

Introduction to Darmstadt
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This note is a summary of some of the things we learned in our short stay in Darmstadt. I don't know if this information is captured anywhere else, so I thought I would write it down with the hope that it will save others some time. The emphasis is on the basics of getting settled in Darmstadt, so there is little "touristy" information.

Background

I was here with my wife and two-year-old son for three and a half months while I was a visitor at TU Darmstadt starting in March of 2003. We lived in the Prinz Heinrich apartments on Bismarkstrasse, and we did not have a car except for one weekend. Some of my observations may be colored by our particular circumstances. For instance, laundry is a primary concern when traveling with a two-year-old, and since the Prinz Heinrich did not have a washer, doing the laundry became a major weekly activity.

Language

Of course, the language most heard in Darmstadt is German. Compared to other German cities, Darmstadt is relatively untouristed, so you hear little English on the street. However, many people understand English. When you ask, you will probably be told that the other person speaks "a little bit" of English, which probably means he or she has a vocabulary of 5,000 words.

That having been said, the more German you know the better. Learning the numbers and a few simple phrases from a phrase book can save a lot of time when trying to communicate. The university offers German for foreigners through the Sprachenzentrum:

<http://www.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/>

Getting oriented

The center of Darmstadt is Luisenplatz. It is hard to miss – it is marked by a column about 40 meters high with a statue of Prince Ludwig at the top. Nearly all public transit goes through this hub, and it is the center of the largest shopping district in Darmstadt. Luisenplatz is roughly at the intersection of Rhein-Neckar Strasse and Wilhiminestrasse. Luisenplatz is part of a large pedestrian mall (roughly 8 blocks by 4 blocks), so everything is easily

accessible. The most convenient way to get there is by public transit. If you drive, traffic that would go through Luisenplatz is diverted into underground tunnels. Exits from these tunnels lead to a large underground parking garage. Slightly north of Luisenplatz is one of Darmstadt's largest gardens, the Herrngarten. It encompasses a duck pond, a children's playground, and a rose garden (the Prinz Georg garden). The main university buildings are just to the east of the Herrngarten. The restored castle of Darmstadt (the Schloss) is just to the south of the university.

A good place to get started in Darmstadt is the tourist center. It is located in Luisenplatz south of the Ludwig column on the corner of a shopping mall called Luisen Center. The staff speaks English and can provide maps and information on just about anything.

In cyberspace, the Darmstadt city portal can be found at

<http://www.mein-darmstadt.de>

This web site has links to a searchable phone book, maps, events, and most of the web sites I will mention in the remainder of this note. The webcam in the upper right-hand corner shows Luisenplatz. Also, a good online map of Darmstadt can be found at

<http://www.stadtplan.net/brd/hessen/darmstadt/home.html>

Getting around

First, a word about streets and street numbers. Streets in Darmstadt are usually short and are rarely orthogonal. The street numbers all increase or decrease in a given direction with odd numbers on one side and even numbers on the other. However, there is no particular range of numbers (for instance, 100) that corresponds to a block. In fact, a range of 100 can easily encompass several blocks. Also, the numbers on the two sides of the street do not necessarily increase at the same rate. This means, for instance, that number 43 can be across from number 72.

Having said that, we have found getting around Darmstadt to be relatively easy. In particular, we have found Darmstadt's public transit system to be excellent. There are several electric streetcars most of which go through Luisenplatz. There are many buses as well, and it is generally possible to get from anywhere to anywhere in Darmstadt and its suburbs on public transit (with a little

walking). Actually, it seems you can get just about anywhere in Germany by public transit. Note, however, that Darmstadt's public transit runs on the honor system. There are ticket machines at every tram stop, and you are expected to buy a ticket before you board a tram. Many bus stops have ticket machines as well, and most buses have ticket machines on the bus itself. Street cars don't. Most of the time, no one checks if you have a valid ticket. However, occasionally, one or more (non-uniformed) inspectors will stand up on the tram or bus, approach you and say "die Fahrschein, bitte" ("Ticket, please"). If you do not have a valid ticket, you are subject to a 40 euro fine. There are numerous signs on the buses warning against "Schwarzfahren" (riding without a ticket), and they usually remind you that there is no excuse.

