

# HÄ, WAS?



THE ADVENTURES  
OF JOHANNA- AN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENT LIVING  
IN FREIBURG

## HOW TO HANDLE CULTURE SHOCK IN A NEW COUNTRY

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INTERCULTURAL MENTORING

# Living in a foreign country is hard!

Don't get me wrong, it is also WONDERFUL. Living in a foreign country can help open your mind in more ways than you could ever imagine. But honestly speaking, it's not always as easy as what you may expect! Today I want to specifically talk about the very real struggle of culture shock that some of you may be facing.

Truthfully, I didn't think culture shock could even happen to me! I come from a modern society so living in Germany couldn't be too different from home, right? It wasn't like I was going to a tiny village in the middle of nowhere, where I couldn't communicate with others and there was no WiFi (haha, joking). Quite the opposite, actually! Freiburg city is international, modern, and well connected city.

It's vibrant, green, and progressive. People take their bikes everywhere, there's nature all over, and it's BEAUTIFUL. I have all the comforts of living in a modern country and even in some ways a fairytale city so why was it so difficult to get used to living here?

## *WHY DID I FEEL SO ALONE, LITTLE, AND AFRAID?*

The strange thing is that even after living a year in Spain, traveling all around Europe, and backpacking around Asia I had never *really* experienced culture shock. I found being in new countries all the time to be fun and thrilling- the more different, the more excited I was! It gave me so much LIFE to be in new places everyday as a backpacker. I loved the days of adventure, meeting new people, and seeing the world! Germany, however, has been a very different experience.



*Stine & yours truly  
back in Spain!*

My dear Danish friend Stine, who I met when I was living in Spain, recently relocated to the Costa Rican Jungle. She's had her fair share of culture shock herself. Here's what she had to say about living in a foreign country:

"I think for some reason I was expecting the first few years to be the most challenging and then things would start to get easier and just float from there... but nope I was wrong! And it's funny because before moving abroad I had all these worries and concerns that was a complete waste of time, and the things that are **ACTUALLY** hard I could never have prepared for...

I guess you just have to live every lesson, and learn everything from scratch again. And like you say, **deconstruct your old idea of reality in order to form a new one.**"

Living in a new country comes a plethora of shapes and forms, there's not just one way or experience. If you're here for a short amount of time as an Erasmus student, your outlook will probably look different from someone who is planning to move here indefinitely. Your age, life experience, and cultural background might also change how you perceive living in a new country- you may both appreciate different things, and also have a variety of different struggles.

*"Learning to live in another culture takes deeply curious living, gentleness, and resilience."*

Even if things look stress-free and fairytale-like on the outside, it doesn't mean that your feelings from other parts of your life will simply vanish away. That's the magic in spending time in other countries, to be honest. If you let it be, living abroad it can be an incredibly healing practice. ***I feel like to live in another country you have to deconstruct the ideas of EVERYTHING you've been taught were "your" values and learn which thoughts and ideas actually belong to you.*** You're given the time and enough distance from your everyday life, as well as the lives of people here, to be able to see things from a distance. Deconstruction and reconstruction of the values and ideas we've thought were the "ultimate truth" is hard work to do, friend! But it's worth it. Living abroad forces you to look at people differently, to UNDERSTAND human beings on another level, and not just to dismiss what others do or say just because it's different from what you're used to. Learning to live in another culture takes deeply curious living, gentleness, and resilience. For those who are truly ready to grow and learn something from themselves, **it's an incredible opportunity to learn about yourself, your past, and who want you continue evolving into.**

*I asked a variety of travelers for advice on how they overcame culture shock since, well, two heads are better than one! Here's what they had to say:*

# ADVICE

## FROM SARAH DECKER

I studied abroad for four months in Spain during my junior year of college. I definitely experienced culture shock. Not just culture, but having to speak Spanish immediately and my host family not understanding English was also a big adjustment.

