

HOUSING GUIDE

For International scholars at HSBI

Bielefeld, Minden and Gütersloh



Photo by Brandon Griggs on Unsplash

Hochschule Bielefeld
Welcome Center

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<https://www.hsbi.de/en/international-office/welcome-center>



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1. WELCOME TO HSBI

We are pleased to welcome you to HSBI as a researcher or lecturer!

Finding suitable accommodation in Germany can be challenging and is an important task to tackle before you arrive. To assist you, HSBI's Welcome Center has created this guide with helpful advice and answers to the most frequently asked questions when it comes to finding accommodation.

2. LOOKING FOR ACCOMMODATION

2.1 Where Do I Start?

Various websites advertise private accommodation offers. If you are interested in one, you may reach out via telephone, e-mail or an online form of the respective ad on the website.

Property owners receive many inquiries on newly advertised housing so a professional first impression is important. Express your interest in the flat; explain the reason and financial resources for your stay in Germany. An appropriate first contact can increase your chances to view and rent a flat.

If possible, only rent a flat that you have viewed in person. Likewise, property owners may be reluctant to rent out their accommodation to individuals they have not met in person. If it is not possible for you to come to Germany for a viewing in advance, ask the property owner whether you can do an online viewing.

Alternatively, we recommend renting a short-term furnished flat for your first weeks in Germany. You can then start looking for accommodation and attend viewing appointments once you have arrived here.

Should you encounter a language barrier with a person you would like to rent from, do not hesitate to reach out to welcome@hsbi.de for support.

Most flats with long-term contracts are unfurnished in general but come with a fitted kitchen unit. Check the available housing offers accordingly or make use of web portals that let you enter your preferences, e.g. *furnished/unfurnished* or *temporary/long-term rental contracts*. You can also use web portals to find second-hand furniture for good value. Another tip: some departing tenants may wish to sell their furniture. It never hurts to ask.

2.2 Own Flat or Shared Flat?

Not everybody in Germany lives in a flat on their own. Many students and professionals share flats (*Wohngemeinschaft*, or *WG* for short). The benefits are plenty: If you choose a room in a flat instead of a whole flat for yourself, you will meet new people quickly and often pay a smaller rent. Some people just live together to save on rent, others also spend their free time together. Some flat mates each have separate rental contracts, some WGs have one person in charge of the contract for the entire flat. It is advisable to find out how rent is handled before you move into a flat.

3. WHERE CAN I SEARCH FOR ACCOMMODATION?

You can find most housing ads online on real-estate web portals. The search can be refined by entering criteria to suit your needs, e.g. location, amenities, size, or price range. Many websites allow you to save your filtered search criteria and let you sign up for e-mail updates so you can stay informed about new offers. Many ads often include specialised vocabulary or abbreviations. At the end of this guide, you can find a list of the most frequently used terms.

Links to real estate web portals

- <https://www.immobilienscout24.de/> (esp. unfurnished flats, long-term contracts)
- <https://www.immonet.de/> (esp. unfurnished flats, long-term contracts)
- <https://www.immowelt.de/> (esp. unfurnished flats, long-term contracts)
- <https://www.kleinanzeigen.de/> (shared flats and single flats)
- <https://www.meinestadt.de/deutschland/immobilien/wohnungen> (shared flats and single flats)
- <https://www.wg-gesucht.de/> (esp. shared flats, sometimes furnished)
- <https://www.wg-liste.de/> (esp. shared flats)
- <https://erasmusplay.com/en/> (furnished flats and single flats, short-term)
- <https://wunderflats.com/de> (furnished flats, short-term stay only)
- <https://www.monteurzimmer.de/> (furnished flats, short-term stay only)

4. BEWARE OF SCAMS!

As the housing situation in Germany grows tenser and tenser, unfortunately, there is a growing problem with fraudsters who exploit those looking for a place to live by posting fake housing advertisements online. Please be careful when looking for accommodation.

Watch out for the following red flags:

5 ways to recognise scams when house-hunting

1. If it looks too good to be true (huge flat, very low rent), it probably is!
2. Do not sign any contract, before you have seen the place in person.
3. Do not pay a deposit to “secure” the room/flat without having signed a contract.
4. Do not send a copy of your passport (or the original) to a person you have never met.
5. If somebody cannot prove to be the owner of the property, they probably are not.

