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Burns Fellowship Report
CNET
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When I applied for the Burns Fellowship, I knew I wanted to be in Berlin.

I'd visited a couple of times before and had loved it. It also seemed like a great fit for someone who covers technology -- and who has essentially no German language skills. Those are both true, but I ended up in Munich.

I'm so, so glad I did.

I was the lone Burns Fellow in Munich this summer. Only one other person was based outside of Berlin, though we both were able to spend time in the city (and everyone came to Munich for a midterm meeting).

I worked on the Wirtschaft (economics/business) desk of Süddeutsche Zeitung, a paper that's comparable to the New York Times in terms of stature. Before my current job at CNET, I had covered business news for five years at Dow Jones/The Wall Street Journal, so it was a natural placement. I had hoped to work on a culture or metro desk to try something new, but I think I was actually able to contribute more to the business desk than in other areas.

The Burns Fellowship program started with a weeklong orientation in DC. The information was heavily focused on US politics, something I don't cover (or really need to know more about). The courses were interesting but not actually useful to me personally. I would have liked more information about Germany, especially since it was having an election of its own, as well as more cultural information, not just politics.

What I did enjoy was getting to know the other Burns Fellows, especially during our visit to the Airlie resort in Virginia. The US/Canadian fellows saw each other fairly often, but this was the only time we were with the Germans.

Munich in the summertime

Munich is a great place to be in the summer. Someone told me every neighborhood either has a river or pool for swimming (though I have failed as a journalist because I haven't independently verified that!).

When I arrived in Munich, the temperature was in the 90s, but there seemed to be thunderstorms every other day. When it was sunny, it was perfect weather for swimming in lakes near the Alps or going to the English Garden or Isar River in the middle of the city. Many nights, I'd have a beer and pretzel for dinner at a biergarten. I am so going to miss Munich's biergartens.

On September 1, the temperature immediately dropped to the high 40s/low 50s. I ended up having to buy a heavy raincoat, boots and sweaters. I had brought some warmer clothes but not warm enough for the dramatic temperature swing. Note to future fellows: bring more warm clothes with you!

I had language classes every morning during the first two weeks I was in Munich. I also had a private tutor every other day. I initially was jealous of the Berlin crew, who had a week of all-day classes and then a week off before starting work, but I ended up being happier with my schedule. I didn't get a week off before work began, but I had most afternoons free to explore Munich. (Pro tip: Journalists get in free to museums in Germany, even US journalists. That's something I wish I'd known earlier!)

I learned enough from my classes to have basic conversations and interpret menus but do little beyond that. My accent was so bad, no one could understand what I was saying, so I often didn't even try to speak German (seriously, people would misunderstand me saying something as simple as the name "Martin."). Like most other US fellows who've done this program, I wish I'd learned more German before arriving in Munich.

Touring Germany

Since I'd visited Munich a couple of times before, I tried to get out of the city as much as possible on the weekends. My plan was to visit places I normally wouldn't see on a shorter trip to Germany, specifically smaller towns in Bavaria.

I visited Murnau am Staffelsee with my language school, Landshut after class one day, Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Mittenwald for a weekend (which I LOVED) and Prien Am Chiemsee when a college friend visited. I likely would have gone to even more lakes if it hadn't rained nearly every weekend. Bavaria is absolutely gorgeous. The lakes are crystal clear, the mountainous landscape is stunning and the architecture is adorable. Plus, I became addicted to this Bavarian cheese spread called obazda. It doesn't look that appetizing, but future fellows, just trust me and try it. It's at every biergarten in Munich.

A Bavarian holiday meant I had a four-day weekend in between my language classes and starting at SZ, so I went to Baden-Baden, Strasbourg (France) and Heidelberg, where I met up with another Burns fellow. I unfortunately was in Baden-Baden when a train tunnel near the city collapsed, which meant it took me three local trains, three local buses and four hours to get to Heidelberg instead of a direct, 50-minute train ride I had booked. That route was closed for weeks.