### What got me through it and what I tell others is:

- 1) Take it one day at a time. Don't think about how the next few months will be, focus on the present.
- 2) Absorb everything. Pay attention. Try to learn as much of the language, the customs, and what's offensive/pleasing in that culture.
- 3) Have a tough mentality. Decide before you even go that you're not going to let stuff get to you- Like mistakes concerning culture, people making fun of you because you mess up speaking the foreign language, and potentially getting lost in a new city. (All of this happened to me in my first week but I refused to cry or let it get to me. I knew I'd get it together eventually)
- 4) Make a friend in the new place who is from there and try to learn as much from them as possible. A kind hearted person will be more than willing to be patient as you learn a language and will love to explain their culture to you.
- 5) See it all as much as possible while you can! This is my biggest piece of advice. I saw a few other international students in my program lock themselves in their apartments and refuse to go out and travel or meet new people. I understood the anxiety you feel as an outsider, but you never know when or if you'll ever be able to go back. Don't let your connection back to your home prevent you from experiencing life in a new place. Make time for significant others/family members maybe a couple hours a week to chat with in the phone. But 99% of your time should be spent with people in your new country-whether that be natives or fellow travelers. I told myself I would always get back to Europe but 5 years later I still haven't! Once I started law school and work there just wasn't time. I am so glad I made every day count when I lived in Spain and travelled as much as possible all over Europe while there. I loved my time there and it made a huge difference in my personality, independence, and freedom.

*Sarah at the  
Morella Castle!*



# ADVICE

## FROM FIONA LAZIĆ

"We are a couple that moved from New Zealand to Sweden and we've gained our daughter (my partner's daughter moved from Australia to live with us) and we've had a child born here in Sweden. The culture shock is huge but we've worked out what works best for us, we suggest the best way dealing with any challenges in living aboard is to be openminded and to learn as much as you can about the lifestyle, the way things work, the language and to network with others both International and locals... The language does have a big affect on being able to connect with older people here but out of respect we try our best which can lead to some funny conversations and observations of the language. It is much MUCH easier to make friends in New Zealand as people there are more easy going and friendly, whereas most people in Sweden are very reserved but nice once they open up to you. We connect easily with other Internationals but open to connect with local Swedes"

## FROM MANUELA TORO

"Hi! I moved abroad 10 years ago and have lived in 6 countries since, so can definitely relate. Re culture shock: observe, be patient, and have a sense of humor! Most afraid of: loneliness and the weather (I'm from a tropical place and still not used to the darkness of winter, I get depressed - that's probably that I fear the most, now that I see it in writing). Adapting is a delicate balance.. a family member once told me "once an immigrant always an immigrant", and I've found truth in that. 'Home' is not a straightforward concept for me anymore. The good news is that I've learned that my home is inside me and I get to create it in whatever way I want! It's beautiful when "foreign" things become home too "

# ADVICE

## FROM ASHLEY MAE

" I'm American - moved to South Korea in 2012 and had the largest culture shock of my life!! Now I live in Norway- and culture shocks still happen. *What I've learned is that loneliness and missing family and where your from is a part of the experience; it makes you appreciate where you come from and where you are now. So embrace that instead of being in fear and sad or scared of being lonely.* It helps to either search for and find or make replacements for things, traditions, rituals you used to enjoy at home. Like stopping to get a pretzel at the mall with my mom became stopping to get fried dumplings when I was out shopping downtown in South Korea; and had become getting gelato in Norway (I know, kinda weird!)"

Personally, I've found that it's best to find people who understand what you're going through. Sometimes all you need is someone who is in the same situation as yourself to realize you're not alone. I found that either other international students, or locals who have spent time abroad (specifically in your home country) have a better understanding of the differences and can also reflect with you about your struggles or misunderstandings you have while living abroad. Secondly, don't be afraid to make friends with someone who really understands the culture. This person could help explain the mentalities you may have difficulties understanding. Don't ever be afraid to ask questions. If you come from a place of genuine curiosity, I've found that most people want to explain why they have certain perspectives or their cultural norms with internationals!

Lastly, don't give up & don't be afraid to ask for help. The person you are becoming through the process of living abroad will open your perspective, heart, and mind up in more ways than you can imagine. Stay curious & take every experience you get as an opportunity to learn more about yourself. And of course if you ever have any questions, the Intercultural Mentoring Team is here for you!

*xoxo, Johanna*