



Why I chose to do the European Studies Programme

I was living in Vienna, finishing a degree there, when I decided to study Medicine. After researching online I found that Manchester University offered the chance to study in a German-speaking country and to learn German alongside the medical course. I knew some German but also knew it could be improved and it seemed the right choice to me to come to Manchester and to do this degree programme. Without the European Studies option I may well have gone to a different University.

Living in Berlin: In General

I lived just north of the Bellevue S-Bahn station and the Tiergarten, in a beautiful flat I had exchanged with a medical student going to Preston for the duration of my placement. Initially, I had wanted to live in east Berlin, but I saw quickly that the west had a lot to offer, and with the good transport links, I came to feel that there was little difference between the two sides of the city on a day-to-day basis.

The Good: the transport links.

Quite a nerdy thing to write about, but after 5 years of having to navigate Piccadilly Gardens and wondering quite how a tourist would manage- one can't help but be struck with just how good it is in Berlin. The €250 Semester ticket price comes as a shock when you are first 'invited' to pay it just before your final exams in January, but once you get to Berlin you realise just how easy this ticket and the network it covers makes life. Being way over in east Berlin at 7am on a Sunday morning but knowing that an S-bahn will get you back to your flat in the west within 30 mins is fantastic. Equally good is knowing that your daily commute can be predicted and relied upon to the minute.

The Bad: the lack of time off to experience the city.

Lack of holiday may not seem immediately bad, "I am in Berlin after all" you may say, but there are several factors that make you feel this lack. Firstly, you go immediately after your final exams, and rather than a break you may suddenly find yourself on a Neurology placement at Campus Mitte working 8am – 7pm. On top of this you know and see that many of your friends are somewhere exotic on their elective placements getting plenty of time off. There are some tips though that can be a help here, that I will go into later on in the report.

Sights and Experiences

- **The Reichstag**- an obvious inclusion but I hadn't realised before I came that you need to book your trip inside and up into the Kuppel at the top. Whether on a hot day with views across the city, or on a cold and wet night where the Kuppel becomes a hall of mirrors, it is worth going again and again.
- **DDR Museum**- a detailed museum, concerned more with giving real insight into the era than with any large displays, but worth a trip on a wet day.
- **Topography of Terror**- for those of us interested in the lay out of the city, and how some of its most iconic buildings were used or misused during WW2.
- **Berlin Zoo**- its huge. A great zoo if you like zoos, with gorillas; something Chester

Zoo lacks.

- **Treptower Park-** a great park in the east. See where the east Berliners used to holiday. Inside the park is **Spreepark**, an old theme park abandoned when the wall came down- you can still see the ferris wheel turning in the wind and the broken dinosaurs hidden amongst the undergrowth.
- **Potsdam Gardens-** take the S-bahn to Potsdam and discover the place you would really live if you were to move to Berlin. This ancient, historic town has so much to discover, not least the most impressive park, Sanssouci, you may ever see, with at least 5 palaces dotted across its huge area. Go to Cafe Eden in the park on a summer's day and you will forget all about the big city and medicine for a few hours.

Bars and Restaurants

A good bar in the west can be hard to find, especially if your mind turns to what you know is in the east; but if you find yourself living in the west, or with no energy to travel to the east you need somewhere to go. It took several over-priced, soulless places before I found a couple of good ones. But that said, most of the list below is in the east!

- **Rivabar-** Hackescher Markt. OK it isn't cheap, but then again it is a cocktail bar with a good atmosphere and great selection.
- **Hello Good Pie-** Kreuzberg. A nice cheap British pie restaurant, taken straight from the Northern Quarter in Manchester.
- **Krone Cafe-** Friedrichshain. A very comfortable, laid-back cafe, deep chairs in which to read a book for an afternoon.
- **Shakespeare and Sons-** Warschauerstrasse. A cafe and bookshop, with a surprisingly good selection of books. Another place to spend a free afternoon.
- **Max and Moritz-** a famous and not inexpensive restaurant, but also very good Berlin cuisine. Something for a special occasion.
- **Monarch bar-** Kottbusser Tor. Arrive early to enjoy a laid back popular venue, or stay late for a heaving club right on Kottbusser Tor. You wouldn't even realise it was there.
- **Berghain-** to try or not to try...? Unless you are crazy about music, I found it rather not worth the wait.
- **Monster Ronson's Ichiban Karaoke-** an authentic karaoke experience really worth the visit, by Warschauerstr. U-bahn. Brave the open mic on the main dance floor or book yourself a sound proof booth with friends when you arrive.

