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Written for AGTV

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First of all, I would like to start off by saying a massive thankyou to everyone at AGTV for sponsoring me to participate in the amazing once in a life time opportunity that was the SAGSE scholarship.

All of the VIC Stipis (Scholarship winners) met at Melbourne airport at 1:15pm on Saturday the 23rd of November. After a rush of excitement it seemed that we were aboard the plane instantly. Even when we were up in the air and on our way to Germany, I don't think we fully understood how much our lives were about to change.

After the three long flights that it took to get to Nuremberg, I had finally met my host family. Since I have previously lived in Nuremberg, I felt as if I were home again and there is no better feeling than that. Driving through the streets of Nuremberg with my host family felt as normal as driving through the streets of Geelong, except for the fact that we were driving on the opposite side of the road. Arriving to what would be my home for the next 11 weeks was breathtaking. My house looked like it belonged in a film. After being given a quick rundown on the family history, I found out the house was over 100 years old, and the only house in my street that wasn't bombed during WWII.

I can safely say without any doubt that my host family made my exchange what it was. We couldn't have been more perfectly matched. My host sister Jonna was only 16, but regardless of that, is one of the most mature women I've ever met. We got along like a house on fire. She was always there for me, whether it be holding my hand as I found out my ATAR, or giving me a hug if I were feeling a little homesick. My host brother Joshua was only ten years old and he reminded me of that every day. "Amber, I am ten years old" is what he said to me every day without fail. It was by no means the only English sentence he knew, but it was his favourite. I eventually taught him "My name is Joshua and I am nearly eleven years old". My host father, Jan has his own business, but also works for BMW. Even though I lived with them for at least 8 weeks, I never figured out what it was exactly that he did, because he didn't even know how to describe it, nor did Jonna. Jan has been to Australia multiple times and has incredibly good English, so he was our translator if I couldn't quite think of the German word. He was often in Munich or

Switzerland for work. My host mother, Cocker works as an interior designer and was home most of the time. It was good to have her around so much because she is exactly like my mum! She is simply brilliant and a few tears were shed when we had to say goodbye. Cocker studied Latin and Italian while she was at school, so whenever we did have the occasional conversation in English, she would say "That word comes from Latin". After a while, my response was always "oh cocker!" Cocker isn't her real name though. Her real name is Brigitte. She got the nickname "Cocker" during high school. When her perm started to grow out and her dead-straight hair came though, people started calling her Cocker Spaniel, which was eventually shortened to Cocker.

My family spoke High German most of the time, which is like Oxford English. This made life a lot easier for me, because I could understand them exceptionally well, but whenever Oma (Grandma) came over, things changed. All of a sudden my Cocker started speaking Franconian (a type of German Dialect) with Oma and I was completely lost as to what they were talking about. Despite this barrier, the more I listened, the more I could understand and the last time that I saw Oma, I managed to have a full ten minute conversation with her. I think Oma and I had a special bond. Not because we got along very well, but because my host family was vegetarian, and Oma certainly was not. She would bring over the most delicious meals full of meat for me and they always tasted absolutely amazing!

One of the first things that I was told about my school, is that it is a Rudolf Steiner School, and also that there is a subject called Eurhythmy, where the students have to wear robe like dresses and dance. I thought it was some sort of strange joke, but then, without fail, on my second day of school I had to participate in the class that is Eurhythmy. I was quite embarrassed for the first few lessons, but after then it became quite clear that this was normal for the students of my school, because they had been learning Eurhythmy since their first day. Towards the end of my exchange, my teacher's passion for Eurhythmy started to rub off on me. After the last Eurhythmy lesson of my exchange, I found myself having a fluent 15 minute conversation about eurhythmy, and its pros and cons. About why people do it and how it increases concentration. It was after this conversation that I realised how much my time at this Steiner School had not only broadened my mind to different and new methods of learning, but also how much it had improved my German.

I had been attending the 5th grade English class of my host brother since I'd arrived. One day my English teacher Mrs Pyrah asked me if I could teach the class on Tuesday because she was going to be away. Teaching English in Germany has been my dream job for years. I was stoked. Suddenly it was Tuesday and it was my turn to teach. I had printed out crosswords and word searches that were on the topic of weather and the kids loved them! I also gave the kids a map of Australia (capital cities included) and a forecast for these cities. They then had to write down what the temperature would be next to the city e.g. "It will be 23 degrees and rainy in Hobart". This confused them a bit, but they were happy again when I said they could colour in the map. I figured that the class went well because the kids were mostly quiet and a girl called Anna asked me "kommen sie Morgenwieder?" which means, are you coming again tomorrow. When I said yes, a massive smile spread across her face.

