

Birdsong Study Abroad Scholar

Klagenfurt, Austria

Summer 2005



Heather Layne

Industrial and Systems Engineering

As I applied for the Birdsong Study Abroad Scholarship last spring, I could have never imagined what my trip to Europe this summer would entail. Having never traveled out of the country before, everything (beginning with the nine-hour international flight) introduced an opportunity for new experiences.

I chose to study German with the University of Alabama whose German department is in correspondence with the Universität Klagenfurt in Klagenfurt, Austria. The Universität Klagenfurt hosts an annual Deutsch in Österreich (German in Austria) Language Program. On Saturday morning, July 2, 2005, eighteen students from the University of Alabama, three from Auburn University and one from Florida State met at the Birmingham airport. We greeted each other with a sense of excitement knowing that we would be traveling together for five weeks. From Birmingham we flew to Chicago, IL where we had a six hour delay. We then boarded our international flight to Frankfurt, Germany. We arrived the next day in Frankfurt and boarded a smaller plane headed for Klagenfurt, Austria. That night we ate dinner as a group at a local Austrian restaurant and met the program directors from the Universität Klagenfurt.

Placement testing was designated for the morning of the first day of class. All of the students attending the university were tested to determine their existing German proficiency. Testing consisted of a written examination and an interview conducted in German. Placement levels ranged from a beginning level (for students with no German exposure) to Oberstufe II (a mastery level involving complex usage of German). I was placed in Grundstufe II. I also chose to take the music culture class offered on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

The remainder of our first day was devoted to a welcoming session where the Deutsch in Österreich program directors introduced themselves and the faculty. They outlined the in-class and out-of-class expectations and itinerary for the coming four weeks. It was wonderful to sense their enthusiasm about each of us being there. We were also told what countries were in attendance. They included the United States, Italy, Slovakia, Spain, Canada, Greece, India, Egypt, Ireland, and Finland. It was incredible realizing the scope of countries from which this program drew. Finally, we were given the results of our placement tests and met our teachers.

Class met daily from 9:00 – 12:30. I also attended the music culture class on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Class consisted of learning new vocabulary, practicing verbal communication, composing complex sentence structures, writing short essays, and training through listening exercises. One hour a week, a German linguistics teacher would practice phonetics with us. Rigorous, but fun exercises were implemented to better our German pronunciations. The music class focused on Austrian folksongs. Much of the music we read and sang was written in old dialect. Our teacher stressed not only understanding the literal translations of the songs but also learning the stories that influenced the songs' creations. At the Deutsch in Österreich farewell program, we sang a few of these songs.

Outside of class daily activities were planned. There was always a sporting event scheduled; whether it was a volleyball match or biking along the Wörthersee (a freshwater lake in Klagenfurt). We also frequented the local *bauernmarkts* (farmers' markets) in the towns surrounding Klagenfurt. Everything from locally produced *honig* (honey) to arts and crafts was for sale. One night we attended a traveling circus in the

neighboring town, Villach. Acrobats and circus entertainers from across the world came to exhibit their skills in the streets of Villach. My favorite outing in Klagenfurt was when we visited the local art museum. A rare collection from the artist Paul Klee was on display. The curator told us that this was a near-complete collection of his work, because it contained both public and privately owned pieces. I knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view such a magnificent collection. I also found it fascinating to know the troubled history of the artist. Although he was held with the same regard as famous artists like Picasso, a debilitating illness at the end of his life led him to create some of his most dark works of art.

Each weekend we had guided tours of cities in Austria and Germany. The first weekend we traveled throughout the surrounding Carinthian Mountains. This countryside contained rolling hills and valleys and a rich Austrian history. These towns included Mariaasaal, Friesach, and Gurk. There was one interesting story behind a stone chair that we stopped to view. In an annual ceremony, the reigning lord would sit in this chair and receive a slap from a commoner. This was to ensure that the lord would never become a prideful and unjust ruler. The first castle we visited was on Burg Hochosterwitz (Hochosterwitz Mountain). Although the 600 meter hike to the top was challenging, the view was incredible. For lunch, we ate in Friesach where I ordered my first Austrian Topfennudel (butter-noodle) dish!

The next weekend we traveled to Salzburg, Austria. Salzburg was one of the most memorable cities I visited. There we toured historic places such as Mozarts Geburtshaus (Mozart's birth home), St.Peter's monastery, and the Mirabell Gardens. It was interesting finding out that a scene from the Sound of Music was filmed in the

Mirabell Gardens as Maria and the children sing “Do Re Mi”. Next to the Mirabell castle was a garden with Zwergfigurines (dwarf statues) that represented bad virtues such as laziness and drunkenness.

