

Morton students say 'guten tag' to Germany

By Dawn Nichting

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Very little time passed before Ben Minton and Crystal Verdick of Morton felt comfortable with their host families in Germany.

They left Peoria on a bus in late July, and flew out of Chicago three hours later. Minton said after an 11 hour flight, they arrived in Munich and rode a bus another three hours to arrive in Peoria's sister city Friedrichshafen, Germany.

As part of the Friends of Friedrichshafen's youth exchange program established in 1980, about 20 students come and go from Germany and Peoria, spending three weeks in the other country during alternating summers.

Although he said he was excited to go, Minton said he occasionally did wonder what his host family would be like.

"I wasn't sure if I would like the host family I would stay with," Minton said.

He said it helped knowing the host families all spoke English.

Verdick said she experienced similar thoughts.

"I was really looking forward to it, but I felt so lost.

Their accent was so heavy, it was hard to understand them at first. Then I realized I was living with a brand new family I knew nothing about."

The three-hour bus ride from Munich to Friedrichshafen was an opportunity to get a view of the

country.

Minton said, "At the beginning of the bus ride, there was a lot of corn similar to what we would see here.

As we got closer to Friedrichshafen, there were more vines and a much more diverse landscape."

When she arrived at her host family's house, Verdick said the house was beautiful and, she thought, big for a German home.

"They had a spiral staircase from the top floor of the house to the basement," Verdick said. "In the living room, the dad had a collection of beer steins."

When she experienced difficulty sleeping, she said she sat on the balcony, which spanned from her own bedroom to the

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Submitted photo

Foreign friends: Ben Minton, right, of Morton, poses with members of his German host family earlier this summer. Minton, along with Crystal Verdick of Morton, was among area students who visited Peoria's sister city, Friedrichshafen, Germany.

adjoining bedroom. The view was "breathtaking."

Minton said he especially

liked the bed.

"The pillows and blankets were made of feathers and very



Submitted photo

Visiting Europe: Ben Minton and Crystal Verdick, both of Morton, were among area students who visited Peoria's sister city, Friedrichshafen, Germany, this summer.

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comfortable," Minton said.

After an early night to bed, the students were refreshed and ready to experience life in Germany.

"It was amazing!" Verdick said. "It was really interesting to go two hours in any direction and end up in another country."

Both Minton and Verdick visited a castle in Germany.

"The Neuschwanstein Castle is the castle that they based Walt Disney's castle off it," Verdick said. "It was elaborately decorated. From any window you could see mountains and little cities and rolling hills."

Minton said he left the castle tour with his host brother, Lukas, 15.

"We went off on our own, and he told me where the bishops ate and where the weapons were made," Minton said. "It was really cool seeing something from a really long time ago because we don't have anything like that here."

In Ulm, the city where Albert Einstein was born, Minton said he also visited a cathedral.

"It was really big and we went 150 meters up into it where we could see a bunch of cities. The stones were all hand-carved and it had all these cool designs," Minton said. "They started building the cathedral in 1377

and finished it in 1890."

Verdick's host family took her to France and to the European Union. Both Minton and Verdick went to the Seehasenfest and the Zeppelin Museum.

The students also attended classes with their German families.

"The school was really different," Minton said. "They weren't as serious about it as we are. The English teacher got upset and left the classroom."

Verdick said, "They were very lenient on tardiness. If the teachers were absent, they didn't have class. There were no substitute teachers."

Even though the schools were different, both Minton and Verdick said they want to return to Germany.

Verdick brought Swiss chocolate and Germany gummy bears home with her. She said her host father surprised her with a 60-year-old beer stein and some old foreign money.

In return, she said she sends him the new quarters from each state.

Both said the trip was something they wanted to do again.

"German hospitality is amazing — instance acceptance," Verdick said. "I got to learn a new culture in an entirely different part of the world where they have different views and different morals."

Many of the shops close at 6 p.m., and no one works on Sunday. Aside from that, she said, she appreciated the conversations among family members.

"They have amazingly close families and eat dinner, breakfast and lunch together," Verdick said.

Although she said she had a hard time adjusting to the food, she did acquire a taste for Kasespatzle.

"It is the best dish ever," Verdick said.

As for American food, Minton said he really missed eggs for breakfast. Verdick said while she was in Germany, she missed American breakfast foods, but now that she is back in the states, she misses drinking espresso or cappuccino with every meal.

"I really liked the people and the culture over there. The food was OK, but I was happy to have American food back."

Verdick said the first day she went to an ice cream parlor with her host sister, Britta. There they saw Britta's gym teacher, and he said he expected Verdick to be fat.

"He thought all Americans are fat and eat fast food," Verdick said.

Proving the stereotype wrong, Verdick told him, "I dislike fast food."