On the Friday after my arrival, my host family had 10 Swiss men and women over for dinner. Not only did we host them for an extravagant dinner, but we also showed them all around Nuremberg. One of the Swiss couples works for Sternstunden, a charity who at Christmas time, sell Christmas ornaments at Christmas markets and donates all proceeds to children in need. I volunteered at the Sternstunden stand with my host family numerous times in the lead up to Christmas. Because I can speak English and German, I was able to converse with most people walking by the stand, and successfully raised over 100 euros for Sternstunden. Having this experience at the start of my SAGSE exchange really helped me understand what kind of people my host family are. I really do feel homesick when I think about them.



(The view of the Mediterranean Sea from the balcony of my host families new house in Rovinj)

From Friday the 6th of December until Sunday the 8th, my host family and I were in Rovinj, which is situated on the coast line of Croatia. My host family have been taking holidays to Rovinj for quite some time and for them, the time had come to buy a house there. Only Jan and Jonna and seen the house before. So seeing the house for the first time was a bit of a shock to Cocker, Josh and I. It was a tiny 60sqm house that had last been renovated in the 60's, but the view from the balcony was breathtaking. Jonna and I spent a lot of time wandering around Rovinj while Cocker was taking measurements at the house. Jan suggested that we take a walk around the botanical gardens, so we did. Or at least we thought we did. We spent 15 minutes walking around this rather small yet beautiful garden. We both thought it was a bit weird that there was a house in the middle of this garden, but we took photos of it too because it was pretty. It wasn't until we left the garden and looked back at it that we saw the sign saying "PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT!" Woops. It took 16 hours to drive to Rovinj and back, but that didn't bother me. We had to drive through Austria and Slovenia just to get to Croatia so my passport and I sure had fun.



(The "Botanical Gardens")

The Christmas that I spent in Germany last year, was the Christmas I learned that I'm allergic to Christmas trees, just like my mum. Therefore, not only was my Christmas this year itchy, it was also very different to what I'm used to. The Christmas tree wasn't put up and decorated until the 24th of December, and while this was happening, Jonna, Josh and I were in our rooms waiting for something. Half an hour later I heard Josh running up the stairs like a stampede of Elephants, screaming "Amber! Amber! It's ready!" So downstairs we went. We were standing at the bottom of the stairs when a bell started tinkling. Josh was off like a rocket to the Christmas tree and already looking for his presents by the time Jonna and I got to the door. I already knew that in Germany, people mainly celebrated Christmas on the 24th and opened their presents then too, but I was somewhat shocked when Josh brought out his recorder, started playing Christmas carols and Jonna, Cocker and Jan started singing along. It was something that I hadn't been expecting. This went on for about an hour and afterwards we put our presents back into piles and went to bed. On Christmas Day we didn't do much. We drove for 45 minutes to a small village and went walking for 4 hours. This was also confusing for me, because I was expecting the family to come over and enjoy a feast at our house. That didn't happen until the next day though. Jan's entire side of the family came over. One of the first things they noticed about me was that I wasn't wearing any shoes or socks, and I was quickly given the nickname of "Hobbit". We sung Christmas carols for about an hour and a half until dinner was ready and then we feasted like kings!

After the New Year, it was time for Wintercamp and Freetravel. These two weeks were the best two weeks of my life. During Wintercamp I was really able to bond with the other Stipis. It was a time where we all got to know each other really well, and started to feel comfortable with one another. At the start things were a bit awkward, because we'd only shared a few brief meetings in Australia and a plane ride together, but we soon realised that we all had one thing in common, and that was German. Towards the end of Wintercamp we had to organise our Freetravel groups. Initially this was difficult, especially because there were 31 of us and we hadn't really discussed who wanted to go where, but within 20 minutes everything was done. Groups were sorted and we all knew exactly

where we wanted to go. My group consisted of 8 people and we started our Freetravel journey by heading off to Hamburg. We arrived in Hamburg in the afternoon, dropped off our bags at the hotel, and decided to have a look around the city. By nightfall, we had found ourselves in the “hipster” area of Hamburg. But this wasn’t its only title. It had also recently been marked as a “Danger Zone” and we soon found out why. We had met up with another group who had travelled to Hamburg and found a street full of restaurants and take-away stores. We soon split up into smaller groups of four and went off to get our dinner. My group were sitting along the side of the road eating our Döner Kebabs, when all these people came marching down the street yelling, letting off flares and holding banners in the air. It was the first protest any of us had ever experienced. Faster than it took us to comprehend what was going on, the police were there trying to dissolve the situation. They didn’t fully succeed, but at least they moved the protestors away from us. We soon regrouped and went back to our hotel, talking excitedly about what we’d all just witnessed. Eventually we had to figure out what we were going to do the next day, so we sat around and planned it. For my year 12 German oral exam, I had studied the Wattenmeer and its pollution, so I was determined to travel there.