5 typical tricks that scam artists use

1. First contact established by property owner and offer made without previous inquiry.
2. Contact via WhatsApp or e-mail only.
3. The property owner is “abroad” or “absent” and a foreign bank account is provided.
4. Private property owner asks you to pay rent/deposit without viewing option and before signing a rental contract.
5. No photos or only stock photos/simulations provided (reverse image search helps).

Further platforms, further scams

- On social media: The private property owner has an empty/impersonal profile and posts the same ad or similar housing ads on a regular basis.
- On Booking.com/Airbnb: The property owner asks you to make a booking payment outside the platform, by bank transfer, not via a secure and official payment track.

Do not let anyone pressure you into paying anything before you are sure of a property's legitimacy. If you are uncertain whether a housing ad is a fraud, contact us at welcome@hsbi.de.

5. ANY FURTHER NEEDS?

5.1 Accessible Accommodation for People with Disabilities

Some buildings are not equipped with a lift and therefore not suitable for individuals with impaired mobility. Should you require accessible housing, search for the term *barrierefrei* (barrier-free /accessible) when looking for a place to live.

5.2 Looking for Accommodation with Family

Will you be bringing your partner and/or family with you when you move to Germany?

Residence permits for you and your family members require proof that your accommodation is of appropriate size for a family. The required living area is 12m² for any family member above the age of six years and 10m² for children under the age of six. Further information can be found [here](#).

6. HOW DO I APPLY FOR A FLAT?

The person you would like to rent from may request proof of your financial resources or income. Ask them which documents they would already like to see at the flat viewing.

Examples for proof of financial resources

- Salary, e.g. salary statement, employment contract
- Scholarship, e.g. scholarship statement or agreement
- Self-funding, e.g. blocked account statement
- SCHUFA information (Germany's main credit rating bureau; the report is available on the [SCHUFA website](#) for €29.95)
- Private liability insurance
- Tenant self-disclosure



→ SCHUFA website

7. FLAT VIEWING

For a successful flat hunt, make sure that you ...

- Arrive on time for the viewing
- Offer to remove your shoes if the flat is still occupied
- Have your phone on silent mode and do not make calls during the appointment
- Be attentive and address the property owner respectfully

Once you have the opportunity to view a flat in person, use this opportunity to inspect the place, get to know the owner and, if possible, ask any questions you may already have about the property. If you notice any faults with the flat during your viewing appointment, please point them out in a friendly manner and enquire when and how they may be fixed. Should you like the flat, express your interest openly.

8. IMPORTANT INFO ABOUT RENTAL CONTRACTS

8.1 Rental Contract and Rent Payments

If you have been accepted as tenant for an flat, you and the property owner will sign a rental contract (often only in German). It is important that you understand the rental terms and conditions of the contract you sign. We strongly advise you to read the contract carefully, take time to translate it and not sign it immediately.

If possible, ask for a copy of the contract to read before the contract signing date, so that you can review the individual parts of the contract.

In Germany, rent is usually paid once a month, at the beginning of each month or in the last week of the previous month. There is a distinction between basic rent (*Kaltmiete*) and rent including heating and additional utility costs (*Warmmiete*), e.g. for water consumption or waste disposal.

The rental contract should list all utility costs that are to be paid in addition to the basic rent. The payment date is also specified in the rental contract. In order to ensure your punctual rental payment you may wish to set up a monthly transfer or allow withdrawal by direct debit from your bank account.

8.2 Special Contractual Obligations

Some rental contracts mention specific duties the tenant needs to fulfil, such as an obligation to clean the commonly used stairway regularly, rules pertaining to the use of a garden and costs (water, heating, electricity, wireless network, renovation when moving out etc.). Please make sure that you have understood all terms of the contract, before signing it.

8.3 After Signing a Rental Contract

After both parties have signed it, the contract becomes legally binding. The property owner needs to hand over *all* keys to the flat no later than the official date mentioned in the contract and must provide you with the so-called *Wohnungsgeberbestätigung*. This form proves that you have moved into their flat. You will need it for the registration of your address at the Citizens' Registration Office. A rental contract is not sufficient proof of your new residence.

8.4 Flat Handover

Go through the following checklist when moving in/out of the apartment:

- All planned and promised renovations should be finished at the time of the handover.
- Check if you have received the agreed-upon number of keys.
- Take note of the current readings of all electricity, water, or gas meters.
- Ask who is in charge of labelling the mailbox and bell: you or the property owner.

- If you notice any faults during the handover or when you move in, point them out immediately, take pictures and make a list. Politely inform the property owner that the faults were present at the time of your move and that you did not cause them.
- It is advisable for a second person/witness to accompany you during the handover.
- Alternatively, you and the property owner can record the conditions of the flat at the time you move into it in a handover protocol signed by both parties. Please find a template at the end of this document.