I also traveled quite a bit for work. I ended up attending three different conferences around Germany: Gamescom in Cologne, IFA in Berlin and the Auto Show in Frankfurt, as well as Drinktec in Munich. If I could do this over again, I would have skipped Gamescom to instead work on features. (I went to the conference with two other fellows to hear German Chancellor Angela Merkel speak. Alas, the promised English translation never happened, so we watched her speech without understanding a single word she said besides "Canada." Ha!).

Working in Germany

Going into the fellowship, my goal was to write fun features for CNET that got me out of the office. I wanted to explore technology from the viewpoint of German culture. What happened, though, was a little different. I spent roughly three-fourths of the time writing about things I could have covered from my desk in San Francisco (Samsung Galaxy Note 8 launch, etc), something that had me pretty frustrated. It was only the last couple of weeks in the fellowship that I had time to report and write features.

Setting up interviews in August and September, when a lot of Germans are on vacation, was difficult. I also didn't have much contact with SZ before I started. My supervisor was on paternity leave, and his deputy was on vacation for the first month I was there. I assumed I would spend most of my time writing for CNET, but I did end up doing quite a bit for SZ, as well.

SZ is based on the outskirts of Munich, and its high-rise offices have an amazing view of downtown Munich and the Alps on clear days. I got distracted fairly often by the sight of farmers herding sheep. The building has a journalism school, daycare center and cafeteria that's basically the only place to eat in the area. The coffee costs about as much as the hearty, subsidized meals (My biggest culture shock was the lack of free coffee in the office. US reporters would have revolted a long time ago if someone took away their free caffeine fix!). I ended up sharing an apartment with journalism students, an easy 15-minute bus ride to work.

Everyone always says this, but it's true: Not knowing German makes things difficult. My desk had a meeting at 9:30 a.m. every day -- entirely in German (of course). I attended my first few days but then stopped going. I couldn't understand anything and couldn't really contribute. I was told I could pitch stories, but that was difficult to do when I had no clue what else was being written. Every story I wrote had to be translated, which I know meant a lot of work for the people helping me.

Going into the fellowship, I was worried about not having anything published by SZ, but the paper ended up running several of my tech business stories, as well as two articles for the metro section. Everything I wrote for the

business section was something I pitched (or more accurately, I just wrote stories and gave them to the tech and digital editors to publish if they wanted). The desk did ask me to write a commentary about my time working in New York during the financial crisis, and the metro section asked me to write something about Oktoberfest.

I didn't even know my first story ran until one of the German fellows saw it as one of the newspaper's featured Instagram stories. No one had bothered to tell me the paper was publishing a Samsung story I submitted or that it was posting another piece I'd written online. Along with several Samsung stories, SZ published an interview story I wrote from a meeting with Qualcomm's CEO at the Frankfurt Auto Show.

It was fascinating to observe how German newspapers operate. At SZ, all full-time journalists have the title of "editor," and they actually take turns editing stories. Digital and print are still separate, though the business desk is one area that's getting better at collaboration. It almost felt like stepping back in time to my early days at WSJ, when the paper was figuring out what to do online.

Many people at SZ were incredibly helpful when it came to researching stories. The restaurant editor called several big-name chefs to find one who would talk to me for a story (one I'm still reporting). One of the German politics writers got Gamescom to let me attend Merkel's speech, when they had earlier told me I couldn't go (apparently I didn't RSVP early enough). And an editor on the business desk found me regular people to talk about a popular German kitchen appliance (I even visited one of the interviewees at her home to cook with her and her children).

SZ's tech editor invited me along to the only interview granted by Samsung's co-CEO at the IFA electronics show in Berlin. It turned out to be a pretty newsworthy interview, and I'm so glad I was there. But because the meeting was given to SZ, not CNET, I had to write a summary of my own SZ story for CNET ("SZ reported ..."), per Samsung's requirements for the interview [insert eye-roll emoji here].