My determination paid off, because the next morning my friend Daina and I were on a train at 5am on our way to Sankt Peter-Ording. Visiting the Wattenmeer wasn’t my most well thought through plan though. Not only was it winter, but it was also a public holiday. The shops were closed and public transport was most certainly not running. 25 minutes, 25 Euros and one taxi ride later, we had finally made it to the Westerhever Lighthouse. It’s been weeks since I visited the lighthouse but I still find it difficult to describe how breathtaking this place is. People say that Australia has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world, and I used to think this too, but now after seeing the Wattenmeer, I have to disagree. To describe the Wattenmeer is simple, a lot of water and a lot of mud. This sentence makes it hard for the brain to imagine something beautiful, but that’s the point. There is nothing I can say to explain the marvellous place that is the Wattenmeer.



That night my Freetravel group and I were on our way to Cologne. The Tuesday that we spent in Cologne was the most exhausting Tuesday of our lives. 532 is the amount of steps one needs to climb to get to the top of the Cologne Cathedral. We looked up to the top of the Cathedral and I simply said “when in Köln” and we were in the lobby buying our tickets a few minutes later. Once we finally reached the top, we were all tremendously

proud of ourselves. We had overcome fears of heights, the ever strengthening wheeze of asthma and the sleep deprivation and fatigue that came with Wintercamp and Freetravel. We sat down at the top of the Cathedral for a maximum of ten minutes while figuring out what to do next and then we were off again. We visited the Hard Rock Cafe, the Chocolate Museum and then went out to Vapiano, an amazing Italian restaurant for one of the Stipis Birthdays.

The next day we arrived in Munich at 12:30. After finding our hostel, dropping off our bags and showering, we decided to take a day trip to Dachau Concentration Camp. This was difficult for all of us and we all handled it differently. I had visited Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp on my previous exchange with BJR, but that didn't make the second trip any easier. On our second day in Munich, we took a free tour around the city and then went shopping. One of the Stipis, Ben, decided it would be funny if he bought Lederhosen and wore them to the Hofbräuhaus for dinner that night. While he was trying some Lederhosen on, another Stipi, Sarah and I tried on some Dirndls just for fun, but we ended up buying them. We arrived at the Hofbräuhaus in our finest Bavarian clothing and instantly had a tourist couple come up and take a photo with us. The meal at the Hofbräuhaus was delicious and the atmosphere was unforgettable. On our last day of Freetravel we found ourselves shoving our shopping baskets full of chocolate at Milka World. After saying goodbye to the group, those few extra kilos of chocolate in my backpack made the trip home more difficult than it already was.

The last week of my SAGSE exchange we spent in Berlin. It was definitely hard to say goodbye to my host family, and a lot of tears were shed, but I know that I'll eventually be back to see them again. On the first night of Berlin Camp, we visited the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag. Seeing both of these places at night time was lovely. On the second day of Berlin camp we visited the New Zealand Embassy and had coffee and cake with the New Zealand and Australian Ambassadors.



Then, after dinner, we went to the Fairy Tale Hut, and watched some brilliant short plays, which were takes on two Grimm Brothers fairy tales. On Thursday we had a tour of the Berlin underground. We were taken through some of the bunkers that had been built under Berlin during WWII and were to be used again during the Cold War. We were told some shocking facts. For example, there would be no one down in the bunkers with the civilians to tell them what to do. They had to figure out for themselves who would be in charge. We also got told that these bunkers were not actually built to survive nuclear bombs. They just painted the walls and told people it would stop the radiation. After this tour we had another tour above ground. It was very difficult to understand the tour guide, as he spoke English with a very thick German accent, but we still got a lot out of the tour and learned a lot that we didn't know. On the last day of Berlin Camp, we visited the German Historical Museum. This is where we had a miss understanding with our tour guide. We thought she had said that Napoleon's head was on display at the museum, but much to our disappointment, we got upstairs and saw a hat (a prime example of the German accent). Later on in the day, we went to Hohenschönhausen, an old Stasi Camp used to Torture prisoners for information and confessions. The father of our tour guide had actually been a prisoner in the camp for complaining to the west about the lack of Jazz music in the east. For dinner that night we went to a Mexican restaurant and while we were eating our meals, a random man started serenading us by playing his didgeridoo. We all assumed the camp organisers had set it up, but as it turns out, it was just a pure coincidence. After finishing the night off with a few hours at a Karaoke Bar, we made our way back to the hostel and began the horrible task of packing.

The entire journey home was one full of sadness, although we all felt a stab of excitement at the thought of returning home to our families. My friend Sarah and I decided to wear our Dirndls for the entire trip home and surprise our families. It is fair to say that the security employees at the airports didn't appreciate the metal buckles on our Dirndls.



In summary I would just like to thank everyone at AGTV again for providing me with this amazing opportunity. The SAGSE exchange has definitely concreted my decision to become a German teacher. I hope that in a few years, I'll be reading a report written by a student sponsored by AGTV.

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