

As a parent, I was incredibly nervous about letting my daughter, Ryleigh, travel to Germany without me—especially across the ocean. Like any parent, I worried about her safety and what it would be like for her to be so far from home. Looking back now, I can say without hesitation that this was one of the best opportunities she has ever experienced.

This trip was truly once in a lifetime. Ryleigh returned home with unforgettable memories, lifelong friendships, and a new appreciation for history, culture, and the world around her. She had the opportunity to tour breathtaking castles, visit historic sites, and experience places that most people only dream of seeing. One of the highlights for her was visiting the castle where Martin Luther translated the Bible. Standing in a place with such historical significance made history come alive in a way that no classroom ever could.

The scenery throughout Germany was absolutely stunning. From picturesque castles to mountain views that reminded us of our own Grand Canyon, every destination seemed like something out of a fairytale. The town of Gotha, in particular, was simply magical.

Beyond the incredible sights, Ryleigh gained a deeper understanding of geography, architecture, and how people in other countries live. Experiencing another culture firsthand gave her a greater appreciation for diversity and opened her eyes to the similarities and differences between Germany and the United States. As a student studying German, she was also able to practice the language in everyday conversations, which boosted both her confidence and her enthusiasm for learning.

One of the most meaningful parts of the trip was the friendships she made. Even after returning home, she continues to stay in touch with several of her German friends. They have been asking about how we celebrate the Fourth of July here in the United States, and we're excited to share our traditions with them. It has been wonderful to see these international friendships continue long after the trip ended.

One of the most profound experiences of the trip was touring a concentration camp. While it is impossible to fully understand the weight of history through books alone, being there in person gave the students a sense of stillness and reflection that can only be experienced by standing where those events took place. It was a deeply moving reminder of the importance of compassion, humanity, and remembering the past so that history is never repeated. It is the kind of experience that stays with you long after you leave and one that touched Ryleigh in a way that words simply cannot describe.

As a parent, I cannot express how excited and honored I am to now become a host parent. Seeing how much this experience enriched Ryleigh's life has made our family eager to provide that same opportunity for another student. This exchange has become so much more than just a trip—it has created lasting connections and memories that will stay with us forever.

This experience will undoubtedly benefit Ryleigh as she prepares for college and her future. More importantly, it has inspired her to continue traveling, learning about different cultures, and

embracing the world with curiosity and confidence. I truly believe this journey has sparked a lifelong passion for exploration, and that is a gift that will stay with her for the rest of her life.

I am incredibly grateful to everyone who made this experience possible. If you're a parent who is hesitant about allowing your child to participate in an exchange program, I understand your fears—I had them too. But I can honestly say it was worth every bit of anxiety. Watching your child grow in independence, confidence, and perspective is something that simply cannot be measured.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Blackburn

Mother of Ryleigh Autry