One of the simplest ways to avoid this hassle is to get a monthly pass. Currently, a pass which is valid for the inner regions of Darmstadt costs about 30 euros per month. (A single round-trip ticket costs slightly under two euros, so the monthly pass is a good deal.) The transit authority is called the RMV (for Rhein Main Verkehrsbund), but the tickets can be purchased at the office of the HEAG in Luisenplatz and at some ticket machines. (From the Ludwig column, look south and east. The HEAG office is about 50 meters to the east of the tourist information center.) Different passes can cost different amounts depending on their area of validity. There is map next to the counter, so you can ask the teller for a "Monatskarte" (monthly ticket) and point to the area that you want. Inner Darmstadt is area 4001.

The transit system also maintains an excellent navigation facility on their web site to tell you how to get between any two points in the area. Go to

<http://www.rmv.de>

In the upper left of the web page there is a box labeled "Fahrplanauskunft". There are two sections labeled "von" ("from") and "nach" ("to") In each section, enter the town or city on the first line, and the name of the transit stop on the second. Enter the date you want to travel (European style, day first, then month) and the time you would like for departure ("Abfahrt") or arrival ("Ankunft"). Click the button marked "Abfragen" to find the best connections. (There is another box for more options ("Mehr Optionen") which you can click to enter a more detailed query such as directions to a specific street address.)

One of the few things that is not in Luisenplatz is the main train station. It is located about one mile west of Luisenplatz. The number 3 tram runs between Luisenplatz and the train station about every 15 minutes. Again, we have found the German rail system to be excellent. There are frequent connections from Darmstadt to Frankfurt and Heidelberg. There are basically four classes of trains: the S-Bahn (which becomes the subway in Frankfurt) the RB (regional

train), the IC (intercity train) and the ICE (intercity express). The S-Bahn and the RB makes basically most stops and hence are the slowest and the cheapest. The IC makes fewer stops, while the ICE connects major cities in Europe. (However, the cheaper tickets may also cover local transit within your destination city, so ask before you buy.) You can get train tickets either at the train station or at a travel agent. If you are planning on doing a lot of train travel, it probably makes sense to get a Bahn card. It costs 60 euros and gets you a 25% discount for a year. If you have a Bahn card, in theory your spouse can get a Bahn card for 5 euros, though the rules for who exactly qualifies for this are a little confusing to me. (We managed to qualify for this, but there some confusion because our son did not have some identification number.) Like the local transit system, the German rail system has a web site that contains a navigation engine to give you the best connections between two cities. The web site is

<http://www.bahn.de>

and the interface for the navigation engine is again in the upper left corner and has an interface similar to that used in the RMV website.

Finally, Darmstadt has convenient connections to Frankfurt airport. An “airliner” bus leaves Luisenplatz every half hour and takes 25 minutes to get to Frankfurt airport. Sadly, it stops only at Terminal 1 (which is the Lufthansa terminal). If you are using another airline, you can take a connecting bus to terminal 2.

Communication

Almost everyone in Darmstadt has a cell phone, and they are relatively inexpensive. You can go to almost any cell phone store and get a reasonable model for 80 euros. (For reasons never clear to me, you must show your passport to buy a cell phone in Germany, so make sure to bring it along.) The price of the phone typically includes a 15 euro credit for time. To add time, go to any telephone store or kiosk and buy a “Telefon card”. (They come in 15 or 30 euro denominations.) There are instructions on the back of the card on how to add the money to your account. (You will have to know the PIN number of the card which you get by scratching off the opaque coating, much like a lotto card.) Local calls are relatively cheap – I can easily get by on 15 euros for a month.

Long-distance calls are another matter. If you call the United States from your cell phone, the rate can be close to two euros per minute. A far better way is to purchase a long distance calling card, again from a kiosk. Be sure to specify

which country you want to call since some cards are valid for calls only to specific countries. The rates for these cards are closer to \$0.02 per minute.

