

## TRAVEL REPORT – SAGE RODGERS from the USA

Being in Austria for the past three months has been one for the books! I stayed with seven host families from almost every part of the country which allowed me to really see and experience the Austrian culture. The first place I stayed was in Helbetschlag, Oberösterreich where my host family operated a small dairy farm with which I helped. The family had a couple of children and they were learning English, so it was fun helping them further their knowledge of the language and to practice. The nearest town to this village was Freistadt which has been there since the early 1200s. Its name translates to “free town”. The importance of this town was a Duke around the 1300s gave the people of the town the right to brew beer, hence the name free town. Having the possibility to brew beer brought people from all over the countryside to enjoy a good brew and became a focal point in Oberösterreich. This town was also on major salt and iron trade routes that connected to the Danube River and served as a market place for locals. Helbetschlag is about 6 miles from the Czech Republic border, so in my free time I was able to visit the Czech Republic as well.



I then moved to a small farm in Preuwitz, Niederösterreich that produces pork, corn, and wheat. Preuwitz is only a couple miles away from the only nuclear power plant in the world that was fully constructed but never put into service. Zwentendorf Nuclear Power Plant was never put into service because it was constructed before the public voted on if they wanted the plant. After the plant was completed, there was a ballot referendum created for a vote on the startup of the plant. The margin was small but the majority of the public voted in opposition of the plant, and so it has sat dormant since 1978. I also had the opportunity to attend the championship of Sensenmähen for Austria's Landjugend where competitors compete by cutting a premeasured area of grass at a uniform length using a scythe in the shortest amount of time. Competitors train all year competing in local contests to make it to the championship and have the chance to earn the bragging rights for the next year.

Being an IFYE in Austria meant I had the opportunity to attend an orientation in Vienna with six other IFYEs from around the world. In addition to going over the basics, we also had the opportunity to explore the city and see attractions such as St. Stephen's Cathedral, Spanish Riding School, Belvedere Palace, along with stopping in at the national headquarters of Landjugend. Landjugend, which

translates to “rural youth”, is a national program in Austria offered to youth in rural areas and is the hosting organization for IFYE in Austria. They focus on six Austrian-wide priority areas: General Knowledge, Agriculture and Environment, Sports and Society, Culture and Customs, Young and International, Service and Organization.

From here I moved to Blaindorf, Steiermark where my next host family had a pig farm. Traveling abroad always creates a handful of unexpected challenges. While here, I caught a stomach virus which slowed down my pace. But thanks to the hospitality of this family it was only a few days and I was back out exploring. While in Blaindorf, I visited Burg Riegersburg (Riegersburg Castle) which was constructed on top of a dormant volcano in the 1100s and became one of the strongest castles in Austria because of its large size, extensive walls, and moats. I also had the opportunity to tour the Zotter Chocolate Factory, which is the only company in Europe that produces chocolate from cocoa bean to chocolate bar using nothing but organic and fair trade ingredients.

From there I moved to Sankt Michael im Lungau, Salzburg to another dairy farm and a worked with another awesome family. Sankt Michael is located in a valley surrounded by large mountains that are covered in ski areas that stay open year round for tourists to explore the high alpine of Austria. While there, I had the opportunity to try top notch Austrian cuisine because the daughter was a chef at her day job. From Wiener Schnitzel (not the hot dog) to Apfelstrudel (apple strudel), I was able to taste some of the best traditional food Austria has to offer. I also helped on a neighboring Alm (high altitude farm) bring in the second cutting of hay on some of the steepest fields I've ever seen. This Alm had the traditional farm animals such as cows and goats but also Sitka deer which thrive on the mountain grass and are raised for local fare in the restaurant. There are many alms like this in Austria that produce specialties like cheese and Zirbenschknaps to tourists exploring the alpine and some also rent out huts for lodging. I also had the opportunity to climb through a mine in the mountain Zinkwand that was hundreds of years old and learned the term “Berg Heil!” on the summit. Berg Heil is a term that is to congratulate for summiting a mountain.

The next farm I stayed on was an organic dairy farm in Kirchberg an der Pielach, Niederösterreich. This farm had been originally built in the 1200s and has been in the family the entire time. The majority of milk on this farm was used to produce seven kinds of homemade soft cheese that was sold directly to consumers or to small farm shops and restaurants. I arrived just in time for the second cutting of hay. I helped by raking and gathering hay with a tractor on the steepest grades I have ever operated a tractor on. I also helped with the completion of their first large green house which allows for a longer growing season of vegetables. Four other farms had partnered with this farm and were in the process of constructing a local food store that will sell products from each of their farms. I had the

opportunity to take off for the day and explore Ötschergräben which is a deep gorge in the Ötscher-Tormäuer Nature Park which offers crystal clear water to swim in as well as a challenging hike to the summit of the Ötscher.

I then moved to Pettanau, Tirol which is located in the middle of the tallest mountains in Austria. The family dairy farm had shut down but I had the opportunity to help a group of local farmers clear trees in the high alpine to maintain the quality of grass for younger cows who would spend the summer up there. Being so close to Italy, there is a strong influence of Italian in traditional dishes such as Steinpilzrisotto, Kaiserschmarrn, and Tiroler Gröstl that I had the chance to try. Since I was so close to Italy, I did have the chance to take a day trip to Bolzano, Italy which has "The Victory Monument" that is still seen controversial because of its ties to Benito Mussolini, Fascism, and the tensions between the Italian and German speaking populations of South Tyrol. Being about 15 miles from Germany, I had the opportunity to climb and summit the tallest mountain in Germany named Zugspitze in a 30+ mile 7500+ feet elevation gain on the Austria-German border.

The last family I stayed with was in Tschara, Salzburg on a small organic dairy farm that also rents out rooms to tourists. The first snow of the year arrived on August 26, which was not uncommon but very much welcomed because of the lack of rain they have received this year. While here, I also helped clear trees for firewood. There was a large need because of guests coming to stay and ski in the winter. I also helped one son in his carpentry shop which specializes in furniture. I had the opportunity to visit a lake named Prebersee where the competition Wasserscheibenschießen is held. The competition involves teams bouncing bullets off the water to hit targets hung on the opposite side of the lake. This village is the only place in the world this sport is held and is absolutely a must see if in this village. This family also surprised me with a birthday cake which topped off my stay in Austria!

At the end of my three month stay in Austria, I met my brother in Zurich, Switzerland where we rented a car and made a five day road trip into six different countries. We had the opportunity to stay at the base of the highest mountain in Europe, Mt. Blanc. Along with that, we saw many sights such as driving over the Alps, touring a chocolate factory, hiking to an alm to enjoy farm fresh cheese, and touring the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.

A huge thank you to the Klopff Family, Popper Family, Steiner Family, Johanna Prodingler and Daniel Hötzer, Taschl Family, Ziernhöld Family, Lerchner Family for hosting me and really showing me what life is like in Austria. Receiving all of the great hospitality and being able to work and stay with these families truly made Austria feel like a second home.

Now I am in Argentina for three months, and could not be more excited!