



EXCHANGE REPORT – UNIVERSITY OF MANNHEIM

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INTRODUCTION

Greetings from the University of Mannheim! As a business student, you've probably done some research and know already that UniMA's business school is one of the best, if not *the* best, in Germany. Indeed, as I have experienced, they have an excellent faculty and the courses I took were greatly rewarding. Students wishing to find an exchange school that quenches your thirst for excellent business education need not look any further.

But who are you fooling if you claim to only study and do nothing else during your exchange experience? You've chosen to spend a semester away from hard work and stress; seize this precious opportunity to travel around Europe! Happily, Mannheim has that covered as well: it may not be the most interesting place in the world (it's not even the most interesting place in Germany), but its central location at the very heart of Europe means that almost everywhere you care to name is within a few hours' reach. In other words, you'll be travelling a lot, as I have!

MONTHLY ACTIVITY LOG

FEBRUARY, 2017

I arrived in Mannheim on the 3rd, settled down in my student housing and immediately set to work on all the matters of bureaucracy, including registering myself as a resident at K7 (the local residents' bureau), checking that my bank account had been successfully opened, and of course registering in the university and courses of my choice. I also had to purchase utensils, pots, pans and other household items as they were not provided by my hall (I got them on the cheap at Woolworths which is certainly worth checking out). The orientation activities that the University planned for incoming students were merely adequate: basically a talk on how to register for courses, get around in the University and Mannheim, and so on. I registered for three business courses and one German language course. Bear in mind that some courses require registration online, while others register you immediately as long as you show up for the first lesson. Two of the business commenced the week after the orientation, while the German course started at the end of the month. Mannheim is about the size of Tseung Kwan O and has about as much to do and see, so I did some travelling too, but not as extensively as I did later.

February Travel Journal

- 3: Frankfurt, Germany – Nothing much to see or do; went there just to say I have been there.
- 11: Strasbourg, France – Certainly worth going. Only 3 hours by bus from Mannheim, it's a lovely small city with a particularly quaint Alsatian old town. Also has the loveliest cathedral interior.
- 18, 20: Munich, Germany – Despite its status as Germany's third-largest city, if you just want to sightsee, two days in Bavaria's capital is more than enough. Highlights include the Schloss Neuschwanstein, the BMW museum, and the city centre. This is also Schweinhaxe (roasted pig knuckle) country: you've never been to Munich if you haven't tried it!
- 19: Salzburg, Austria – An extremely beautiful city. I had my first glimpse of the Austrian Alps at the Festburg (Salzburg castle) and I almost wept from the sheer magnificence.

MARCH, 2017

March was an especially intense week for me. As the spring semester of Year 3 would be the last semester for the local students of UniMA, they had to prepare for their final project and dissertations for the second half of the semester, and so all of my three business courses ended at the end of the month (in fact one course I took, an intensive course, only lasted for the last week of March). I was nose-deep in work for the latter half of the month, but before that I travelled quite a lot, all short day trips within Germany. One of those trips, the one to Cologne, was organized by VISUM (the international student association) and was thoroughly enjoyable. Another trip, the one to Weinheim, was a hiking trip organized by the university's Institute of Sports. Besides travelling, I didn't miss the Carnival festivities of which Mannheim has quite an impressive scene. A festival of food, costumes, floats, amusement rides, and numerous candies, it's a buzzing celebration that gave me a feeling of solidarity that I never experienced in Hong Kong.