Fleamarkets

- **Mauer Park-** the most famous Berlin fleamarket and the biggest. Probably best to go in Spring or Summer, unless you are wanting to buy a winter coat. With an outdoor stage next to it showing live stand-up and karaoke, it has a great atmosphere in the sunshine on a Sunday afternoon.

- **Arkonaplatz fleamarket**
- **Frankfurter Tor fleamarket-** close to the Shakespeare and Sons cafe (above), making the two a good combination for an afternoon.

Church

- **Berlin Projekt-** a welcoming experience, with several sites around the city. The one I went to most Sundays was set in a cinema; with a relaxed atmosphere, I found the sermons always interesting, and the music and people gave a peaceful insight into the city which I would have missed otherwise. <http://www.berlinprojekt.com>

Schillertheatre

I saw Die Zauberfloete here in my last fortnight in Berlin. Worth a visit.

Spa

Perhaps the best thing I found in Berlin was the **Vabali Spa**- not cheap, but definitely worth it. It was on my doorstep but a real hidden oasis. A spa break that is stereotypically German: with luxury and nudity in equal measures.

Don't bother: Sealife Aquarium- not much in there worth seeing and overpriced, a better trip is to Berlin Zoo which has its own aquarium.

THE PLACEMENTS

In General

The Good: the difference between Charite and Vivantes placements.

Before you arrive in Berlin you will not realise that the city is basically split into 2 systems as far as medical student placements are concerned. This is a complicated hangover from the time when the city itself was split. During that time the east had its training influences from the USSR and the west from Europe and beyond. I am not able to say quickly or accurately how this has influenced today, but I think it is worth noting these separate points of departure. Today, all medical students, some 7000 as I was informed, are taught under the umbrella term of *Charite Medical University*, making it the largest medical school in Europe, as someone else informed me. Alarm bells begin to ring. One of the problems I have with Manchester Medical School is that it is too big to make the experience valuable for individual students, and it has only 2000 of them- surely similar problems might arise in Berlin? And they do.

The Charite brand has 2 main sites, historic hospitals in the heart of the city- *Campus Mitte* and *Campus Virchow Clinics (CVK)*. These are what we could call the main *teaching* hospitals. Apart from this Berlin has a half a dozen other hospitals, most run by a private firm called Vivantes. For a student this means that you are either wearing a white coat with CHARITE printed across it, or one with VIVANTES and its associated red and grey motifs. But the difference is more than a logo.

My first two placements were at a Vivantes hospital, Neukoelln (the north Manchester of Berlin in terms of demographic) to the south east of the city, and my second two placements were at CVK, the famous Hr. Virchow hospital on the north-west side of the

city centre. The contrast between the two experiences was stark but great to experience. I will go into this more when writing about the placements themselves.

The Bad: (some of) the people.

I will have to be careful not to generalise here. I have lived in Munich and Vienna and have enjoyed the attitude and humour of the people in both those places and the people in Berlin have only added to this enjoyment. I found the patients to be down-to-earth, funny and patient people, and I loved this. The people I refer to unfortunately as 'bad' in my experience in Berlin were some of the employees of the hospitals and the University- some doctors, nurses and secretaries! The hierarchy of the hospitals was always incredibly tiresome and pointless on a daily basis. Having to wish complete strangers a 'Good morning', not out of courtesy, but simply because they would take offense if you didn't was a nonsense I won't miss. Being scolded by secretaries because you arrive at their office at mid-day, while they are still open, but while they are eating, as though you should have guessed this would be the case... is stupid. Being on a crowded bus and having each person on it act as though their needs were the only ones of importance, pushing and shouting away in futility. These experiences stacked up and I started to miss *England, My England*, with its politeness, which although may not always be sincere, is at least always welcome.

