



Wide Wild West: Claus-Daniel in New Mexico's White Sands

Adventures in New Mexico

Claus-Daniel Bartel about the highlights of his high school year abroad

In your book "The Best Year of my Life" you share the experiences of your high school year in the USA with future exchange students. How did you yourself become one?

Well, first of all I was looking for new ideas and experiences. Besides, I thought it might be a good way to improve my English and also to get an impression of how people live on the other side of the Atlantic. The whole idea of spending a year abroad came to me two years ago. One day I wanted to go, another I didn't. I finally decided on leaving about eight months before I left.

Why did you choose the United States as a host country?

I think the United States, due to their history, are very suitable for an exchange year. Early Europeans founded the first colonies there in the 16th century and settled down in this beautiful landscape. Since then, people from all over the world came to live there. The US still is one of the most culturally mixed places in the world. This always fascinated me.

Looking back on your last weeks in Germany before leaving: How did you feel?

As time went on, I experienced very different feelings. The idea that I wouldn't see my friends and family for a long time suddenly seemed a little scary. Besides, I wasn't sure what to expect from spending a year in a strange country with a host family I didn't know much about. The last weeks before my departure I spent with lots of farewell parties, trying to say goodbye to everyone. At the same time I had to prepare everything for the journey. That was quite exhausting and not always easy.

Spending a year abroad needs a lot of planning. How did you manage to organise your trip?

In Germany you can choose from over 60 organisations offering programmes for high school

years abroad. Picking one of them was probably most difficult. When I finally made my decision, things got a lot easier. The organisation managed everything I needed for the trip. Still, studying abroad is quite expensive and scholarships are rare. But it's definitely worth it.

What would you advise future exchange students to pay special attention to before and during their stay?

In my eyes, it's very important to be open-minded and willing to try new things. Besides, don't forget to bring a lot of pictures to show and real German "Gummibärchen" for everyone!

One year is a long time. What were your personal highlights during the stay?

Honestly, the whole year was exciting from day one to the end. The trips to New Mexico's White Sands and the International Balloon Fiesta were most enjoyable. The presidential election was very interesting as well and I will definitely never forget the time in Canada and Manhattan. But, of course, everybody going abroad will make their own experiences and define their own highlights. One which most exchange students share is a rather sad one: the day you have to leave.

Is there also anything you learned in the year abroad?

I definitely learned a lot about the American way of life, for example that Americans do a lot of sports and most of them also know how to cook healthy food. To live in a different country for a while really helps you to understand the people and to overcome prejudices. Of course, I too had prejudices before I left. When my organisation, for example, told me, that I was going to live with a 60-year-old couple on a highway in the Indian desert, I was pretty shocked. But it turned out to be the best year of my life and I can only recommend everyone to try it out.

Every year students from all over Germany get "itchy feet" and leave their friends and family in order to spend a high school year abroad. In his book "The Best Year of my Life" 19-year-old Claus-Daniel Bartel reports about his adventurous time away from home.

What about your language skills?

Well, during my stay I learned how to weld and how to fix cars, but I definitely also improved my English. But the most important thing I learned is to be more self-confident as well as open-minded and interested in new things.

Assuming that you just spent the "best year of your life" – how did it feel to return to Germany?

When I landed in Frankfurt I think I got a slight culture shock. The first days at home everything felt really weird: the language, the cars, the Autobahn, German food – even being in my own parents' house felt sort of funny.

When did you decide to write a book about your time abroad?

My mother and sister came up with the idea around Christmas. Since then, every week I posted my experiences and stories in a public diary. This is what the book is based on. Along with the notes on the best year of my life, I also share a lot of important ideas and helpful information with the reader.

Interview: Martina Hoh
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Read more

If you would like to read more about Claus-Daniel's adventures in New Mexico, visit www.daniel-bartel.de or simply order his book. Claus-Daniel Bartel: "The Best Year of my Life", Verlag Piribauer, ISBN 3-9502140-0-3, 16,90 Euro