8.5 Security Deposit

When renting an apartment, you will likely have to pay a lump sum as deposit before moving in. The deposit serves as a security for the property owner and will be paid back after you have moved out, provided that you have left the flat in good condition. If the flat is dirty or damaged and needs to be cleaned or dealt with further, the deposit can be retained partly or completely.

A standard deposit comprises one or two monthly rental payments. Request a written receipt of your deposit payment and written confirmation under which conditions the deposit will be returned to you.

9. IMPORTANT INFO ON LIVING IN A GERMAN FLAT

9.1 Registration

If you live in Germany for more than 90 days, you need to register your address with the Citizens' Registration Office within 14 days after moving in. You can find further information on the [Welcome Center's website](#) and contact us if you wish support organizing an appointment.



→ Welcome Center Website

9.2 Liability Insurance

We strongly recommend you apply for private liability insurance, just in case you accidentally damage the flat. This type of insurance is recommended, in particular, when renting furnished flats. It compensates the property owner or other individuals for accidental damage that you have caused. Immediately inform the property owner if you have caused damage to your flat or have discovered a fault.

9.3 Electricity Providers

If you do not choose a specific electricity provider for your new residence, you will automatically be registered with the local electricity provider (*Stadtwerke*). You have the option to switch to a different provider and can make use of various web portals to compare offers, e.g. Check24, Wechselfiraten, tarifo or Verivox. Some of these websites are available in English.

9.4 Internet

Most flats do not automatically come with an Internet connection. Make sure to ask the property owner at the viewing. If no connection is available, you will need to choose and apply for a network with an Internet provider. Again, it is useful to compare rates and minimum contract periods. The following web portals can be of use when trying to find the best provider for your needs: Verivox, Check24, Wechselpiraten or preisvergleich.de.

9.5 Receiving Visitors and Subletting Rooms

As a tenant, you can receive guests, both during the day and for overnight stays. If you receive visitors for an extended period, make sure not to disturb your neighbours with increased noise levels. If you receive visitors for more than six weeks, the property owner may increase the rent.

“Visiting” must be differentiated from commercial renting out or subletting of rooms, where you receive rental income from your guests. The subletting of rooms requires the property owner’s consent. Pay attention to the corresponding clauses in your rental agreement. In the event of subletting, the property owner may claim a share of the rental income you have earned. Remember that you are liable for any damages caused in the flat.

9.6 Waste Separation

In Germany, waste is separated into different categories. You have **bins** for general waste, organic waste, paper and recyclables. You will find several bins in and around your apartment.



yellow lid:
recyclable material



green lid:
organic waste



blue lid:
paper



grey lid:
general waste

photos: private

If you wish a detailed overview of what belongs in which bin, you can use these [waste separation charts](#).

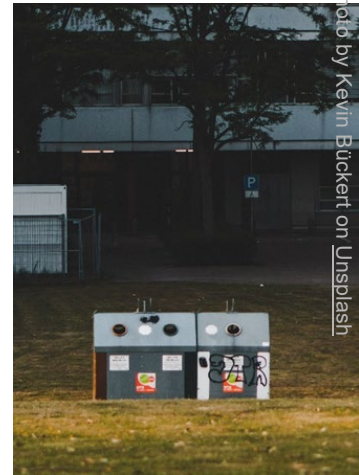


→ waste separation charts

Glass is disposed of in specially designated containers, which you can find in all cities. There is a distinction between white, green and brown glass. Throw away your *empty* and *clean* glass containers without lids. The lids belong in the recyclable materials bin.

Used clothing container

Used clothing that you no longer want can be donated. To do so, put your old but intact clothes in the container. Make sure that you only donate to reputable organisations (such as DRK or Johanniter). Used clothing containers often stand next to the glass containers.



9.7 Ventilation

It is important that you ventilate your home properly to prevent mould from growing. You should ventilate your flat several times a day. To do this, open all windows fully (this is called shock ventilation or *Stoßlüften* in German), so that air can flow through the flat (in winter: 5–10 minutes, in summer: 20–30 minutes). In summer, you can also tilt your window permanently to let fresh air in.

Turn down the heating while ventilating to reduce heating costs. To prevent mould from growing, open your window while cooking, after showering, or, when drying your clothes inside your flat. You can find more information [here](#).



