

Voluntary service in Germany 2011/2012, Ali, Venezuela

My Community Service year in Germany – an unique experience.

Well...Where can I start? For me this was a unique experience. Hi I'm Ali, a *chevere* Venezuelan who participated in the AFS Community Service Program in Germany back in 2011-2012.

The AFS volunteer service in Germany was fantastic. With this kind of program you can make a lot of experiences, one doesn't just gain intercultural knowledge and learns a new language, one actually grows a lot as person by interacting with the people with whom you live and work. All this was a unique experience for me.

The place

My experience started in Maiquetia, along with 5 others. We were all going to Germany but to different cities...maybe Hamburg or Berlin, not bad right? Well not me. I stayed in a small town called Hettsted in the Sachsen Anhalt region. At first I stayed in a nearby town called Namburg – at least I think that was the name of it hahaha-, this is where my 'Days off and weekends family' lived (I stayed with them on my days off from work and on my weekends). My family, The Dammanns, what a wonderful family! I love them very much: my mother Doris, my dad Ralf, my siblings Christopher and Anne, and Anne's husband as well. They are great, and so are my aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins and family friends. Hettsted is a small town and that's what makes it awesome, it is 15 min away from my host family's house and not that far from Berlin where my sister lives, so I could visit them often.



The work



I worked in Kolping, because that's the biggest learning center in Hettsted. For those of you who don't know what this institution does, they help young people with adaptation problems, to gain knowledge so they're able to work and make a better life for themselves. I fell in love with this project, because back home I'm a teacher in a University but on the side I have my private Tech company, where I teach kids about computers but also give them *tools* for their future.

At first my duties weren't clear, I helped in many departments: kitchen, wood and free time activities...hahahaha at the end I obviously stuck with wood and free time activities (sorry but I'm the kind of guy who burns cereal). That's who I became a *liaison* between the kids and the teachers.

The language

The institution gave me an apartment, where I stayed during the week or on weekends when I helped the teachers with special activities. At the beginning it wasn't easy, almost no one spoke English at work and even less Spanish! In general very few people could speak English, maybe it

had to do something with the fact that I was in a small town in Eastern Germany, where English is not a strong point. The organization had a hard time finding an English course for me, because I was far away from most learning centers; but that didn't get me down. I started studying by myself and a German teacher who could also speak a bit English helped me. I watched TV and spent a lot of time with the kids from Kolping and even though at the beginning I didn't understand everything it was a lot of fun. Afterwards I got better and better and being completely honest in 3 months I could defend myself in German.

Free time and friends

My work was basically being one of the kids so I got involved in the same activities as them, from working with them to playing and having fun. It was very fulfilling for me because even though they were "disabled" I never had any issues with them. On the contrary, they came to me and told me their problems and I helped them a lot so I gain many friends in this organization. **Honestly, my heart is with this institution and will always be there.**



I had to live by myself, but hey: Most people in our age in Germany already live by themselves, it's normal. And never forget you're the one who should adapt to the situation/culture and not the other way around. I got into this mindset and even though I had a host family I didn't mind being by myself sometimes: in my apartment, going out for a walk or just buying groceries to later watch Germany's Top Model (hahahaha). I studied German, talked to my host family or planned a trip... (I'm a genius at traveling cheap). Most of the time I visited friends who were participating in the exchange as well. We shared a lot of good moments and sometimes I visited them at their jobs. These people became like family and I saw them often. So even though Hettstedt is not as big as Berlin or Hamburg I had always something to do. **This experience is by far the best I've had in my life and I'll treasure it forever.**

AFS activities and seminars were very insightful. You could really see how you've adapt the language and how your German had improved. I remember that my first seminar was kind of shocking for me, because I thought all could speak better German than me even though we had around the same level. The thing is that they were already going to classes. But at the end in my last seminar everyone was pretty happy with my level which I maintain.

You guys, I just want you to read this and see that not everything will be just exactly as you picture it. But I ask you: Isn't it that what makes life so exciting? **With this program you can have a great life experience and if you ask me to do it all over again I would, no doubts about it.** So to my beloved AFS, thank you for everything!