

PERSONAL STATEMENT

XXXX, Germany, German

I stand on the beach and look around slowly at the throngs of bathing-suit-challenged Europeans surrounding me. And to my surprise, I feel quite at home.

How on EARTH did I, a sensible, down-to-earth girl from rural Maine, get HERE?

Although I'd been to Europe twice before and have traveled throughout the United States and Canada, it is safe to say that I've spent my entire life in Maine. I have always had the luxury of living where things are familiar and comfortable. In the little sphere that I call home, I've been versed in the etiquette of living in a small town since birth: That I should chat to all the good familiar folks about nothing in particular as I check for invasive plant species at the boat launch. I grew up with these people in the place where the most exciting thing to happen is the fireworks during the Blueberry Festival and where news travels faster than the TGV through France. Living in the town comes with a code very familiar to me, and by this point, I've got it down pat.

Even after branching out of my hometown as I went to college, I still live a mere hour from home. My parents can come to my rescue should I need anything. I have friends nearby brimming with common sense who can advise me should I run into any scrapes. My older siblings can tell me cautionary tales of their younger years at the drop of a hat, helping me to not fall victim to similar mistakes.

That's why I awoke in a state of panic on my first night of my semester abroad in Regensburg, Germany: I was completely alone, my support system an ocean away and a new and altogether foreign cultural code to learn. I had never felt more scared, confused, or utterly alone in my entire life.

And through the six months of the program, I had no choice but to learn Regensburg's code from the ground up, to embrace all that was foreign and scary. Stepping out of my comfort zone and replacing all the customs I knew from Wilton with new ones, beginning with conquering the daunting task of navigating and checking out at the supermarket, leading to mastering the train system and the thrills of a German Folk Festival, and finally conquering my fear of giving a 20 minute solo presentation to a classroom full of native German students helped become a more confident, more worldly person. The feeling of being alone was completely gone, replaced with a sense of independence and belonging, of growth.

Leaving all that was familiar and comfortable taught me to think for myself, to fight my own battles, to become worldlier. I have seen things I never thought I would have the pleasure of seeing, made fast friends with strangers, fought away the fears, become a person far different from the small-town girl of yore. And I realize with a smile as I wade into the water to join my suit-less friends, that it was all because I exposed myself to culture.