You should also read the manual with your phone to find out how to send and receive SMS messages. These messages are like e-mail but of limited length (160 characters). They are cheaper than phone calls and very popular in Europe. You will often see people on the street intently pressing the keys of their cell phones for several minutes. They are not dialing a long number but rather are conversing via SMS. Most phones have built-in dictionaries and auto-complete features so the amount of typing necessary to send a message is relatively small.

Our apartment did not have a high-speed Ethernet, though I am told some do. We simply used the dial-up modem. You can consult the website

<http://www.billiger-surfen.de>

which is a search engine of providers. (If you are looking for a dial-up connection, just select “Modem” under the “Zugang” button and click the “weiter” button.) For each provider in the list, pressing the “Details” link will give you information on the service. Somewhat surprisingly, you do not have to sign up – you just call the number listed on the website, and your phone bill is charged automatically.

Shopping

First, you should remember that shopping hours in Germany are restricted as compared with the United States. Stores close at 7 PM weekdays, 4 PM on Saturdays, and are closed on Sundays. (This was about to change when we left.) Thus, you have to plan accordingly, particularly for Sundays. If you find yourself in desperate needs of some essentials on a Sunday, you can go to the train station which has stores which are (almost) always open. Also, restaurants are open nights and weekends, and some sell food which you can take home. There is always one fairly centrally located pharmacy open all the time in each city. Your local pharmacy will have a sign posted that is visible from the outside which lists which pharmacy is open which night.

Basics

There are two supermarkets in the Luisenplatz: Mini Mal is in the basement at the north end of Luisen Center. Karstadt also has a store in the basement of its store at the south end of Luisen Center. They are slightly more expensive than other supermarkets (like Plus and Aldi) but have the advantage of easy access to transportation and a significantly wider and more complete selection of items. We found two stores with the largest selection of items, including international

foods and larger size containers than usually available: Wal Mart and REAL. They also sell a wide selection of all kinds of other items such as clothing, household goods, toys, auto-related items, drugs store items, flowers and so on. The Wal Mart store is on 44 Eschollbrücker Strasse. To get there, you can take the “H” bus to the Fliederberg stop (three stops after the train station) and walk across the railroad tracks. If you have too much to carry, there are usually several taxis waiting nearby which you can take home. (The fare for us was usually five or six euros.) Just pantomime calling and say “Taxi bitte” at the customer service desk at Wal Mart and they will call one for you. It will usually arrive in a couple minutes outside the front door (however, returning the shopping car is a ways a way so unload near the door). The REAL is larger than Wal Mart and is on Pallaswiesenstrasse. Take the 5515 bus a couple of stops past Kasinostrasse. If you see an automobile dealer with a tower of cars 2-3 stories high, you have gone slightly too far.

You should also remember that most grocery stores expect you to bring your own bags. They usually have bags available for sale at the checkout lines, but you have to pay for them (usually about 25 cents each). Only at Wal Mart are the bags free. Also, the grocery carts usually require a deposit. All the carts are chained together, and you need to put a euro in a slot on the cart to unlock it. You get your euro back when you return your cart and re-connect it to the chain.

There are also farmer’s markets in the plaza just north of the Schloss on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, and elsewhere in the city also. We stopped there only once or twice, but they had a good selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. “Bio” indicates organic. There is an organic grocery store on Rhein strasse a couple blocks west of Luisen platz called “All Natura”. What in the States would be called a “health food store”, here is called “Reformhaus”.

By the way, there is also a laundromat directly across from the Fliederberg bus stop, so you can do your laundry and shop in the same trip. There are also a couple of fast food places (Burger King and Pizza Hut) between the Laundromat and the Wal Mart, so you can make an entire day of it.