The paperwork.

My first week in Germany and my last two weeks in Manchester before I left, while trying to revise for my final exams, was largely ruined by the bureaucracy associated with going on an Erasmus exchange. The bureaucracy in the Berlin Student and Erasmus offices in particular is very frustrating. Firstly, they have opening hours that are of no use. They have a strange need for you to provide hard copies of everything, as though their printers don't work and as though an emailed copy were magic not to be trusted. I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally received my Semester card and could wipe my hands of it all.

PLACEMENT 1, FEBRUARY 2015

DERMATOLOGY (DERMATOLOGIE + VENEROLOGIE)

VIVANTES KLINIKUM

NEUKOELLN - BERLIN

The Good: the pathology. It was a good placement because I got to see some diseases that I have never seen in reality before, conditions like Pemphigoid and Erysipelas. It added to my knowledge of medicine, to my ability to assess and treat these conditions, and I could not ask more of a placement.

The hours. It is well-known in Berlin that Dermatologists have a nice work-life balance. The placement was from 8am til 4pm each day, and I never stayed beyond this and often left earlier. It was a good first placement, an easy and comfortable introduction to medicine in Berlin after the strain of revising and sitting final exams.

The Bad: the lack of activity. I wouldn't say the placement was boring as there were always a lot of patients, and lots of different conditions. If one pushed oneself there was always something to do. However, there was no culture of on-the-ward teaching and the doctors had little inspiration as to what to do with a medical student. There was a lot of sitting around being ignored, or being given a job to fill time.

PLACEMENT 2, MARCH 2015

PAEDIATRICS (KINDER- + JUGENDMEDIZIN)

VIVANTES KLINIKUM

NEUKOELLN - BERLIN

The Good: the set-up. The layout of building, a large cylinder with intensive care, neonatology, and obstetrics above and the paed's wards and A+E below meant for a comprehensive experience as a patient and a student. It was good to be free to spend days in the different areas.

Two weeks in A+E. A+E is what I am interested in, and I was glad to be able to spend Two weeks of the four in the Rettungsstelle, although, like in the UK, it suffered from having a lot of patients without too many emergency conditions.

The Bad: the lack of activity.... boredom. This placement unfortunately goes one clear step further than the dermatology placement previously in this respect. I still wonder if it has something to do with it being a Vivantes hospital run by a private firm. There was a complete lack of any culture of teaching. None of the doctors from junior to senior had any interest in students being there, regardless of how attentive and pro-active you were. The placement consisted of long days spent doing very little.

During this placement I went to see the erasmus co-ordinator in the city centre, for another reason and was asked how my placements were going. How do you put into words that you feel like you have been shipped out of the city to some hospital in the south east as an inconvenience? Was it made better or worse that the native students, those who study full-time in Berlin, also have the same experience and same frustrations? I find that hard to answer.

PLACEMENT 3, APRIL 2015 RESPIRATORY (INFEKTOLOGIE + PNEUMOLOGIE) CAMPUS VIRCHOW KLINIKUM (CVK)

The Good: the activity, the challenge, the similarity with the student assistantship. Hallelujah. I finally had a placement in which I was expected to work, in which I had a role, and although this role was not always to my liking, at least at the beginning I thrived on the change. Each morning I was one of four final year students (known as P-Jers, *Praktisches Jahr* students, pronounced P-Yotlers in German) who was expected to do all the morning jobs: bloods, cultures, cannulas... and then to join the ward round, make a note of the jobs, complete the daily jobs after the ward round before then clerking patients for admission in the afternoons. This was often repetitious work, and often too much work, but still it was a challenge and a role.

The closeness of the commute. This is only an advantage if you live relatively centrally, but it is fair to say that if you get a placement in one of the two Charite campuses you will have an easy trip to work and if you get a placement in a Vivantes hospital you would get to know much more of the U-bahn network.

The famous, old campus. I really enjoyed going to this old Hr. Virchow clinic, as something that I could look back on in the future. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to work at the 300 year old Mitte central campus but at least in the CVK, after the frustrations of the placements have faded I will be able to look back and know that I once worked at this institution.

