

When I finished my work schedule, I usually went out to know more about the city. I marveled at everything that Hamburg has to offer: the “Reeperbahn” and its illuminated streets with neon signs everywhere, crazy techno parties, German beer and happy people at “Jungfernstieg”, and its luxury stores, cars and fancy lifestyle. I went to “Alster river” and its beautiful views, mansions and small boats, the hippie streets with lots of cool places and “Sternschanze”, the long and green roads of the “Botanische Garten” and all that a “Hafen” can offer, German food, water, amazing views and history.

Living as a volunteer in Hamburg broke those stereotypes that normally people have about Germans. Cold? Probably just the weather, as Germans are very friendly and nice. They have that empathy that teaches you with time that a German friend is a friend for a lifetime, no matter the distance, age or the social level.

Without knowing it, having made the decision to live this experience changed my life. The fact of having lived alone, of having known so many cultures, of having worked in another country and of having learned another language made me a better version of me - with more self-confidence, determination, visions, empathy and most important, good vibes.

How sitting at a table can create cultural misunderstandings

Carolina Bonsignori (Italy)
EVS Volunteer in Denmark

When I arrived in Rejsby in South Jutland, I had no idea about the cultural differences between Italy and Denmark. The only thing that I was told was that the Danes like to spend time at home and that they're not as much outgoing as other Europeans. The teacher with whom I had done my interview told me that they liked to go home after work, light some candles have a cup of a warm drink and stay together with their families. Not so much later, I discovered that this attitude was described by a Danish term, which is impossible to translate: *hygge*. “Hygge” can be a moment or a place, something related to cosiness, tranquillity, and relaxation.

It didn't take too much time before I started to realise the many differences in the way of living of the two countries. First of all, the daily routine, which sees the Danes having dinner at 18:00, when in Italy it is time for an *aperitivo*, whereas dinner takes place between 19:30 and 21:30, according to where in Italy one lives.



Secondly, human interactions: although the teachers of the school where I work have been very kind since the very first moment, the Danes are much more reserved than the Italians, and they have a different way of greeting each other.

I would walk around the school saying hello to everyone if it was the first time that I met them that day, but I soon realised that you don't really need to greet someone that walks past you if you are not interested in starting a conversation. Another thing that I noticed, and that made me and my colleagues laugh about cultural differences, is how differently we behave when we're sitting together with other people and decide to leave the table. In Italy, we would spontaneously wait until everyone leaves the table, or else tell everyone why we are leaving earlier.

This means telling everyone else: “I have to finish my work” or “I am going to the toilet”, which the Danes find irrelevant, obvious, or, in the last case, amusingly weird. Why should they care if you need to do private things? Well, in Italy it's just a polite way to tell the others that you don't want to be rude leaving on your own.

Intercultural interaction is made up of many different, small things like this. We could compare culture to the rules of a game: we are all playing, all the time, but when we move out of our country we meet people playing according to other rules, and we might not even realise it. This is something very important that I learnt during my training as an EVS volunteer. Cultural misunderstandings can happen all the time, without the people involved being aware of it. To go back to the example of the people sitting at the same table, it's easy to imagine what happens if a Dane and an Italian are sitting together and the Dane decides to leave without saying anything. The Italian is likely to feel offended or think that the other person doesn't like him/her. But neither the Dane nor the

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Italian can understand what's going on between them if they don't talk to and compare with each other.

This whole anecdote serves as an example of intercultural misunderstanding, which can always happen because we are used to seeing the world "through the lenses of our own glasses", and working according to our own rules. Going through these small events in our everyday life can teach us to weigh more cultural differences and to better understand our own culture. There's a continuous process of becoming more aware of the self and the other in every single moment we spend with someone coming from a different background and environment.

My Half Year of Volunteering in Switzerland

Yu-Ping Wang (Taiwan)
Volunteer in Switzerland

So now I am officially halfway through my year with the ICYE's volunteer program. I work as a teaching assistant in different classes with children aged 6-14 at School Uznach. The good thing to volunteer in a small town like Uznach is that it also allows me to observe Swiss culture more closely. Not only is it a fresh experience for me, it is also their first time a volunteer was introduced in the school. What I've encountered is entirely my firsthand account in this country.

My way to go around in Switzerland is taking public transportation, and I like how almost ubiquitous it is



here. Many Swiss use it for daily purposes or vacations. It is relatively safe and on time compared to some countries I've been to, to the point that I can just leave my bag on the seat and go to use the restroom that I don't need to worry if someone will steal it. Whenever I have a chance, I jump on a train heading to different places. Every town can be similar, nonetheless they are unique - whether by

way of the mountain, hills, lakes, rivers, or monuments. Since this country hasn't been in a war for two hundred years, the majority of the lands and historical buildings are well preserved, which is what Switzerland is well known for.

Eye contact, a courtesy Swiss are taught since they were young. It is normal to look into someone's eyes when we talk or listen to someone, you may think. I know that avoid eye contact in certain times may be considered rude, but I believe they take "eye contact" to another level. Class begins with greeting by students shaking hands and making eye contact with the teacher one by one; they do so after class as well. Before I came to Switzerland, I was not aware of how unaccustomed I was at making eye contact or shaking hands. Another Swiss etiquette is "three kisses on the cheek" between acquaintances. Its intimacy is something I still find hard to adapt to although I have no problem giving someone a hug. Yet kissing on the cheek is way more affectionate from my perspective.

Interestingly, despite the aforementioned discoveries, I had found myself in solitude a lot for the first few months because of the language barrier. It doesn't matter, I was told before not to have too much expectation for a Swiss welcome with open arms. And even though I'm proud of my English, this did not give me an advantage to socialize with them earlier. The fact is that at my workplace, the teachers probably can speak better English than I do, however they do not have the habit or predisposition to speaking in English. Plus my knowledge of German was zero. Very often, when I was in the teacher's lounge, I stayed quiet for I kept having the idea that I shouldn't speak English as it would seem impolite. At a certain point I started to doubt my intention to be here. This kind of emotional letdown did not go away for a while.

While wiring this article, I was thinking about what exactly I could conclude about my life so far in this hospitable yet self-restrained country. I'm discovering a bit of Switzerland, also my weaknesses and strengths each day. And I'm looking forward to sharing with you all my stories after this one year volunteering program.

Me as a part time Indian girl

Lea Sophie Bauer (Germany)
Volunteer in India

From the first minute I arrived in India, which was already 7 months ago, it has been an adventure, and I've been totally overwhelmed by all the differences in lifestyle and behaviour. I felt and still feel that everything in the everyday life follows a rhythm, which has been completely new to me and not always easy to get used to, but because of these reasons it's also the most interesting and instructive time abroad for me so far.