There are many drug stores in and around Darmstadt. They are marked with a large red sign with a stylized “A” (for “Apotheke”). We often used Engel Apotheke which is just east of the bus stops in Luisenplatz. You can get most (but not all) of the medications you are familiar with from other countries such as the United States. However, they are not “over the counter” – you have to explain your need to a pharmacist, and he/she will get the medication you want. For other things that one would usually find in a drug store in the States, there are various stores such as the chains D&M and **Shin...***???**

Other shopping

There are several clothing and department stores around Darmstadt. (Near Luisenplatz there is Karstadt, H&M, H&R, and Kaufhof, to name a few.) However, clothes tend to be more expensive than in the U.S., and children's clothes are much more expensive than in the U.S.. Several of the parents we talked to said that they got their children's clothes at flea markets, which are quite common on the weekends. The best prices we found were at H&R in Luisen Center and at C&A and other small store in the pedestrian shopping area behind Luisenplatz. There are several bookstores in and around Luisenplatz, though of course almost all of the books they sell are in German. There are several toy stores, the biggest of which is Faix (it is south of Luisenplatz, and you can't miss it – it has a model of a full-size helicopter coming out of the second floor.) C&A is across the street.

Restaurants

The guide books can tell you about places to dine, so I will concentrate on where to get a quick meal. There are several restaurants in and around Luisenplatz, and I will name just a few. Just south of Luisenplatz is Centralstation where several live performances are given. Adjoining this building is a similar brick building which contains a food court with several international fast food choices. There are also a couple of fast food restaurants in the basement of Luisen Center, but these tend to close at the same time as the stores. The department store H&R has a restaurant on the top which offers a variety of snacks, dinners, drinks, and desserts. They have a nice patio that overlooks the city, and in the evening (usually 5 PM to 7PM) the food is half-price. Finally, just to the east of Luisen Center there is a Pizza Hut. It has nothing in particular to recommend it except that it stays open almost around the clock. Going a couple blocks north of Luisenplatz is Matheldenplatz which has one of the best bakeries in town, Espenschied. It is also open on Sundays.

Our son's favorite snack was an ice cream cone. Ice cream can be obtained most any time of the day at corner vendors. A single scoop typically costs 60 cents. Large soft pretzels ("bretzel") are also a get food bargain at 50 cents. By the way Pizza Hut just to the left and a block south of the main entrance to Luisen Center seems to be open most of the time and is quite cheap. Bakeries almost always sell several kinds of pre-made sandwiches for 2-3 euros. Other local fish fast food can be found at Nord See outlets.

By the way there appear to be no water fountains in Germany, so carry your own water or beverages or be prepared to pay several euros for small bottles of water or juice. This is particularly important on hot days and Sundays when it may be hard to find a store open while you tour around. Restaurants only sell bottled

water (with gas or still, and usually rather salty) and do not provide as many free glasses of water or free refills of beverages as you'd like as they do in the States.

Places to go (mostly with kids)

This is a partial list of things to see and do around Darmstadt with children. There are usually some special activities on the weekend, and you should simply watch the posters for upcoming events.

Getting started

A good place to start in Darmstadt is the MutterZentrum. Their website is loaded with information:

<http://www.familien-willkommen.de/>

(The website is currently in German, but they plan to translate it to English in the near future.) They have several activities for children – perhaps the best way to find out about them is to simply drop in and ask.

You should also consult the book titled “Familien Bildungsstaette” which we have left with Birgit Neuthe. It contains a list of resources for families in Darmstadt.

Parks

Almost every park in Darmstadt has a playground, and the playground equipment is different in each. My personal favorite is the Prinz-Emils Garden. One note: though the Herrngarten is convenient and has several attractions, it is also a hang-out for drug addicts. Luckily, they congregate all in one spot, namely, the gate off of Bismarkstrasse. We have friends who have told us tales of finding syringes near the playground, though we have never seen this ourselves. Nevertheless, one would advise caution.

Vivarium

Darmstadt has its own zoo on the east side of town. (Take the L bus to get there.) It is not a large facility, but is a good zoo for small kids. There are plenty of indoor exhibits if the weather is too cold to spend much time outside.

Landesmuseum

Just north of the Schloss is the Hessen Landesmuseum. The first floor is a natural history museum with dioramas of wildlife of the area. Good for a rainy day.

Frankfurt

Frankfurt is loaded with museums, some for adults, and some for kids. Our son particularly enjoyed the communications museum with the old telephones, a mock post office, and sheep made of telephone cords. (You have to see it to understand it.) There are also short boat trips along the Main (one or two hours) which give you a look at the Frankfurt riverside and harbor.