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Here are a few of the things I learned from the Arthur F. Burns fellowship.

I learned that while many U.S. schools practically require an FBI clearance before they let reporters into a classroom, English teachers in Germany were more than welcoming to me after a cold call. And then they were happy to force their teenage students to talk to me about a sex-advice columnist.

I learned that those teenagers think nudity is no big deal. And that they think the U.S. open-container law is really, really hilarious.

I learned how to persist at street reporting while speaking only a little German. I learned how to ask more direct questions to “interview partners” who simply did not understand me when I beat around the bush, and how to get calls returned when half the people I called didn’t have voice mail.

I learned how to order a Milchkaffee in a perfect German accent (unfortunately, that was the *only* thing I could say in a perfect German accent), why everyone says Berlin is best experienced on bike, and that the fastest way to get someone frothing at the mouth in a Berlin laundromat is to bring up George W. Bush.

I learned that a huge part of being a foreign correspondent is dealing with logistics. And that the Burns alumni network is just as terrific as everyone promised.

I learned that dirndls are really cute – and expensive. That currywurst actually tastes good. And that Germany is surely one of the world’s most beautiful, complex, and underrated destinations.

I’m very grateful for the chance to have participated in the Burns program. It forced me way out of my comfort zone both personally and professionally and helped me look at the world much more broadly than I ever have before.

Every bit of reporting I did I found fascinating. The first commander of Checkpoint Charlie stood on Friedrichstrasse and showed me where he saw workers start to build the Berlin Wall. I asked Muslims in Hamburg about life since they learned the 9/11 hijackers plotted in their city. I talked to Germans on the street about Angela Merkel. And I interviewed Germany’s teen sex-advice guru, Dr. Sommer.

I spoke no German before applying for the program and was able to pick up only basic German by working with tutors before and during the fellowship. In many ways, this was not a big deal. So many alumni told me that pretty much everyone I would meet through work would speak English, that I could use it while reporting with no problem, and that I would hear it spoken regularly on the street in Berlin.

All of this was absolutely true. However. Interviewing people - especially law enforcement - in a language that wasn’t their native tongue seemed to result in less-nuanced reporting, and this bothered me.

I wound up writing five stories for my home newspaper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, two of which ran on the front page. All five were picked up by the McClatchy news wire service (formerly the wire service for Knight Ridder, which sold the Inquirer this year), and as a result, two of the stories subsequently ran in other newspapers.

My posting in Berlin was with Deutsche Welle's online English language web site. DW is the German international broadcaster, and its mission is to explain Germany to the world. Along with television and radio units, DW has web sites that translate news into 30 different languages.

The English page is aimed at a mostly American (as well as British and Australian) audience. DW's English staffers are a very interesting and smart group of people from several different countries who are divided between offices in Berlin and Bonn. Their primary tasks are translating and digesting German newspapers and wire reports into stories for the site. There is usually only about one originally reported story a day generated by the site, and many of the ideas for those stories seemed to come from other publications or events going on that week.

The English team basically left me to my own devices, saying I could work on my own stories at my own pace. In many ways, this was great. It was an incredible luxury to spend as much time as I needed on stories, especially since it seemed to take three times as long for me to do everything in Berlin as it did at home. It was also a nice change from my regular job, which has a lot of daily demands.

In a few instances, I repackaged some of the same reporting for stories for both the Inquirer and DW. (One, unfortunately, was a daily story, and that was a really long day.) I was also able to have a bit of fun with a few things I wrote for DW, like a riff on Oktoberfest and a visit to the Checkpoint Charlie museum.

However, I was disappointed by the lack of original reporting done by the site. This meant that I had to find my own "shadowing" opportunities and also meant that I wound up needing to seek a lot of reporting help from other Burns alums. It also made me wonder whether I should have explored a posting at a German-language newspaper, where I couldn't have written anything without translation help, but where I would have had more access to reporting resources.

I would recommend DW online to future Burns fellows only if they are seasoned reporters with a great deal of self-initiative who want the freedom to do their own stories and require no guidance or structure.

I would absolutely strongly recommend Berlin to any fellow. Working there put me right in the middle of everything and made it easier to meet people like political aides, professors, etc. And I was floored by how fun and livable the city was – and how ridiculously inexpensive.

Some thoughts about the program itself:

I thought orientation was terrific. The speakers provided a great basis for reporting in Germany – I wound up interviewing one of them later on. I'll always remember drinking beer with the German ambassador in his basement bar, meeting Henry Kissinger, and pretty much everything about Airlie. However, I think I learned the most just from the casual nighttime conversations with the German fellows.

I do think it would have been interesting to have a few speakers on German culture. And I will add my voice to the chorus calling for the program to be moved out of the high vacation month of August. If I had had access in August to all the people who helped me in September after they returned from vacation, I could have learned a lot faster and been much more productive.

Some practical advice for future fellows:

Try to read a lot of the really great journalism, past and present, produced by Berlin-based correspondents for U.S. papers. It helped me understand how American journalists explain Germany to their audiences at home.

If you're in Berlin, get on the Berlin Scholars listserve on Yahoo. It's a great resource for everything from housing to buying bikes to stuff to do in the city.

Get a bike. I didn't use mine as much as I thought I would, but I also didn't fall in love with Berlin until I started riding around.

Get a German cell phone, which is ridiculously pricey, but good for everyday text messaging and the maybe-more-than-occasional "Sorry, I'm late and I'm lost" call. And get Skype.

Don't compulsively try to travel every weekend. I am glad that I was able to experience Berlin as a resident, not a tourist.

But at the same time, at some point during your fellowship, try to get to another part of Germany other than where you're posted - particularly if you don't know the country well. This was my first time in Deutschland, and my travels during the fellowship and afterward on vacation (Hamburg for the mid-term meeting and to report, Munich during Oktoberfest, the Bavarian Alps and Rothenberg) helped me appreciate its complexity, history, regional differences and mind-blowing natural beauty. And pastries.

Now if only I could have found an affordable dirndl.