The Bad: the ill-defined role of a P-Jer; are you there to be helpful or are you expected to work? and how this creates a bad mood on the ward.

A clunky title, and on the face of it, maybe it seems at odds with what I have written above about how good it was to be a P-Jer and have some work to do. The problem was however that P-Jers, as students in their final year, are obligated to work a full 12 month year with a maximum of 30 days allowed to take off for whatever reason in that time.

During this 12 months they are expected to work the shift patterns of the junior doctors and do all the ward jobs. This means that as a P-J equivalent in a hospital like the CVK, which basically runs on P-Js, I was expected to do all the jobs. Rather than in Britain where a final year student is a help and an assistance to the junior he shadows and in return accumulates knowledge and teaching, in Berlin the final year student is simply expected to do the junior doctor's ward jobs while they do paperwork, and there is no teaching or learning in return.

The whole set-up breeds a bad mood on the ward with overworked, unappreciated students, many doctors who only notice students when they fail to do the jobs they expect them to have done, and nurses who do not know how to interact with, or what to expect from, a rapid turnover of ward-based medical students. This problem was compounded by the poor working conditions at the moment in Berlin hospitals, made apparent to me by the nurses strike which went on during my time on placement in the CVK. Under these conditions even more of the day's tasks were expected to be done by the P-Jers, and even less consideration was given to what a final year student might want or need to get out of a placement.

Lack of time off. I have mentioned this above, but it becomes a major topic as a European Studies student during 5th year. You finish your final exams and within a week you have moved to Berlin and everything looks rosy. But then you realise you are a P-Jer, expected to work nearly full-time. That long waited for rest, disappears. You might expect me then to say it is best not to claim to be a P-Jer, as many other erasmus students do. However the scenario is not better if you are a 3rd or 4th year student on placement, you are expected to be there just as long, but are given less to do. My tip is to state clearly at the beginning of a placement that you are a P-Jer. Some placements will expect you to work as such, which may mean a lot of blood taking, and quite long hours- but you also have the right, one day a week, to take a day off. Some doctors will expect you to work 10 hour days, 5 days a week but as a P-Jer you are entitled to your study day: claim it loud and clearly, "I am taking my study day off tomorrow", it helps.

PLACEMENT 4, MAY 2015

A+E (RETTUNGSTELLE)

CAMPUS VIRCHOW KLINIKUM (CVK)

The Good: interested in teaching. This was the only placement in which I met doctors who took an active interest in teaching, and for whom teaching was a part of their job. It was still very much unstructured, and to be claimed and found wherever it could be, but there was a feeling in the department that students had a role outside of simply being helpful, that they were there to learn.

The Bad: the strike. An ongoing nurses strike was not so much bad for me as bad for the hospital and department. During the strike days the department was empty which meant that indirectly my days were affected; I had little to do and there was little medicine to see. On the days after the strike one could feel the atmosphere that had engendered such action; the over-worked nurses was not happy in their jobs, and this lead to impatience, short tempers and altogether an uncomfortable working environment. This was one of the drawbacks of the placement.

CONCLUSION

Being in Berlin really showed me the difference between the UK and Germany in terms of studying medicine and working as a doctor. I really enjoyed aspects of it, and was very frustrated by other parts. Overall, it made me appreciate the structure of the foundation

year jobs we have in the UK, and the good humour to be found on the wards in British hospitals. The major benefit I received from my 4 months in Berlin can be stated simply: **I didn't learn medicine, I learnt to be a doctor.** By this I mean, that I learnt to be self-sufficient and thick-skinned, and above all I learnt to take responsibility for my actions. This was often a hard-learnt lesson but one for which I will be continually grateful. Each time I saw a patient, wrote in their notes, ordered an investigation or did a procedure it was made very clear to me by the other doctors on the ward that I was not a student to be mollycoddled, rather that I needed to accept the consequences of my actions. I had not before fully felt the weight of this whilst on my placements in Manchester and I feel now that it is a very valuable lesson to have learnt before starting my FY1 post.