Oktoberfest -- something I had no desire to visit, not even when I was in college -- ended up being a big thing for me while I was in Munich. I thought I'd go once or twice, but I ended up visiting six times. (Yes, I know. I can't believe it, either). The SZ metro desk asked me to write a column about my impressions of Oktoberfest, which the paper ended up making into two different pieces -- one with my view and a second about American Oktoberfest misconceptions. SZ ran the articles in both German and English (which it really should do more often. The paper has an international site but doesn't update it very regularly. Everything I wrote had to be translated from English anyway. It would have been easy to also post the stories on the international site.).

After those pieces ran, a lot of people at SZ came up to me and said they enjoyed them (the paper ran my picture with one of the articles, so I was easy to spot in the company cafeteria). I wish that had happened earlier! It would have been a nice way to meet people. That cafeteria gave me flashbacks to middle school anxiety about who to sit with at lunch.

I also wrote an Oktoberfest-related story for CNET, my favorite to report while I was in Munich. That one focused on beer-making technology. I met with the famed Hofbräu München brewery and various machinery makers and suppliers to learn about new innovations in the industry.

Overall, I'm somewhat surprised at how much I wrote during my time in Germany. I wish I had had time to write more of those fun features, but I'll finish up a couple back in the US.

For future fellows deciding where to go, I would highly recommend Munich and SZ. People in Germany were more willing to talk to me when they heard I was working there, and it even impressed people I met in the park or at Oktoberfest.

In terms of the SZ Wirtschaft desk, I would only recommend working there if you either have strong German language skills or experience in business reporting. People would help with contacts when I asked, but besides that, I was on my own.

Burns connections

The Burns alum system has been amazing. I found out about the fellowship in the first place from a Frankfurter Allgemeine reporter who was based in my office a couple of years ago. He encouraged me to apply and even helped me find an apartment in Munich when I received my placement (he went to journalism school there and posted on the j-school's Facebook page about me needing a place to live). I also stayed at his apartment when I was in Frankfurt for an interview at the Auto Show.

And several of the alums at SZ also were incredible, getting lunch or dinner with me and giving me tips about Munich. One of the German fellows this year, who works at SZ, was beyond helpful. He checked in with me to see how things were going, gave me tips about the paper and Munich and really helped make my experience a great one. I'm so grateful to him and the other Germans who helped me during my fellowship. Even though I was on my own in Munich, I felt less alone because of them.

I was able to see other US fellows fairly often -- Heidelberg for a weekend trip, Cologne for a gaming conference, Berlin when I was in town for a tech conference and then our gathering/Okttoberfest in Munich. I'm proud to be part of such an amazing group of journalists, people I now consider my friends.

Parting advice

Along with eating lots of pretzels bigger than your head, I have some other advice for future fellows. The biggest is something I didn't do myself but had wanted to -- try to learn some German before you go.

If you have time (I know all journalists have loads of free time!), start reporting stories and setting up interviews before you head to Germany. It's difficult to schedule things when so many people are on vacation, so the more you can do before you get there, the better. Also, don't be afraid to ask colleagues at the German publication (or the German fellows) for helping finding sources, data, etc.

Be flexible. Of the three stories I pitched for my Burns application, I had time to write only one of them while I was in Germany and do most of the reporting for another. The third I scrapped entirely. Instead, I found the brewing tech story that ended up being my favorite piece to report.

Travel! See as much of Germany as you can, even if it's just exploring a different Berlin neighborhood every weekend.

Be open to placements outside Berlin. Germany's capital is an incredible city. It's a place I could see myself living one day, but I'm so grateful for the time I had in Munich. My social life maybe wasn't as active as the Berlin fellows, but I was able to see so much of "the real Germany" and explore a lot on my own. And that obazda cheese. Delicious!

Savor your time in Germany (literally and figuratively). It's so rare to have two months to live in another country, at least when not in college anymore. I wish more programs like the Burns Fellowship existed. I have a much better understanding of Germany and Europe in general after my time abroad, and I feel so lucky to have been part of this program. I can't recommend it enough.

Interviews may fall through, train tunnels may collapse, but you're going to have a time you'll never forget. Enjoy it! I know I did.

