology 'theatre', which means scrubbing up and being in charge of the equipment. You very quickly have to learn the German names for all the various implements, and learn how to control a long, flexible metal wire. (Hint – it's not easy!)

The days in the interventional department were a lot longer, but the staff were quite friendly, and it gave my German the chance to rapidly improve before my next placement. On the down side, being in interventional radiology meant that I didn't particularly learn how to interpret basic X-rays, which would have been handy for FY1.

Dermatology

After surviving 4 weeks in Radiology I was looking forward to starting a new rotation, although the thought of having to talk to patients was a little daunting. The first day didn't go that well – the Erasmus office was closed for Rosenmontag, and the dermatology secretaries were all out celebrating

the most important day of Fasching. Eventually I found one of the dermatology wards and introduced myself to the staff.

Homburg is a fairly large centre for dermatology and subsequently has 2 wards for a variety of patients. Common causes for admission include allergy testing, autoimmune skin conditions and severe eczema. Another ward handled most of the pre- and postoperative patients. The overall impression is that a lot of the patients are in fact quite well and could easily be managed in the community. PJ students are expected to take bloods, insert cannulas, give subcutaneous injections, and clerk new admissions. The caveat here is that, given a lot of the patients are quite well, it's quite rare to actually have to put in a cannula or take much blood.

There was another PJ student on the ward, and as a result I was sent down to the outpatients department, away from my cushy life of sitting in the doctors' office and going home at 1pm. As it turned out, being sent to the 'Ambulanz' was perhaps the best thing to happen to me during my time in Germany.

The dermatology outpatients was fantastic. The staff, especially the nurses, were all unbelievably helpful, and really took their time to ensure that I understood everything. I was able to clerk my own patients, take biopsies and suture, use ultrasound devices, and became well experienced in using a dermatoscope. Even better was the fact that I saw some real pathology, and learnt to recognise certain 'Blickdiagnose' (spot-diagnoses). In one morning I think I saw erysipelas, tinea corporis, leishmaniasis and dermatographic urticaria. You also get a lot of exposure to more common diagnoses, and become better at spotting actinic keratoses and skin cancers.

Ophthalmology

I really enjoyed ophthalmology in Manchester, however we only had one week in the Royal Eye Hospital, and I went away wishing that I had had more opportunity to study this speciality. This opportunity presented itself in Germany, and Homburg is a major centre for ophthalmology, with patients coming from as far away as Bavaria and Schleswig-Holstein. The eye clinic occupies an entire building, with two outpatients departments, a large ward, operating theatres and a paediatric department (the Sehschule). The department is headed by a particularly short-tempered Chef, however one of the other consultants there, the wonderful Professor Käsmann-Kellner, takes all the students under her wing. She is an immensely friendly person, and will give you a guided tour of the department, arrange a timetable for you, and give you an information pack detailing what you can do in each part of the eye clinic. She studied in London, and subsequently has a particular interest in English medical students.

My 4 weeks were divided between the outpatients, ward, operating theatre and the Sehschule. Despite paediatrics being my favourite speciality, I had decided not to do this in Germany, due to the language barrier. The Sehschule, however, gives you the opportunity to experience German paediatrics in a more controlled setting. The outpatients department is hectic, but the doctors were always willing to teach, and there was a special slit-lamp with two sets of viewing lenses.

The most useful part of this placement was being on the ward. The morning ward round consists of all the patients being called into the doctors' office and being examined under slit-lamp. The friendly doctors on the ward taught me how to use a slit-lamp properly, and before long I was examining my own patients. They're also quite keen on teaching you how to measure intraocular pressure, and how

to perform indirect fundoscopy. All of these are really useful skills, and I've become much better at identifying structures in the retina and measuring the cup:disc ratio.

Gastroenterology

All of my placements up to this point had been in specialities that were often quite relaxed for medical students. This changed when I hit gastro. I had purposely chosen my final placement to be in internal medicine, as I had heard that it was quite bloods and cannulas heavy, both skills that I badly needed to practise.

I wasn't expected when I arrived on the ward on the first Monday, but nonetheless one of the ward doctors and the other PJ student showed me round. My duties were immediately made clear. As a final year student I was expected to spend the entire morning taking blood, then the afternoon would be spent clerking in new patients, writing letters and putting in any cannulas that the nurses needed. I wasn't there to be taught, or to join the ward round, rather to be a source of labour.