March Travel Journal

- 4: Stuttgart, DE – A quite cosmopolitan city, I went there mainly to see the Mercedes-Benz museum.
- 8: Ludwigshafen, DE – This is the town opposite the river of Mannheim and reachable by bike and tram. There is absolutely nothing to see there because it serves mainly as a residential area for the employees of BASF, the world's largest chemical producer whose headquarters are located here. I went there to hear a concert by legendary pianist Grigory Sokolov, hosted by the culture department of BASF.
- 11: Heidelberg, DE – Just half an hour away by train from Mannheim, Heidelberg has a beautiful old town with a castle overlooking it, just like in Salzburg. Very much worth going.
- 12: Speyer, DE – I went there by bike which took me 2 hours. It is a rather small town with a majestic cathedral and a nice riverfront on the bank of the Rhine.
- 18: Cologne, DE – This was organized by VISUM. Highlights included the Cathedral and the local beer, called Kölsch.
- 19: Weinheim, DE – Located next to Mannheim, Weinheim boasts a beautiful countryside. While hilly, it's never steep and the altitude never exceeds 400 meters. It also has a forest of exotic trees from all over the world. A good Sunday retreat.

APRIL, 2017

April came, the workload was reduced greatly since most of my courses save German had ended, and I finally had the time to travel further beyond West Germany. Of course, the long Easter holiday fell on this month so I took the opportunity to go to the UK and meet some of my friends who were studying there. I also travelled with one of my friends to Munich as he had not been to Germany before. April was also the time to register for exams. Yes, you read that correctly—unlike UST, exams are separate from courses and have to be registered for. It can be easily done on the Portal² (equivalent of UST's course registration system) but bear in mind there is a particular registration time period for exams. Register late (as I did) and you will still be able to register, but for a fee of 10€ per exam.

April Travel Journal

- 1: Hamburg, DE – The second-largest city of Germany and a buzzing metropolis. The newly-opened Elbphilharmonie concert hall has become a justly famous tourist attraction in its own right. Buy tickets early—concerts sell out fast.
- 2: Lübeck, DE – A totally worthy day trip from Hamburg, Lübeck has a wonderful brick-coloured old town and equally wonderful Marzipan.
- 2: Travemünde, DE – If you have time left in Lübeck, take the bus/train to Travemünde, Germany's opening into the North Sea. It is breathtaking.
- 3: Bremen, DE – Also a day trip from Hamburg, this is the home of the famous tale of the Musicians of Bremen, and has a beautiful city center.
- 9, 10, 12: Copenhagen, DK – My parents came over from Hong Kong and travelled with me on this 4-day trip. Copenhagen is no doubt a beautiful place, but it's also very expensive compared to Germany.
- 11: Malmo, SE – Malmo was a nice surprise for me. Easily reachable by train from Copenhagen, Malmo was for me cleaner and cooler. It's also a less touristy place which is good if you dislike swarms of tourists.
- 14: Baden-Baden, DE – A retreat for the wealthy and one of the points of entry to the immense Schwarzwald (Black Forest), Baden-Baden is 3 hours by train from Mannheim. I had the best fried trout here.
- 19-24: London, UK – Little needs to be said about this multicultural, vibrant capital of the UK. Especially wonderful if you are going with friends, like I did.
- 20: Bath, UK – The town of the world-famous Bath Spa, an ancient Roman thermal spa. The entrance fee is exorbitant (13 pounds?) but totally worth it.
- 20: Salisbury, UK
- 22: Oxford, UK – I didn't have friends at the University of Oxford, but Oxford itself was one of the most impressive towns I had been.
- 22-24: Guildford, UK
- 25-27: Munich, DE
- 26: Schloss Neuschwanstein, DE – No doubt the most majestic castle I have been, but be sure to pay attention to the weather (I learnt my lesson!). Incidentally, photos of the inside of the castle are forbidden.
- 29: Nuremberg, DE – Smack in the middle of Germany, this characterful city has a nice castle and an impressive wooden restaurant serving the world's best sausages (beech-smoked right in front of you).

MAY, 2017

May was also relatively relaxing for me since the only courses that I had to take were German. No exams or lots of homework or projects to worry about. May is also one of the most ideal months to travel since a) light workload, b) the peak Easter holiday season had just passed, therefore fewer tourists, and c) it's not as cold as travelling in winter. I seized this opportunity to get out as far and as often as I could. My travels during this month brought me to the eastern Central European countries, as well as a few other places in Germany that I have always wanted to visit.

