



With my German host family (I'm in the middle)

My Trip to Germany: Something Lost, Something Gained (by Sophia Moore - 2019)

Before I could get reacquainted with my checked luggage, I was welcomed by the smile of my exchange student, Maya! After seven months of being apart, I was so excited and happy to see her, and I could see she felt the same. Picking up where we had left off, our friendship was unaffected by the time span between visits to each other's country. Adventures awaited me in Germany, and they were to begin immediately. The energy level among all the American students was high, but their excitement was dampened when fifteen of us, including myself, were told that our luggage would not be joining us. After missing two of our flights, and enduring long layovers in Atlanta and Paris, it was not all that surprising.

My first breakfast with Maya's family was a treat! The meal included the best bread and jam I have ever tasted! As with my family, they had a very positive family dynamic and ate all meals together.

Then the first day of school started. Maya's high school, Albert-Schweitzer-Schule, is in an old building, with some parts of the 4-story building more modern than others. Within a 5-minute walking distance are the newer elementary school and the lower grades of the high school, which start with 5th grade. Coming from Arrowhead High School in Las Cruces with 3 Smartboards and a laptop cart in every classroom, I was surprised that there was so little technology in the German classrooms. A projector or Smartboard were used but not everywhere. There were other things that astonished me. Unlike in the US, the German high school students had some subjects only once or twice a week. The grading scale is also very different; in Germany it's from 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest. As I began visiting different classrooms to give my presentation on New Mexico wildlife, the elementary students showed a great deal of interest with lots of questions, while the upper grade level teenagers showed a great deal of "enter rest" and were satisfied to hold off on questions.

During the first week with my host family, Maya and I baked some cinnamon buns that were very tasty, especially with the fresh German ingredients! We enjoyed a concert in Hannover, took an exchange-group trip to Hamburg, went to a bird park, and to the city of Bremerhaven. In Hamburg, the entire GAPP group went on a city tour on foot and by boat. A highlight was the journey through the colossal ‘Elbphilharmonie’, one of the most popular concert halls in the world! In the ‘Vogelpark’ (bird park) we saw over 200 species of birds and a show that exhibited some of the most famous birds they have, including the bald eagle. Maya, her mom, and I also taught a cockatoo to say, “Hello”!

The following day the entire GAPP group went on a bike tour of Nienburg. The most difficult part was finding a bike short enough for me; after all, I was shorter than anyone in Maya’s family. Fortunately one of Maya’s friends lent me her bike that was just the right size! Too many bikers too close together and no established bike riding etiquette made for a challenging ride. I fell twice. Our tour of the countryside nearly turned into a tour de hospital. Afterwards it was nice for my legs and knees to take a break during Maya’s backyard party.



Maya and I (on the right)

In Bremerhaven, we visited a very enjoyable interactive immigration museum, where each pair (an American and their German counterpart) followed the story of one person that immigrated to Germany and one that emigrated to the US. In the ‘Klimahaus’ (Climate House), we went through simulations in which various devices designed to reduce carbon emissions were made. In the exploration exhibit, Maya and I walked through different global environments. It was fascinating to see how people around the world live and thrive in different climates.

My first week in Germany was fun and full, and through most of it my luggage remained full until it finally caught up to me. It can be quite difficult to do without the things you need.

During my second week in Nienburg, my exchange family took me to a shopping mall in Bremen, which is about a 40-minute drive from Nienburg. Most of the stores there are not the typical H&M or Hollister. However, they do have Tom Tailor, which is a very popular store in Europe. We invaded a candy store and came out with enough sugar to sustain Maya’s family for a week, or longer if necessary. The next day we all went to

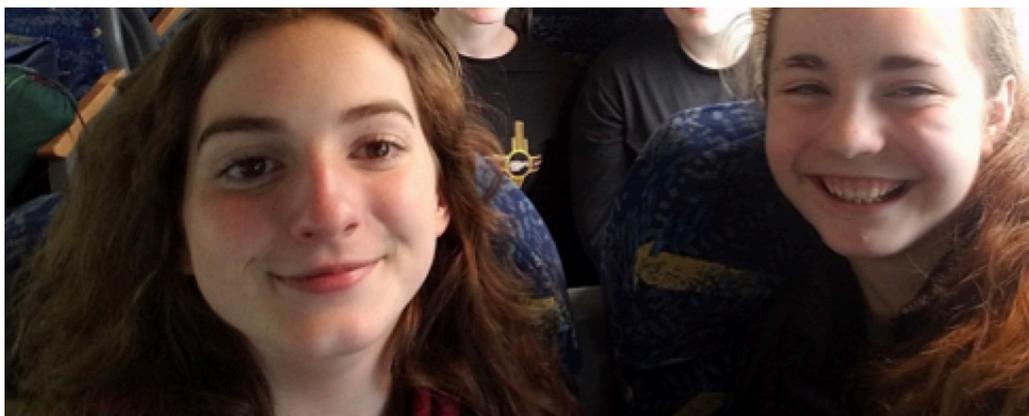
Hannover to a fireworks festival. We arrived several hours earlier so we could stroll through the city center and take in the picturesque scenery. The fireworks festival was amazing because it was perfectly timed to music. The following morning, we visited Cuxhaven on the North Sea. We all had a great time and ate at a scrumptious seafood restaurant, where I had fresh salmon and tilapia. -- The trip to the medieval town of Celle was intended only for the American students. We toured the castle 'Herzogschloss' and walked through the city center. It was my first time without my exchange student, and it felt as though part of the experience was missing.

The baked treat of this week was rhubarb muffins, which were new to me, and now one of my favorites. The rhubarb we used came from the family's garden, which made the muffins truly organic! Maya and I also baked some cherry and chocolate scones that the family ate up very quickly.

During the last days in Nienburg, our American group took a tour of a Nazi work camp in Liebenau and the memorial burial site nearby. [Note: Some of the other students described this visit as sobering or grim, but that it was "an important experience to acknowledge".] The next day, which was the last day of school, my American friends and I went into town to have one last look around and get our last ice cream from Nienburg. We also ate at our favorite restaurant, 'Kochlöffel'. That evening was the farewell party, which was extremely fun (even though it started downpouring). On Saturday, Maya's family took me to the Saturday Farmer's Market, which is similar to the market we have in Las Cruces -- but with more flowers, fruits and vegetables. I also did some last-minute shopping for souvenirs and chocolate. For my last dinner, we made white asparagus, pork pieces, potatoes, and eggs. The white asparagus is much milder in taste than green asparagus and now one of my favorite veggies! On Sunday, it was time to leave my family. It was quite hard to say good-bye after all the great times we had, but we had already made plans to see each other next year, possibly in St. Petersburg, Russia. [Note: Sophia's grandmother on her mother's side is Russian.] As I sat on the train to Berlin, I felt incredibly grateful for having such an amazing exchange family!

Of all the learning experiences I had in Germany, a most valuable one came from that of losing my luggage. I realize that you can miss "things," that without them your life may be a little unpleasant. But experiencing moments without people you have grown attached to is so much more difficult. Losing a suitcase is one thing, but leaving behind a friend takes a bigger toll.

I am extremely grateful to the Las Cruces-Nienburg Sister Cities Affiliation for granting me \$500 towards my travel expenses. Danke schön – Thank you so much!



Friends

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