

# **Chasing Aachen, Germany 2009**

## **Introduction**

The first time I came to Aachen, and the first time I took a bus in Aachen, everything looked weird! It was strange and different, but even though everything was different it all looked the same; I was confused. I felt like I was reading a map upside down. But now, four months later, I love it here. I love walking, sitting at Elisenbrunnen, and watching the world go by. I love getting an ice cream cone from the place on the corner and seeing the top of the Aachener Dom above the buildings and feeling so wonderful because I am actually living in a piece of history.

So, you are getting ready to come here as well. First, take a deep breath! It will be a magnificent experience. At first I was very worried about living a semester abroad, but as I am preparing to leave, I wish I could stay here much longer.

## **Preparing to Leave**

When you get here you will need to meet with your advisor in the OIP at the FH (university). They will definitely help you take care of everything you need to while you are at Aachen. I felt a lot better under their direction. I recommend bringing at least three copies of all your important documents. When I went to get my student pass for public transportation they kept the originals of my health insurance forms, which was a problem because I needed them later when I ended up going to the hospital, so bring copies. I recommend keeping a photo copy of your passport and health card in your wallet because you do not want to lose the originals.

## **Climate**

In Aachen, it rains a lot and often has thunder storms during the summer, but I have grown to enjoy it. I heard it rained more here in summer than in winter, but thus far, the summer has been very mild and enjoyable. And most of the time, a few minutes after the rain stops, the sun comes out. It's like the weather is playing tug of war for the day. I think the major seasons here are winter when it snows and spring when it rains. You should definitely bring an umbrella! Always keep it on your person because you will use it often. Even if the sun is shining in the morning, bring an umbrella. During the winter, you will require long underwear because it is very, very cold. Layers will be your best friend.

## **Packing**

When getting ready to come here I tried to pack for every situation. Looking back I wish I would've packed fewer items including clothes and no books. When packing, besides not forgetting the umbrella, you should bring a comfortable water-proof jacket and a nice sweater to wear underneath. Do not buy a jacket once you arrive because jackets here are expensive. Also, you should bring your favorite tennis shoes as they are also twice as expensive here. Other than that, you should be good. As long as you pack a good English/German Dictionary, you really don't need to bring any extra books. Well, maybe just one to get you started.

## **Flight Information**

The flight was very long, but coming over here, it wasn't very crowded. You could get a whole row for yourself, which was what happened to me. So I just stretched out and slept. Other than

that I really didn't need anything else. Oh – but you might want to bring a toothbrush and a hand towel. After so many hours flying it feels good to freshen up every now and then while you are on the plane!

### **Arrival/Rules and Regulations/Banking**

When I arrived there was a family friend to greet me at the airport, but assuming you have to go it alone, the information desk past security is very helpful. They can direct you to a train and once you arrive via train in Aachen, you can catch a taxi to your place. They are always right outside the train station, and they are not very expensive. The orientation at the FH and all the tours they offer are a MUST. They are extremely helpful when getting accustomed to such a different system. You will have a one-on-one orientation with your advisor as well as a school orientation. The one-on-one orientation will give you all the information you need about documents you need to take care of as well as all the red tape you need to get through in your first weeks at Aachen. You will have to file with immigration, register in the city, and get your student pass as well as a paper saying your health insurance is acceptable. The orientation with your advisor will also explain how to set up a bank account and where specifically to go: Sparkasse Aachen where you will receive a debit card with your account. Keep in mind, there are some places which only accept EC cards, a type of debit card that uses a chip instead of a magnetic strip. Most American debit cards do not have this kind of thing. As for cell phones, contracts last for two years, so you can buy a cell phone anywhere, and the SIM card you can buy at a kiosk. You can then load credit onto your cell phone using your debit card from Sparkasse Aachen at any ATM. There is an ATM on every corner.

### **Housing**

I found my housing through the resources Aachen sent me and I was very pleased. I would definitely use the links from the FH OIP sends you. You will feel much better knowing something is waiting for you upon arrival. And if you don't like it, you can always just stay the first month and give notice. Usually you can find another place through your connections, but I don't know anyone who found a place using Aachen's services that has moved. Also, check your renting agreement carefully. When you move, you must give one month's notice prior to moving. In some places, it is three months prior notice. Housing options are mostly one room deals (the kitchen, study and bedroom are all in one room) but the only difference is the bathrooms. Some apartments/dorms have the bathroom and shower in the room and in some you have to share a bathroom and shower with everyone on your floor. There are thirteen of us sharing two toilets and two showers. Surprisingly, it has worked fine and no one has yet to stand in line. Depending on where you go, some also have to share the kitchen, but I think the most people prefer having their own room and kitchen while sharing the bathroom.

### **Academics**

To succeed, ask questions! Professors build on everything they said in pervious sessions, so if you don't get something, it is important to ask questions and try to understand it. If you show up and take good notes you'll be in good shape. You will have to study and practice a lot outside of the classroom. The professor will give you the theory but you have to put it into practice. Furthermore, your grade depends solely on your final. Therefore, it is a good idea to study a little every day to keep the information fresh. There are classes in English and German but the only ones you have to sign up for are the language classes. You can go or not go to any class you want

and sign up to take any final you want, meaning that you can take eight classes but only write six finals if you choose. The catch is that if you don't go and pay attention, you'll probably do quite poorly on the final. Make sure that you are taking all the classes required to keep your student status at State. It's strange at first because they don't use our credit system. So it takes a little calculation.