May Travel Journal

- 1: Trier, DE – The home of numerous vineyards and Roman ruins.
- 5: Leipzig, DE – I adore classical music so Leipzig, the final resting place of Bach and a historically important musical capital, was a must-go for me. Had the great fortune to catch a concert by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra of Mahler's 5th Symphony.
- 6-7: Prague, CZ – A breathtakingly beautiful and characterful place, especially its lovely castle. Totally enjoyed it.
- 7-8: Dresden, DE – If Prague can be described as brown, Dresden is very very grey. The Staatsoper Dresden is worth a visit.
- 10: Würzburg, DE – A brief and scenic stopover en route to...
- 10: Rothenburg ob der Tauber, DE – Picture-postcard little town, arguably the prettiest single place in Germany.
- 12, 13, 15: Gothenburg, SE – Went there to meet a friend. Gothenburg itself has nothing much to see, but its surroundings (outlying islands, Volvo museum, etc.) are interesting at worst.
- 14: Stockholm, SE – Also not a great deal to see, but the Vasa Museum is completely worth going.
- 17-21: Berlin, DE – The sheer scale and vibrancy of Berlin reminds me of none other than Hong Kong, minus the frantic pace of life. There's much to enjoy, see, and do here, and of course how can you say you've been on exchange to Germany if you haven't been to Berlin?
- 20: Potsdam, DE – A 30-minute ride on S-Bahn from Berlin, Potsdam boasts an amazing palace and a neat old town.
- 23, 25: Vienna, AT – A decent city, but not as romantic or elegant as many would have you believe. Catching a concert with the Vienna Philharmonic is, needless to say, essential. I got lucky and secured a seat for the annual Schönbrunn Summer Night concert – an unforgettable experience.
- 24: Bratislava, SK – Bratislava and Vienna are the world's closest two capital cities, so if you have time Bratislava is worth a day trip. A unique blend of Slavic and Germanic cultures.
- 26-27: Budapest, HU – Buda Castle would be the main attraction for most, but the Pest side is where most of the locals thrive. Restaurants usually require reservation so be warned if you want to eat at a popular locale.
- 28-29: Zagreb, HR – While probably not as worth going as Dubrovnik, Zagreb (Croatia's capital) is pretty unforgettable for the picturesque St. Mark's Church, and most interestingly, the Museum of Broken Relationships.

JUNE, 2017

The very last month of my exchange journey, which started with two final exams. To strike a good balance between my grades and my packed travelling plans, I eked out three days of intense revision between my travel plans and decided to leave the less essential bits for revising on the go (which didn't turn out to be a bad idea). My German course also finally ended at the start of the month. After my last final exam, I was completely free! I left Mannheim for a full 3 weeks and travelled as much as I could—as you will see.

After so much travelling, it was finally time to go home. Deregistration from the university and the Resident's Office at K7 was not time-consuming, but be sure to save up two days to pack up. Farewell Germany, and farewell Europe – you will be missed!

June Travel Journal

- 2: Innsbruck, AT – Nordkette, the Alpine mountain chain, was the whole point of my visit. Breath-taking beyond words. Forced to pick a single highlight of my exchange trip, this would be it.
- 3: Salzburg, AT
- 4: Bad Ischl, AT – A town in the heart of the Salzkammergut region, the stream water, directly from the Alps, is so clear you can effortlessly see the riverbed.
- 5: Hallstatt, AT – Yet another picture-perfect town, this would be the second-best place I have been in my exchange journey.
- 7-9: Paris, FR – Everything that one would expect, except this restaurant: *La petite rose des sables*. Hospitality beyond imagination.
- 10: Glasgow, Scotland, UK
- 11: Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
- 12-14: Highlands, Scotland, UK (Loch Ness, Isle of Skye, etc.) – Part of the *Skye High* tour to the Scottish Highlands. An untainted haven and a stunning gem. Our guide Graham (who doubled as our driver) was superb.
- 15: Newcastle, UK
- 16, 18: Nice, FR – Not much to do, but that azure coastline is the stuff of dreams.
- 17: Monaco – A rich man's world, and home to an impressive castle.
- 19-20: Rome, IT – A feast for history buffs and culture vultures, Rome is surprisingly compact, and so is the Vatican City.
- 21: Venice, IT – A stunning lagoon, and almost everywhere you turn is a photogenic alley, but beware of numerous tourists (and tourist traps), expensive (and not very nice) food, and the sheer heat.
- 22: Florence, IT – The world capital of art, and home to my new favourite delicacy: Florentine steak.
- 23: Pisa, IT – The tower and nothing more.
- 24: Milan, IT – Home to fashion and haute couture, but nothing much else. It's however worth taking a day trip to...
- 25: Como & Bellagio, IT – not too far from Milan is the tripod-shaped Lake Como that extends all the way to the Swiss Alps. A stunning lake and a fitting conclusion to my exchange journey.

GENERAL EXCHANGE INFORMATION

1. Visa Procedures

Holders of most passports would need a student visa to study in Germany. Check with the embassy whether you need one and how long the validity period is – you may have to extend your visa during your stay in Mannheim (I didn't since mine lasted for 6 months). No matter what the case is, it is highly recommended that you open a blocked account with Deutsche Bank as soon as you received the confirmation letter from the university, as a) having proof of financial support is the prerequisite of gaining a student visa, and opening a blocked account with Deutsche Bank is the most convenient way, and b) it takes a few weeks to open the blocked account, and at least a month to process the visa application.

2. Orientation Activities

The school offers a brief compulsory orientation session school-wide and another one for business students, but if you already know how to register for courses and your way around the university, the orientation is not extremely useful. If you have time in January (which I didn't), enrolling in the Winter Academy is a useful way to brush up German skills and know people.

3. International Services & Activities

VISUM is the student organization taking care of international students in UniMA and they host several Stammtisch (gatherings) as well as the famous Schneckenhof parties. Should you need academic or bureaucratic help, the international office at L1 will offer you assistance.

4. Accommodations

UniMA's halls are not within the campus like UST; rather, they are scattered around and sometimes outside Mannheim. Reaching such halls would take around 15 mins by tram. The hall I stayed in, however, was within Mannheim and was a part of a contract signed by Studierendenwerk and the hostel, rather than the property of UniMA. There is an online application system for such accommodation, so register early and check your emails.

5. Courses Registration

Some courses have to be registered for before the class using the online system called Portal²; others will register you in automatically as long as you show up for the first class. Check on the university's course website before you register because it can get pretty confusing.

6. Teaching & Assessment Methods

The business courses I took were lectures, with extremely limited teamwork (except for one simulation in groups, and one group project). The grades for two courses were 100% based on your performance on the final exam. Another weighted 70% on the final exam and 30% on the group project. In all three cases attendance did not count as part of the final grade. For my German Language course, however, it was a small course of 15 people. Three tests throughout the course were weighted equally for the final grade, and we were not allowed to miss more than 2 lessons.

7. Sports & Recreation Facilities

The Institute of Sports has a paying gym in Mannheim and other sport activities, but if regular sports are not your fancy the Institute also organizes frequent hiking trips (one of which I attended in March).

8. Finance & Banking (including currency / expenses)

Most German banks have a branch in Mannheim, so banking is not difficult. If you have a Deutsche Bank account, you may withdraw money for free in Cashgroup ATMs (Deutsche Bank, Commerzbank, Hypovereinsbank and Postbank). Beware that the Deutsche Bank blocked account only allows you to withdraw 720 euros per month, which will certainly not be enough if you plan to travel, so a credit card is most recommended. Mannheim and most of Europe is pretty card-friendly but of course bring sufficient cash.

Mannheim in general is very inexpensive compared to the rest of Germany and Europe. The living costs here are pretty low, but nobody is expecting you to stay here for your entire exchange! If you

do quite a lot of travelling, as I did, expect your average monthly expenses to reach approximately 1200 euros.

