

## My Week of Work Experience in Schwäbisch Hall

Thanks to the generous support of Goethe Institut London, I had the opportunity to travel to Schwäbisch Hall in Germany to complete a week's work experience. It was an amazing experience!

My journey started early on Sunday October 19th, when I boarded my 7 o'clock flight to London, to meet the rest of my group and our supervisors. The journey was long, but it gave me plenty of time to bond and get to know the other successful applicants, who came from all over the United Kingdom.

Eventually, after 16 hours of travel, we arrived in Schwäbisch Hall, a small town in Baden-Württemberg, that was soon to become very special to us.

After a good night's sleep, we woke early the next day and started our day with a guided tour of the town. A lovely woman, who had been living in Schwäbisch her whole life - over 70 years - was our guide and showed us the beautiful town, with its old medieval buildings, calm river, cobble-stoned streets and, of course, the amazing view from the highest point of the town.

After the tour, we had some free-time, in which we were able to explore the few open shops and the Goethe-Institut, before testing our German by speaking to some of the locals in the coffee shops. Thankfully, the Goethe Institut attracts over 2,000 students to the town every year, so the locals were used to students practising their German on them, so knew to be very patient and kind!

Later that day, we walked to Comburg, a nearby castle in the town. The tour guide, despite being very intimidating, gave us a lot of information about the beautiful historical buildings.

That night we had a meeting with our supervisors, Lynn, Bob and Domine, to discuss the work shadowing. I was placed with another girl, Sophiya, at the Bausparkasse, a company that deals with building savings.

From Monday-Friday, I spent my mornings there. After lunch we met up again as a group to engage in cultural activities.

In contrast to the rest of the town, the Bausparkasse was a large, modern building which employed thousands of people. Sophiya and I were very intimidated as we sat in the lobby, waiting for our mentor Yousef. In charge of the Bausparkasse's training building, he guided us to where we would be spending our time each day. Luckily, the company has been taking students from the Goethe Institut for work experience for 3 years, so they were very prepared for us. The first thing we were given was a vocabulary list, including words such as; contract, to pay taxes, to accumulate interest, collateral appraisal, government grants and so on. Needless to say, these words were not on our GCSE German vocabulary list and immediately threw us in at the deep end!

Throughout the week, with the aid of Google translate (Sshh! Don't tell Miss Moore!), we learned a lot about the history of the company and were also given a tour of the building. During the placement, we spent time in the training centre, sitting in on different training seminars for the employees, the call centre, and the savings centre. As well as this, we produced a video presentation, in English and in German, explaining the building society contract.

By the end of the week, we had got to know the trainee employees, who were tasked with making sure we did not get lost, the other workers in the company and Yousef very well. On our last day, we received a certificate, recognising our training as "Bankkauffrau", and a farewell gift of a soft toy of the Bausparkasse's mascot.

Of course this was only half the trip. Each afternoon was spent exploring, shopping, buying ridiculous amounts of German sweets at Rewe, going to the Neues Globe theatre, visiting art museums, where we were interviewed by the local newspaper, or attending the Marionette Theatre to watch Der Zwerg Nase. We also participated in activities held by the Goethe Institut such as movie nights, football matches and games afternoon. All of these activities allowed us to bond a lot as a group. We became extremely close and spent every night in our flat talking for hours.

Our final day was a sad one. We left early in the morning, already sad about having to say goodbye, not only to the town to which we had grown so attached, but also to all the new friends we had made on the trip.

In London, after one more group hug and a lot of tears, everyone went their separate ways. I, of course, was the only one having to get yet another plane back home and so after reassuring Bob, Lynn and Domine that I was not going to get lost, I left - arriving back in Belfast late that night.

The entire week was amazing. Not only was I able to complete work experience in an incredibly interesting company and improve my German significantly, but I also got to make some amazing new friends, with whom I still talk almost every day. I will always be grateful to the Goethe Institut for allowing me to go on this once-in-a-lifetime trip and I hope to visit Schwäbisch Hall with the friends I made in the future. I would urge anyone who has the opportunity to do something similar to consider it very seriously. Meine Woche in Schwäbisch Hall war eine einmalige Arbeitserfahrung,

Abbie Fitzsimmons