



Sightseeing with friends

My Germany Experience 2019 (by Kimberly A. Casares)

Getting to Germany was the roughest part of the journey. Our flights kept getting delayed, and we spent three days trying to reach our destination, but once we arrived at the Hannover airport, there was nothing sweeter than seeing my host sister Mareike, her family, and the rest of the Germans participating in GAPP (German American Partnership Program). After driving to Nienburg, my hosts gave me a tour of their house, and I saw right away how very different their home is compared to mine in Las Cruces. Many Germans take off their shoes when entering the house; Birkenstocks are house shoes, and rooms like the kitchen and living room are separated and have doors. I also noticed that German families prioritize having a desk for their students to use when studying - compared to studying at the kitchen table in the US. For dinner and most meals, Brot/Brötchen (bread/rolls) tend to be incorporated, as well as pasta, salami, and cheese. It was also common to have carbonated water or carbonated apple juice, which became my absolute favorite.



With my host family (I'm on the right)

My host family luckily spoke English; I understood some things that they would say in German, and it was amusing to be able to converse and understand in two different languages like I do back home. Mareike and her family made sure to teach me about their culture and include me in their lifestyle. We often talked about my home and the differences and similarities between us. They always made me feel welcomed, and they always asked if there was any food I'd like to try. Mareike was a busy student just like me when they visited, but I spent every day with her like it was the last because I genuinely enjoyed getting to know her better. My visit with Mareike and her family was amazing and wholesome. Having to part with them was difficult and it still makes me tear up thinking about it, but I'm thankful for experiencing this and being a member of a wonderful family.

Mareike attends Albert-Schweitzer-Schule, which is a 'Gymnasium' (academic high school) with both older and significantly younger students. When I first entered the school grounds, I saw the no phone zone sign and three different trashcans each on two different sides of the building. There are also three smaller trashcans in every classroom, and each has a different color signifying what type of trash should go inside. Another item of interest: I later learned that instead of clapping to applaud a presentation, students knock on their desks or tables.

The issue of climate change is taken very seriously in Europe compared to the United States. "Fridays for Future" was a prominent demonstration throughout German schools and the rest of Europe. Although Nienburg is a small city, most of the community heavily participates. A lot of students from Albert-Schweitzer-Schule shared how they strongly support Greta Thunberg in her actions to improve the climate, society and the quality of life. When I participated in the demonstrations with the rest of my classmates from the US, it was my first time in a protest ever. So I wasn't really sure how to go about doing my part and inducing action. I also noticed that in Germany and the rest of Europe there is no air conditioning in most homes or institutions. That was worrisome to me because climate change, including global warming, causes places like Germany to reach unusually high temperatures with high humidity in the summer. Nothing worried me more than people in communities becoming sick due to heat exhaustion.

During "Fridays for Future" I got to know Nienburg better and became especially familiarized with the many 400- to 500-year-old half-timbered buildings. Some are still used as homes, many as stores. (The interiors are of course all up to modern standards.) Many half-timbered structures have old writings displayed on the front, usually a religious saying that is focused on blessing the home or the people who enter the home. Aside from the half-timbered houses, I became very interested in the different brands of cars that are foreign to us in the US but common in 'Deutschland': BMW, Volvo, Audi, Mercedes, Porsche, Opel and – naturally - Volkswagen ('infamous' because of their emissions scandal). I also saw Tesla, which makes me proud of Elon Musk.



German and American friends

Compared to the US, I didn't see any big corporate stores, such as Walmart or Target. The city of Nienburg is much smaller than Las Cruces, yet a big European chain store such as H&M is easily accessible. I also noticed that it is easier to commute in Nienburg; due to short distances, many people do not need to drive and prefer riding their bikes or walking to their desired destination. Choosing to ride bikes as a mode of transportation is common in my host family, but when I arrived, we commuted more by car. Why? My host family is a lot taller than me. When I tried riding the shortest bike available, I fell off.

In many bigger cities such as Hamburg and Berlin, I began to hear more English, and interestingly enough I also heard people speak Spanish. It gave me great pleasure to be able to speak three different languages with people from all over the world. In Berlin, I was intrigued by things specific to the city, for example the Hard Rock Café, the Kiss of Peace, or even the big bears with bright colors and different decorations. One of my favorites was the Victory Column - it is beautiful and admirable. Hearing its history and significance has made 'Deutschland' that much more memorable to me. In short, Berlin is proud, and it made me happy to be a part of a beautiful city.

Thank you so much to the Las Cruces-Nienburg Sister Cities Affiliation who sponsored me and awarded me with a travel scholarship. Without their support, it wouldn't have been possible.

[Note: This report has been edited for length and clarity.]