The third weekend was our ‘free’ weekend. We had the option of traveling with the group or planning a trip on our own. Three students and I planned a trip to Munich, Germany. The week before the trip, we went to a travel agency and the Bahnhof (train station) to book our rooms and to reserve our train seats. It was exciting practicing our German with each business. Munich was a city full of things to do and see. We visited places including the famous Glockenspiel (the largest carillon in Germany), the Hofbräuhaus (a famous beer garden), and the English Gardens. The Glockenspiel is located in the Neues Rathaus, and as it chimes, copper figures dance to *Coopers’ dance* while other figures joust. The English Gardens were nothing short of breathe-taking. The perfectly trimmed hedges and lawns were decorated with brilliant flowers and trees. It was quite picturesque as a friend and I sat in the shade while enjoying our cones of Italian gelato!

After our four-week Deutsch in Österreich session ended, we packed our things, said our goodbyes, and left Klagenfurt. The following week involved a whirlwind of stops. From Klagenfurt we drove to Vienna where we stayed for three nights. After Vienna we spent one night in each of the following cities: Prague, Dresden, Eisenach, and Frankfurt.

There were so many landmarks in Vienna, but some specific things were rather impressive. We toured the great Schönbrunn and Belvedere Palaces. Inside the Belevedere Palace was a museum with original paintings by Monet on display. We also

toured St.Stephen's Cathedral and the Catacombs. This Imperial Burial Vault contains members of the Habsburg royal family. Also, one night a friend and I came across an outdoor film festival that was playing an Italian opera. Local restaurants had set up temporary booths and were selling everything from Japanese to Italian dishes. We thoroughly enjoyed eating dinner outdoors while watching a wonderful opera with hundreds of other people.

Prague offered a lot of interesting sites as well. When we first arrived, our tour guide rushed us to a carillon (similar to the one in Munich) that chimed at six o'clock p.m. From that clock tower, we walked to a theater house where we ate dinner as a group. The next day we visited the Old Royal Palace (the president's home), a cathedral housing the body of a martyred priest, and the Golden Lane (where Kafka worked).

Next we traveled to Dresden. This city was devastated during WWII. Many of the buildings we visited had been rebuilt or restored after the war. We toured the opera house and an art collection museum that displayed a green diamond once worn by royalty. We also walked along the Elbe River which is referred to as the 'Balcony of Europe'. Still, there was more to see in Eisenach.

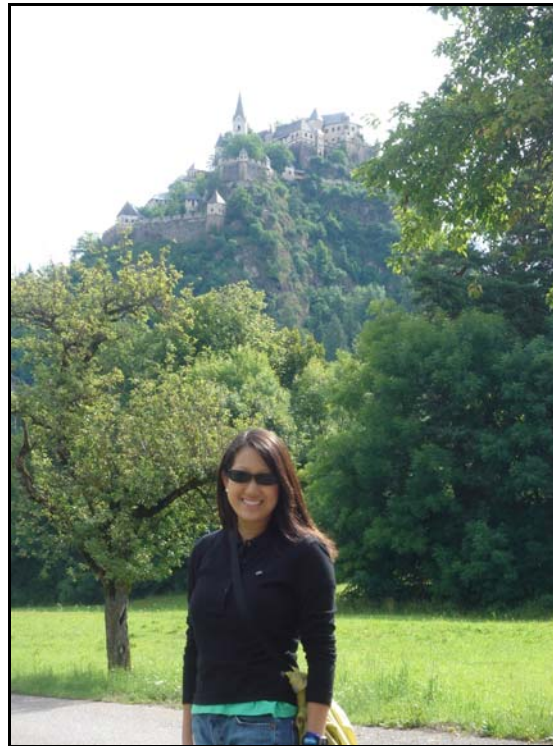
In Eisenach, we visited the Bach House. No one really knows if it is the authentic house where he grew up, but it was still very interesting to tour a typical home from that time period. The end of the tour involved an informational session where the curator played old piano-style instruments that were similar to the ones Bach played. Finally, we toured the Wartenberg Castle where Martin Luther was hidden after his excommunication. It was incredible seeing the actual room where he lived for ten months as he translated the Bible into German.

Our final night was spent in Frankfurt where we rested for our long flight home the next day.

As mentioned earlier, never could I have imagined the potential this study abroad opportunity held in store for me. This short report cannot begin to recall everything I experienced. I tried my best to sum up each event that took place, but the expression of my emotion and excitement is not as easy. Most important, it was the friendships I forged, the communication skills I developed, the cultural enrichment in which I was immersed, and, simply, the historic ground on which I walked that transformed me into a more learned individual. This special opportunity to studying abroad through the Birdsong Scholarship allowed me to take a break from my engineering studies and broaden my cultural perspective. As Robert Frost so appropriately wrote,

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Appendix:



The Hochosterwitz Castle behind me



The beautiful Woerthersee in Klagenfurt, Austria



The famous Glockenspiel in Munich,Germany



Over looking the city of Eisenach