The other student was highly motivated, and would often stay round until 6pm, just in case she could help in some way. Unfortunately this meant that I was also obliged to spend the majority of the afternoon sat in the doctors' office, whilst the other students relaxed in the beautiful Saarland sun outside. Given that I still had no access to the computer system, this meant that I spent a lot of time simply sat reading my beloved "Anamnese und klinische Untersuchung" book. The one blessing was that on Thursdays and Fridays there was PJ teaching 2-4pm, which was actually quite good, and always provided an excuse to leave the ward early.

The original student left the ward after my second week, and 2 new students joined. This made life a lot easier as I got on extraordinarily well with the new PJlers, and we became very efficient at sharing jobs and finishing on time. By this point I had also become very good at venepuncture and rarely failed at cannulation (you tend to, when 10-20 patients need bleeding and 5 need cannulating each morning). This made the last half of my gastro placement a really enjoyable experience, and one that I would have loved to extend by another 4 weeks. Overall, I'd certainly recommend a placement in internal medicine to get you up-to-scratch with key FY1 skills, although I'm not sure if gastro is the best ward for learning on.

The differences between the UK and Germany

Aside from the obvious difference in language, the English and German cultures aren't as similar as I'd first expected. Before we left Manchester, the concept of 'culture-shock' was described to us at a pre-departure meeting. I didn't pay much attention – I'm not one to experience homesickness, and I'm rarely phased by being in unfamiliar surroundings. However, once you're living in Germany, the slightest cultural differences can seem huge, and you genuinely develop a yearning for English cultural norms. Things like the Germans' seeming inability to form an orderly queue, or watching an old lady being pushed out of the way during the scrum to get on a bus can be infuriating. In my home village it's completely normal to greet every passer-by, regardless if you know them or not, however in Germany, even in smaller places, so much as smiling at a stranger will often trigger a confused glare back at you.

The other major differences relate to the medical system. In Germany the healthcare is (sort-of) privatised, with each patient having a Krankenkasse, although the state will step in if people can't pay. Some patients pay more, and therefore get a better standard of treatment. It can be painful to watch as the last available appointment is given to a private patient for the removal of a benign mole, whilst a patient with an actual skin cancer has to wait a few days more. The German incessant need for tests will also surprise you, especially when you have to take up to 15 barrels of blood from one patient! It all makes you miss the extremely efficient NHS.

Students in Germany often have a far greater theoretical knowledge than their English counterparts. They spend 5 years with very limited clinical experience, attending lectures and seminars, and are then suddenly released onto the wards in their 5th and final year. Before this point, they'll carry out a 'Blockpraktikum', and a 'Famulatur', which has to be completed in the holidays. In short, you can feel a bit dumb when a consultant is grilling you all on type A gastritis, but you quickly realise that the clinical knowledge you gain from Manchester outstrips that of even some of the German doctors. (Source – watching some junior doctors trying to deal with a blatant sepsis!)

Have I learned from this experience?

Absolutely! You learn so much about the wonderful varieties of cultures in Europe, and especially in the Saarland, you get a real sense of 'Europeanness'. We were the first batch of students since the Brexit vote, and I really hope that the Erasmus scheme will continue to include the UK. I think you also learn how difficult it must be for foreigners in the UK, and you learn how best to communicate with and help them. Naturally, your own German language abilities improve dramatically, and I went from being someone with no German background, having learnt German at school and university, to being able to understand a full German film without subtitles.

Would I return to Germany?

I've met so many wonderful people over there now, that I'll definitely be travelling back to Germany to visit them. Ask me would I work over there, and the answer is sadly no. I've grown to love our NHS, and I don't think I'd get the fulfilment out of the job working under the German Krankenkasse system. That doesn't mean that my time in Germany is over though – I'm always on the lookout for diplomas or courses that I could complete in Germany, not least to keep my language skills up!

Possible issues for future students

As a final point, the European Office ask us to detail any potential issues or difficulties. I'll keep mine relevant to the Saarland:

- Immatrikulation – or registration at the university, is nothing short of a nightmare. The only way I can suggest to get around this is to upload all the forms they require onto the website (you'll get an email about this), but also to bring an electronic and paper copy with you.

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If you have any questions about Homburg, the Saarland, or even a placement in Germany in general, please just drop me an email. I'd also love to hear from anyone thinking of going to the Saarland! I've got the contact details of some doctors and a lot of PJ students who are thinking of staying in Homburg as doctors, so I'd be more than happy to put you in contact.

My email address is: