



# Blossoming in Berlin

Jude Crilly is the winner of the Erasmus Student Prize 2004, and a student of German at University College, London. She describes here how her Erasmus year abroad in Berlin has been a rewarding and life-enriching experience

I was certain I wanted to spend my year abroad in Berlin, as I had spent an eventful summer there in 2002. I was intrigued by this city for its vitality and cultural diversity, which is counter-balanced by darker reminders of German history. I was enrolled in the History of Art department at Humboldt University Berlin, but also attended lectures in both the Modern German Literature and Art departments.

The Erasmus program also offered cost-covered language courses, which proved a very entertaining experience as a large part of it was spent trying to straighten out cultural stereotypes – such as English people cannot swim and the classic “tea-at-four” jibe. In such an international environment you quickly learn to respect other cultures. I had both German and Italian flatmates and

we quickly learnt to accept and even admire each other’s differences.

The prerequisite for the study abroad, naturally, was a fair proficiency in the native language. My primary objective was to improve my language skills, and I became much more confident as I learnt. The Tandem-Partner scheme was a very good way to meet native German Speakers. It is a means to “share” language through conversation and hopefully mutual interests

I was a little disheartened when I realized just how many young German people speak English. I encountered a persistent desire to answer in English, once it was discovered that that was my mother tongue. There seems to be a great admiration for the English culture in Germany, which was particularly apparent during the European Cup,

when many German spectators were supporting their opponents.

### Cultural perspectives

I felt valued as an English person in the academic environment for being able to provide a different cultural perspective. The views and opinions I have developed as part of my English upbringing were challenged by those from a German background. Although the two cultures are close in many ways there are still fundamental differences in thinking. It is these differences which continue to feed my fascination with the German people.

Our main UCL academic requirement for the year abroad was an extended essay on a subject of our choice, relating in some way to German society or culture. I concentrated on German Verist art of the 1920's and the turbulent social history which influenced it. Berlin's many galleries were an indispensable source of first-hand material, as well as institutions like the German Historical Institute, which has fabulous library facilities.

I attended a life drawing class twice a week at the Universität der Künste, in which the models sometimes took it upon themselves to teach the class as

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well! A memorable course was a poster art class taken by an acclaimed graphic designer, which gave students the opportunity to design the poster for the annual art show. With a friend from the art college I started to rent a cheap run-down apartment in East Berlin where we set up a dark room and an additional space for drawing and sculptural projects.

A small gallery close to this apartment agreed to show a selection of our work, and I ended up doing some voluntary administration work there afterwards.

### Photography project

Berlin proved to be a continuous inspiration for my creative work and prompted me to invest in a new camera and start documenting the city around me. I was particularly interested in the tenement blocks in the East Berlin suburbs, built as part of the socialist housing program. I developed this interest into a photography project. My rickety Diamant bicycle (the state brand of the GDR) was a trusty companion in my photography expeditions.

### British Council

I began working at the British Council at the beginning of the second term in Berlin. I gained an interesting insight into the workings of a bilingual environment, and became part of the primary agency for promoting Britain to a foreign audience.

I was struck by the friendliness of the people who worked in the Council and their willingness to help. I met, naturally, many people there who had studied German and this gave me an idea of the direction language students can take.

### Berlin social life

Throughout East Berlin large cultural centres, like Tacheles or RAW-Tempel, survive from the time of reunification, when they were claimed by squatters. They provided the bastion of my social life. They are non-profit organisations which offer theatre, film screenings and music nights far from mainstream culture. Volksküche was also a blessing, meaning literally "peoples' kitchen", where simple but delicious meals are served very cheaply. In this informal environment it was easy to meet other students, and a good place to invite new friends.

The year in Berlin gave me the critical distance to step back and consider my options after my degree. Many students do not have this opportunity, but an Erasmus year keeps you academically involved, but, at the same time, gives you time to reflect. Throughout the year, I became increasingly interested in current affairs.

I began to follow issues happening around the world, at the time when I was working in the British Council and had access to much material. I went to the Humboldt University Law Faculty where I enquired about course options for after my degree. My present inclination would

be to work in Human Rights on completing a Law degree, with an emphasis on International Relations.

This year has opened an exciting new door. I felt intellectually and emotionally challenged reading about Human Rights. It is a thorny topic which forever excites debate; juggling consideration of religious, political and ethical values of

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world societies and one which is, today, more important than ever. I have since joined Amnesty International and applied for a study placement in Budapest which concentrates on Human Rights issues. It surprises me to think how dramatically my perspectives have changed throughout the course of this year.

### Advantage and opportunities

The year, with all its challenges, has given me a new confidence. I took part in a drama course in Leipzig after leaving Berlin. It was based on the possibilities of gesture and movement as a compensation for language and as a retreat from traditional theatre, which relies heavily on dialogue. I now have the confidence to pursue this new interest and hope to audition for plays back at UCL, something I would not have been able to do a year ago.

Although I was intent on going to Berlin for my year abroad, even if I had not been offered the Erasmus program, I have since realised the full extent of the advantages and value of being supported abroad in this way. It provided the backbone to my experiences, many, I am sure, would not have been possible without it. Without doubt, it has been the most formative year of my life.

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