9. Social Clubs & Networking Opportunities

There are a few school clubs in UniMA but most of them are quite German-exclusive and I didn't really join any of them.

10. Health & Safety

I didn't get sick in Europe so I don't know much about the details, but I know there are a few clinics and hospitals around Mannheim. Your medical/travel insurance should cover most fees.

Mannheim is extremely safe compared to most European cities as long as you use common sense. Jungbusch may be an area of concern but that's about it. One cannot say the same, however, of especially France and Italy, where petty crime (stealing, pickpocketing, etc.) is rampant and vigilance is strongly advised.

11. Food

Food is good and cheap in Mannheim – while you will struggle to find decent and filling food for under 15 euros in France, in Mannheim 12 euros is a luxury. (Vapiano and Hemmlein are two eateries that I frequent, and the Katik Kebab place near the Kunsthalle is my favorite budget haunt.) Should you want to save even more, you may want to eat at the school canteen where meals are less than 5 euros. The quality, however, is variable.

12. Transportation

Where I live, going on foot to the train station or school is easy, but if you live further, you may need to take the tram or rent a bike (the VRN Nextbike system is free for students for the first 30 minutes). If you decide to take the tram, you may pay 169 euros for a semester ticket (which I didn't find worth it).

Mannheim's central location in Germany and Europe means that it's very well-connected, especially for a city of its size. Direct trains (Deutsche Bahn is the German rail operator) will get you from Mannheim to Munich in 3.5 hours, Hamburg in 5 hours, Berlin in 5 hours, and Paris in 3 hours – as long as there isn't a delay (which incidentally happens much more frequently than stereotypes would have you believe)! A delay of an hour is enough to claim compensation from Deutsche Bahn, but it's a cumbersome process and not worth it if you are only able to claim a few euros.

13. Climate

Mannheim has a moderate continental climate: predominantly dry and with mild winters (coldest 0°C, and it rarely snows) and warm summers (around 30°C max). The temperature difference within a day could be huge so be wary.

14. Communication

It's much more convenient to buy phone data plans in Hong Kong than in Germany, for the simple reason that the language barrier if you don't speak German is quite considerable. If you should need a German phone number, however, you may find some good deals at O₂, Telekom.de, Vodafone, and so on.

15. Other notes

Mannheim and Germany in general is a place where people are laid-back and don't spend long hours in work. The downside of this is that basically everything closes after 8pm. Also, and this only applies in Germany: shops are legally required not to operate on Sundays and public holidays, even supermarkets (excepting restaurants, and shops in train stations). I was not informed of this before I came and needless to say got quite a nasty surprise. Therefore, be acquainted with the holidays and do your shopping in advance!

ITEMS TO BRING

- Passport, acceptance letter, insurance, etc.
- Sufficient clothing, for all types of weather (2 weeks' worth of clothing is advised)
- Hiking backpack & shoes
- Personal electronics and their charging cables, batteries, etc.
- Electric adaptor
- Sufficient extra cash
- Credit card

USEFUL LINKS AND CONTACTS

- University of Mannheim for incoming exchange students: http://www.uni-mannheim.de/io/english/incoming_exchange_students/
- Course catalog for incoming exchange students: http://www.uni-mannheim.de/io/english/incoming_exchange_students/course_catalogues/course_catalogue_fall_semester_2017/index.html
- Things to do around Mannheim: <http://www.tourist-mannheim.de/en/Home>
- Deutsche Bahn: <https://www.bahn.com/en/view/index.shtml>
- Deutsche Bank for international students: <https://www.deutsche-bank.de/pk/konto-und-karte/konten-im-ueberblick/internationale-studenten1.html>
- Visa affairs on the German Consulate General, Hong Kong website: <http://www.hongkong.diplo.de/Vertretung/hongkong/en/03Info/Visum/visa.html>

Should you need more information, please obtain my contact from SBM Exchange Team by emailing at bmugexch@ust.hk. Thank you and have a lovely stay in Mannheim!