Clips:

21 August 2017

Samsung's big Note 8 challenge: Making it stand out

<https://www.cnet.com/news/samsungs-galaxy-note-8-challenge-making-it-stand-out/>

23 August 2017

Mit dem Note 8 will Samsung das Akku-Desaster vergessen machen

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/samsung-galaxy-note-mit-dem-note-will-samsung-das-akku-desaster-vergessen-machen-1.3637635>

23 August 2017

Neues vom Note

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/samsung-neues-vom-note-1.3637568>

27 August 2017

A nongamer's guide to one of the world's largest gaming shows

<https://www.cnet.com/news/gamescom-call-of-duty-a-nongamers-guide-to-one-of-the-worlds-largest-gaming-shows/>

27 August 2017

Scenes from Gamescom 2017

<https://www.cnet.com/pictures/scenes-from-gamescom/>

30 August 2017

Calling all fitness freaks: Samsung's new wearables want you

<https://www.cnet.com/news/samsung-gear-sport-fit2-pro-iconx-wearables-fitness-health/>

30 August 2017

Samsung's Bixby is a no-show on its new wearables

<https://www.cnet.com/news/samsungs-bixby-is-a-no-show-on-its-new-wearables/>

30 August 2017

Samsung IFA 2017 launch: What you need to know

<https://www.cnet.com/news/samsung-ifa-2017-launch-what-you-need-to-know-wearables-tv-appliances/>

1 September 2017

Wenn die Glotze mitdenkt

Der Fernseher kennt seinen Zuschauer, die Spülmaschine meldet Probleme: Ein Gespräch über kluge Geräte.

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/samsung-wenn-die-glotze-mitdenkt-1.3649278>

4 September 2017

Samsung is 'a ship without a captain,' says co-CEO

<https://www.cnet.com/news/samsung-electronics-bixby-ceo-bk-yoon-jay-y-lee-prison-iot/>

8 September 2017

The big iPhone 8 changes will likely cost you more than ever

<https://www.cnet.com/news/the-big-iphone-8-changes-will-likely-cost-you-more-than-ever/>

12 September 2017

Apple's iPhone X finally brings a much needed makeover

<https://www.cnet.com/news/apple-unveils-iphone-x-iphone-8-phone-8-plus/>

14 September 2017

Qualcomm Smartphones auf Rädern

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/qualcomm-smartphones-auf-raedern-1.3666526>

17 September 2017

Qualcomm says cars, not phones, will see the most innovation

<https://www.cnet.com/roadshow/news/qualcomm-says-cars-not-phones-will-see-the-most-innovation/>

21 September 2017

"Mit Umtata haben wir gerechnet, aber nicht mit Britney Spears"

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/oktoberfest-mit-umtata-haben-wir-gerechnet-aber-nicht-mit-britney-spears-1.3677584>

21 September 2017

"We all thought we'd hear oompah music, not Britney Spears"

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/octoberfest-in-munich-we-all-thought-wed-hear-oompah-music-not-britney-spears-1.3677919>

Also posted on SZ International:

<http://international.sueddeutsche.de/post/165619322325/we-all-thought-wed-hear-oompah-music-not>

22 September 2017

Elf Überraschungen, die Amerikaner beim Oktoberfest erleben

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/touristen-elf-ueberraschungen-die-amerikaner-beim-oktoberfest-erleben-1.3677347>

22 September 2017

11 things Americans get wrong about Oktoberfest

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/bavaria-things-americans-get-wrong-about-oktoberfest-1.3678068>

Also posted on SZ International

<http://international.sueddeutsche.de/post/165619741505/11-things-americans-get-wrong-about-oktoberfest>

22 September 2017

For the German election, no fake news is good news

<https://www.cnet.com/news/for-the-german-election-no-fake-news-is-good-news/>

5 October 2017

German breweries bring 1,000-year-old beer making into the modern age

<https://www.cnet.com/news/prost-a-look-at-german-breweries-of-the-not-too-distant-future/>

I have three pieces that haven't been published yet. One is a column for SZ about my time covering Wall Street for the Wall Street Journal during the financial crisis a decade ago. I also am finishing up a feature for CNET about the high-tech Thermomix cooking machine and another about the tech industry's efforts to help refugees find jobs.