

Foreign Privileges

Manfred Auster, an exchange officer from Germany, shares some candid views of his tenure at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.



For Germany's Manfred Auster, working on the high-priority Arctic file included involvement in the Arctic Ocean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Chelsea, Quebec, in March.

Did you know?



The Muskoka chair is styled for comfort. Its wooden back and seat are set at a slant for sloping lawns; wide arms are perfect to hold cool beverages.

During the Second World War, Muskoka Airport was used by the Royal Norwegian Air Force to train 3,300 airmen.

Muskoka is the birthplace of Dr. Norman Bethune. His home in Gravenhurst is a museum.

Muskoka is on the 45th parallel, half way between the equator and the North Pole, and is the home of an amusement park called Santa's Village.

Peninsula Lake, where the G-8 Summit will take place, has excellent bass and pike fishing.

It has been a privilege to work at DFAIT. I was given a high-priority file—the Arctic—and an office with a view—something at a premium here at headquarters. As well, my hosts in the Circumpolar and Aboriginal Affairs Division welcomed me with open arms and integrated me fully into their daily business. Working in a policy area that hits the Canadian news almost as frequently as the latest hockey results gives me a real chance to contribute.

This exchange has been—I hope—beneficial to both Canada and Germany. Although Germany is not an Arctic state, it has a vast science and research capacity dedicated to polar research, and has been a permanent observer on the Arctic Council for some time. As one of the major maritime powers, it is interested in the opportunities that the changing climate brings to the Arctic. Germany is also a leading member of the European Union, which is developing its own Arctic policy. I see my role as helping to dispel myths and contributing to the understanding of diverse positions.

During my one-year assignment here, the German Federal Foreign Office has in turn welcomed a DFAIT diplomat to work in Berlin. This reciprocal arrangement comes with some privileges, like retaining my generous European-style annual leave, which affords me the time to discover the beauty of Canada beyond the National Capital Region. My family and I make best use of it!

My time at DFAIT has also provided a rare opportunity to observe differences in work culture from the inside—and quite the differences they are, at times. In my division, I was impressed by the effective yet easygoing work environment, and the efforts made by everyone to keep a sound work-life balance. Now, may I offer a few more observations? My German compatriots are often referred to as the people who invented bureaucracy (wrong, by the way—put the blame on ancient Rome). But even if this were true, Canada must have envied our success. I am surprised by the number of hoops that a simple memo has to jump through at DFAIT, as well as the way in which public diplomacy and outreach are administered and centralized.

When it comes to how DFAIT is perceived by other government departments, I empathize with my Canadian colleagues. We come under similar criticism in Berlin. Yes, in a globalized world, foreign ministries don't have a monopoly on dealing with partners abroad. But we do have the capability of overall analysis that others do not. This provides real added value and we should be proud of it. After all, Canadian foreign policy is a success story, isn't it? At least I feel very privileged to have contributed a little bit to it.

Manfred Auster is a senior counsellor in the Circumpolar and Aboriginal Affairs Division.