

# Here's my Study Abroad Story

**Melanie Bello**

**IES Berlin: Language and Area Studies  
Berlin, Germany**

**Major:** International Relations and German (dual)

**Program:** The IES Berlin program site is located in the center of Berlin, only a ten minute walk to the Brandenburg Gate, German Parliament, the historic Friedrichstrasse train station, and so much more. In your IES classes, you'll have multiple fieldtrips around the city to sites such as Turkish neighborhoods, mosques, and restaurants, the "Regierungsviertel" (where all the government buildings such as the parliament are located), and Museum Island. You'll really get an up-close view of the city, the major historic sites, and the greater Brandenburg area.

At the beginning of the semester, you'll have three weeks of an intensive German language class to sharpen up your German if you're feeling a bit rusty. You'll also take one German language course throughout the semester with other international students. Aside from these, you have the option of taking your courses at the program site with German professors and American students from



your program and of taking courses at the local universities. IES courses are extremely diverse to appeal to different subject areas and interests. They vary from contemporary issues of multiculturalism to timeless German literature or German history and international relations.

**Typical Day:** I would usually wake up early to go for a run next to the beautiful canal that wove through my neighborhood. I would then head to my program site by metro (later I explored the bus system), which would take about half an hour. My home stay was only about three miles from the program site, but the metro commute required a couple transfers. For lunch, I would usually take a sandwich or grab a quick bite at a wurst stand or at any of the other tons of options. Most of my classes were in the afternoon, so I would stay in the center from about noon until dinner time. Because meals are not included in the IES home stays, I would normally cook for myself a few times a week.

On other days, I would explore my neighborhood and have dinner at a local place. On weekends, my friends and I would usually get together and cook a big meal together. We would also take day trips on the weekends to the lakes that surround Berlin, museums, and other cultural places. About twice a month, my host mom and I would get together to cook and eat a meal together.

**Highlights:** I loved getting to know Berlin by foot. One of the best decisions I made while abroad was to run my first half marathon. I loved the excitement and emotions as I was being cheered on by people with German sayings that I'd never heard before. I had already been in Berlin for about two months at that point, but I felt as if I didn't know the city as well as I could. Looking back, I know this feeling stemmed from the fact that I was traveling mostly by metro, which didn't allow me to really see the sites and interact with people. Because the marathon route ran across the whole city, I saw so many new places that I couldn't believe I hadn't seen before. After running the half marathon, I was invigorated to do my traveling by foot and by bus so that when I left Berlin, I would feel like I really knew the city and wouldn't feel like something was still missing. I got out of my comfort zone and back into my running groove. I spent most of the spring time running around the city.



**Challenges:** It was difficult for me to get used to living in such a big city like Berlin. I grew up in a small suburban city, only ten minutes from CMC. So starting college and living in a dorm was the farthest I had been from home. For the first couple of months in Berlin, I felt nervous when traveling around at night, especially when I was alone. Although it is good to be cautious, I knew I had to adjust to my new environment. This is why running was so important to me—it allowed me to get to know the city so that I would feel more comfortable when traveling by myself. I eventually learned to trust my instincts and knowledge of the city to know when I was safe and could relax.

**Advice:** 1) Push your comfort zone past its limits, and don't let your language abilities keep you from exploring the city. If you feel like you haven't gotten to know the city, take a weekend and just walk around by yourself. See as much as you can!  
2) Don't be afraid to explore beyond your IES program. They do a great job in creating a nice and welcoming environment, but don't get too comfortable that you never explore beyond the program site and American students. Take the chance to go to new place and meet other German or international students.  
3) Make your experience your own. See what you want and go where you want without hesitations. This trip is for you and your own cultural growth. Don't hold yourself back!