

LEFT: Small class size and native speaking instruction provide an excellent learning opportunity at the Deutsche Sommerschule von New Mexico.



Deutsche Sommerschule von New Mexico

***Auf Deutsch, Bitte!* – Total Immersion German Programs in the United States**

by Karen Pfeil

Interested in learning German? For the best results, immerse yourself in the experience.

Ask most people who speak two languages well: What is the best way to learn a foreign language? They are likely to give some version of this answer: Go to the country where the language is spoken, spend time there, and, most importantly, immerse yourself in the language and culture. Certainly, this answer has merit. Going abroad for

months may be the ideal language learning experience but, for many, it may be impractical or impossible. In this case, at least for those interested in learning or improving their German language skills, there is another viable option. Namely, there are four total-immersion German summer programs located within the United States. These Goethe-Institute endorsed programs

offer would-be fluent German speakers of all levels a chance to study, learn, and practice German in a total-immersion setting. Affiliated with the University of Rhode Island, Portland State University, the University of New Mexico, and Middlebury College in Vermont, these summer programs offer unique variations of the total immersion language learning experience.

What is total immersion?

Total immersion is a philosophy of language learning that emphasizes surrounding students with the target language and thereby increasing fluency in a short amount of time. What this means for participants at any of the four Goethe-endorsed programs is that they spend a summer living and learning *auf Deutsch*. On arrival, participants sign a pledge to speak only German for the length of the program and since participants live on-location with instructors, this means speaking German all day long – in the classroom, at meals, while socializing, and at extracurricular events.

The total immersion approach aims to make the language “come alive” for learners. Suzanne Baackmann, director of the Deutsche Sommerschule von New Mexico, explains, “Linguists have identified a factor called language interference. This refers to the fact that it’s much harder to go back and forth between two languages than it is to stay in one. Since the total immersion approach focuses on the target language only, students make remarkable progress in German in just four weeks.” In fact, according to Baackmann, many students have commented that a month in the total immersion program at Taos was worth more in terms of language improvement than a full academic year spent in Germany. Baackmann explains, “During their stay in Germany, many American exchange students meet Germans who would rather speak English with them than go through a halting conversation in German.” In contrast, at summer immersion programs both

instructors and participants have pledged to speak only German.

All four of the immersion programs work with this philosophy and, to maximize the learning potential of participants, the programs are structured in similar ways. Ranging from three to six weeks in length, the programs offer classroom instruction in the mornings and workshops or extracurricular activities (all *auf Deutsch*, of course) make up the rest of the day. Examples of extracurricular activities include excursions to nearby tourist attractions, German films, guest lecturers on cultural topics related to German-speaking countries, and seminars targeting specific areas of language learning, such as business German.

The programs boast native speaking faculty who come from Germany, Austria, or Switzerland for the summer. Norbert Hedderich, director of the Deutsch Sommerschule am Atlantik, located at the University of Rhode Island, comments on the importance of this. "Instructors who come straight from Europe bring the latest in culture with them, including films, CDs, and contemporary fads and expressions." He adds, "These teachers use modern teaching methods and focus on conversation. They may teach grammar, but they don't teach it for grammar's sake. They use materials developed in Germany and base instruction around games and visuals."

If native speaking instruction is one of the advantages of all four programs, it is made even more valuable by the fact that instructors and program participants live together. This allows participants to interact with their instructors in casual settings, such as over morning coffee or sitting on the porch for an afternoon break. Hedderich emphasizes, "Participants should expect a learning community. What that means is what goes on outside the classroom is just as important as what is taught in the classroom." Hedderich is quick to add that participants, even beginners, should not be intimidated by the requirement to speak German at all times. He says, "Total immersion is not about policing language use. Our motto is to set a good example and provide lots of various activities

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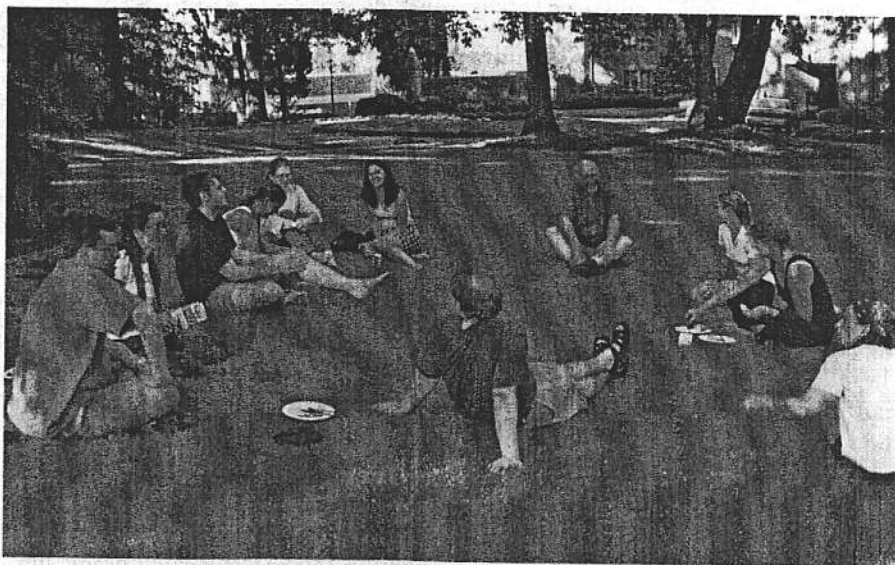
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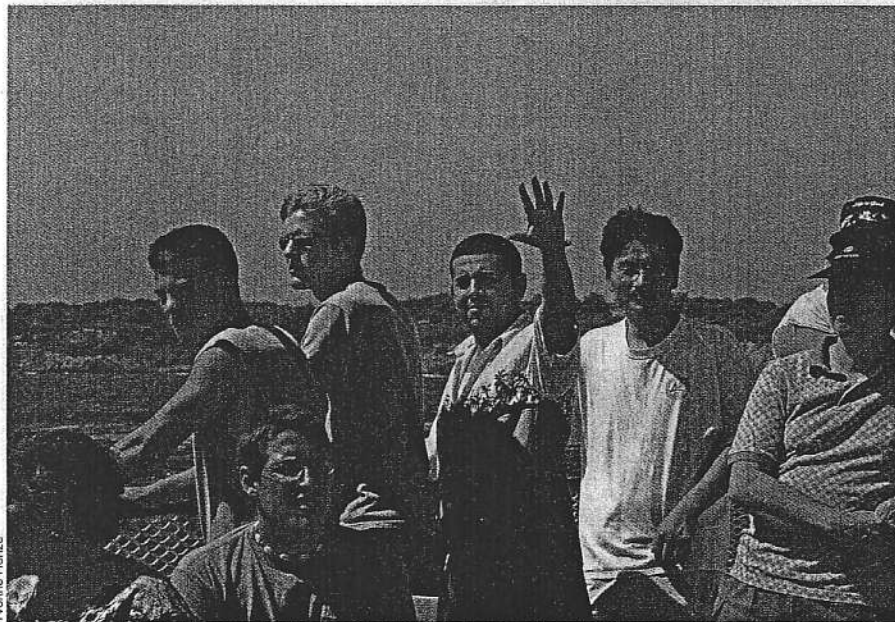


Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik

Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik students relax on the beautiful campus.

that help to sustain the total immersion environment." Living with staff and fellow participants not only allows for superior academic support, this community aspect allows participants to surpass "textbook" German and enter the world of intimate, familial, day-to-day German language.

The four programs are sanctioned by universities and offer transferable college credits or degree options. Participants also have the opportunity to take internationally recognized Goethe Institute language tests. Despite the programs' academic affiliations, all are quick to recognize the value of diversi-



DSSA students enjoy a summer cruise on the historic Newport Harbor.

ty among participants – they welcome traditional college students, business professionals, high school seniors, graduate students from various disciplines, and, of course, life-long learners who simply have a passion for German language and culture.

So...how can a prospective participant actually choose which of these four interesting programs to attend? There are some differences among the four programs (not the least of which is the four varied but spectacular locations) that should be taken into consideration. The Middlebury program (located in the mountains of Vermont) offers courses for beginners and undergraduates as well as graduate-level Masters and doctoral programs. There are special workshops for German teachers and recently, the program has added a course called German for Singers and Vocal Coaches, which combines vocal performance and German language instruction. The oldest and most academically elite of the four programs, Middlebury offers six-, seven-, or nine-week program options for undergraduate students and an additional three-week option for graduate students.

The Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik (DSAP) is located on the beautiful Lewis and Clark college campus in Portland, Oregon. Boasting close proximity to both the Pacific coast and the

Cascade Mountains, this program celebrates its fiftieth birthday in 2007. It runs for five weeks every summer and targets oral proficiency. There is also a weeklong Teacher Training Seminar option for German teachers. The DSAP has a prerequisite of two years of college-level German, or the equivalent, for participants. A *Wirtschaftsdeutsch* course, emphasizing German for business and economics, is available in addition to regular course work.

Program participants in Taos, New Mexico, live in Taos Valley, a cool, strikingly beautiful ski valley. Like the DSAP, the school at Taos has a prerequisite of two years (or the equivalent) of college level German. The program is four-and-a-half-weeks long, but there is a two-week long option for current teachers of German. The program is affiliated with both BA and MA degrees from the University of New Mexico.

The Deutsche Sommerschule am Atlantik (DSSA) is located twenty minutes from Rhode Island's renowned beaches, thirty minutes from historic Newport, and about an hour from Boston. Courses are offered for beginners through the graduate level. The program offers both three-week and six-week program options.

The costs of the programs, including tuition and room and board, range from \$1,850 (three weeks at the DSSA)

to \$7,700 (the full nine weeks at Middlebury). Partial Goethe scholarships are available at all the programs and Middlebury, though the priciest to attend, offers the most additional scholarships and aid to qualified applicants.

What is this experience actually like?

Visit a beginner class at the DSSA and what can you expect to find? For one thing, a wide-range of eager German students: there is Brenda, an undergraduate voice major who says she has fallen in love with the German language and culture over the summer; there is Meghan, a student from URI's International Engineering Program who is preparing for an upcoming internship in Regensburg; there is Christian, a professor from URI's theater department; and there is Tara, who recently married a German man and would like to be able to speak with his family. It is week five of the program and, with special permission to speak English, the nine students in the class describe what their summer experience has been like.

A few express excitement over having learned colloquial German expressions although they are beginners at the language. (It is true – there is a homemade poster on the wall with the heading "Schimpfworte" and let us just say, there is quite a list!) Other participants enthusiastically comment that they have learned more German in five weeks than in a semester of university and add that they have had fun doing so. One student describes how practicing the language everyday all day has made her feel "tuned in" to German.

Participants comment on the fact that their summer experience caused them to reflect on language and culture at a new level. One student confides, "This program has made German a living language for me. It's made German part of my real life." As anyone who has ever sweated for years over a German grammar book can appreciate, having the language come alive in only five weeks is certainly a tribute to the total immersion experience! **GL**

Karen Pfeil lives in Rhode Island. She writes fiction and non-fiction and is a teacher of writing literature and very basic German.