## **Campus Life/ Social Life**

The campus is a single building, and all the business courses are on the second floor. Excluding the library, everything you need for your academic life, including your classrooms the computer lab (there are several!), is ALL on the second floor. It is nice that way. It is much smaller than State and there are only a few hundred students max. There is a cafeteria on the first floor as well as vending machines, which are refrigerated inside because they dispense sandwiches, chocolate milk and the like, so the Twix bars are hard, but that's okay. You can be sure you won't get food poisoning from a warm egg sandwich. Anyway, it is also important to note that the 'floors' in a building start with E (for Erd = Earth Floor), then 1, 2, etc.

The FH throws lots of fun parties. But INCAS is a great way to meet people outside of class. If you take a class in English you can pretty much be guaranteed that there are a lot of exchange students there who are just as 'cautious' about this whole experience as you are. So band together! INCAS is a group that meets every Tuesday night created for all international students in Aachen. They also plan trips around the region, which are always very nice, and you get a great deal for your money. I made most of my friends in the first few days in a German course that was offered before the semester started. We still hang out together all the time. We went to bars together, parties together, and clubs together. From there, it is easier to branch out and make other friends because you feel like you have a stable foundation. Please avoid chewing gum when you talk to someone. It has come to my attention that that is considered rude here. It is also taboo to spit on the sidewalk or stumble down the street when you are intoxicated. A very nice thing that I enjoy here is getting up early before school starts and walking to the bakery to get fresh rolls for breakfast. That is lovely! And I think it's a very German thing. The book that they offered at orientation called, "The Overseas Handbook for Americans" I found very, very helpful! While you are here you should attend as many events as possible. Like they say, "Say yes to every experience (within reason)." You won't regret it!

## **Religion**

The dominant religions are Catholic and Protestant. There are many churches you can attend if you belong to one of the two dominant religions. Churches, like ATM's, are everywhere. However, it is a common belief that only old people go to church, so if you are looking for something outside the 'norm,' be diligent. There is also a strong muslim population but I have yet to see a mosque. All in all, I would say that the young people are not religious at all. There are some though who are very curious if you are religious and like to ask a lot of questions to try and figure you out. It is a good experience and you should try to be exceptionally open-minded and work through it.

## **Leisure**

There are many cafes around and little sight-seeing excursions that are only a bus ride away. You are also only fifteen minutes from Belgium and Holland. Check'em out! There is also Monschau,

a little village, and Drei-Laender Punkt, the place where Germany, Belgium and Holland meet. You can be in three places at one. You much visit the Dom and Elisenbrunnen in Aachen—they define Aachen!! The biggest event during the year, besides the “May Party” which occurs the night before the first day of May, is the Shuttle Party. Erasmus (6-month students) throw lots of parties throughout the year but this is the biggest one. The streets are packed! And you’ve never seen packed until you’ve seen this. There is no room to move at all. There are ‘shuttle buses’ that take you all around to all these different clubs and things but it is a riot to try and get on one. It’s harder than trying to squeeze on BART during commute time. But it’s great—Everyone in the bus is yellin’ and singin’ and there are so many people that they start saying, “left, right, left, right” and get the bus to sway quite a bit. It is an impressive sight. In Aachen there is also the Tivoli arena where there are many soccer games. Everybody here is soccer crazy! It would be good to have some head knowledge about it. Often, when there is a game, everybody gets together at a bar, watches the game and drinks a beer.

There are no malls that I have seen. Germans tell me that is an American thing. They are all mom and pop shops that are too cute. Window shopping is a wonderful leisure experience. The sizes here are also smaller than American sizes. There are many specialty shops. There is a bakery, a butcher and a cheese shop. And if you want the goods, you’ve gotta go there. All the shops have very nice displays. There is also a special shop that only sells things made by people in Aachen. It’s beautiful. I would say that clothes and shoes are a bit more expensive here, but I think it depends on how much you are used to spending. Be careful about haircuts. Some places charge you for drying! Or make you dry your hair yourself. But it’s all part of the experience.

## **Travel**

It’s always best to travel with a buddy! There are some weird people in some areas if you go by yourself. The buddy system is the best system and I tell you this through an experience I could have avoided if I would’ve had a buddy. There are some great cheap ways to get around. If you want to fly, Ryanair and Germanwings are the best. Ryanair is the cheapest but leaves from some remote-ish airports. And they charge you for how much luggage you bring along. Otherwise, by putting everything in my carry-on, I’ve flown round trip across Europe for ten Euros.

## **Closing**

In closing, as long as you 1) know who you are and are confident in who you are, 2) stay open minded and 3) realize that the host country probably just satisfies a basic human need that you feel is missing, you will do just fine! The months will fly by so make the most of them; don’t waste a second! These’ll be the best months of your life thus far! I will really miss all the people that I have bonded with while I was here. When I return I will miss the little shops and the way everything always seems so clean. But home is always home! I hope you look forward to this adventure fondly.