→ mould prevention

9.8 Issues with the Property Owner?

The rental contract and the resulting rights and obligations are regulated by German law, in order to provide clarity for various situations. If you have any questions or problems, you should always first communicate them directly to the property owner, as many issues can be solved this way. Should there still be disagreements with the property owner that cannot be resolved through communication, you may consider seeking legal advice, e.g. the support of the [Mieterbund OWL](#) (tenants' rights association).



→ Mieterbund OWL

9.9 German cleaning agents

German names of cleaning agents are sometimes difficult to understand. Below you find the most important cleaning agents, their German and English names and what you can use them for.

German name	English name	What to use it for
Allzweckreiniger / Neutralreiniger	general-purpose cleaner / neutral cleaner	for everything, especially surfaces, floors and windows
Spülmittel	dishwashing liquid	to wash dishes by hand
Essigreiniger	vinegar-based cleaner	mainly in the bathroom and the kitchen
WC-Reiniger	toilet cleaner	inside the toilet bowl
Scheuermilch	scrubbing milk	against heavy dirt, but only on robust surfaces
Glasreiniger	window / glass cleaner	to clean windows and glass
Waschmittel	detergent	to wash clothes (washing machine)
Weichspüler	fabric softener	to make clothes softer (washing machine)

10. MOVING OUT

10.1 Termination and Flat Handover

If you want to move out, be sure to comply with the notice period stated in the rental agreement and submit your written termination letter to the property owner by post. Since you have paid a deposit on moving into the flat, it is very important to leave the flat clean and in good condition. For your own sake, make sure to receive written confirmation on the receipt of your termination letter from the property owner as well as confirmation that your flat is in order when you leave. Also, clarify when and how you will receive your security deposit back.

10.2 Deregistration and Change of Address

If you move within Germany, you need to register your new address with the Citizens' Registration Office at your new place of residence. A de-registration at your previous place of residence is only necessary if you move abroad for more than six months. The earliest you can de-register is one week before moving out. The Welcome Center is happy to support you organizing an appointment.

11. WOHNUNGSÜBERGABEPROTOKOLL (HANDOVER PROTOCOL SAMPLE)

Name Mieter*in (name of tenant): _____

Adresse der besichtigten Wohnung (address): _____

Anlass (occasion): Einzug (move in) Auszug (moving out)

Die Wohnungsübergabe fand am (date) _____ um (time) _____ Uhr statt.

Es wurden: keine Mängel festgestellt (no defects) Mängel festgestellt (existing defects):

Raum (room)	Keine Mängel (no defects)	Mängel/Bemerkungen (defects)
Diele/Flur (hall)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wohnzimmer (living room)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Schlafzimmer (bed room)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Küche (kitchen)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kinderzimmer (children's bedroom)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arbeitszimmer (office)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bad (bathroom)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WC (spare toilet)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Balkon/Terrasse (balcony/terrace)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keller (basement)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Garage (garage)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dachboden (attic)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Weitere Räume (other rooms)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Frist für die Mängelbeseitigung (deadline for elimination of defects):

Die festgestellten Mängel sind von dem*der Mieter*in zu beseitigen bis zum (until): _____

Zählerstände (meter readings):

Strom (electricity):

Gas (gas):

Kaltwasserzähler (cold water):

Warmwasserzähler (hot water):

Zählernummer (meter number):

Stand (reading):

Heizung (heating):

Raum (room):

Zählernummer:

Stand (reading):

Schlüsselübergabe (Anzahl) (key handover – number):

___ x Hausschlüssel (house key)	___ x Wohnungsschlüssel (flat key)	___ x Briefkastenschlüssel (letterbox key)
___ x Kellerschlüssel (basement key)	___ x Sonstige Schlüssel (other keys)	
Folgende Schlüssel fehlen (keys missing):		

Renovierung (renovation): Die letzte Renovierung wurde durchgeführt am (Datum) (date of last renovation): _____

Bemerkungen/Sonstiges (notes/ other):

Bestätigung (confirmation):

Der Mieter hat eine Kopie des Übergabeprotokolls erhalten (tenant received a copy of the protocol):

Ja (yes) Nein (no)

Datum (date): _____

Vermieter*in (owner): _____

Mieter*in (tenant): _____

Zeuge(n) (witness/es): _____

12. UNDERSTANDING HOUSING ADS

12.1 Frequently Used Abbreviations

Abbreviation	German	English
Abl.	Ablöse	key Money
App.	Appartement	studio/flatlet
B/ Bd.	Bad	bathroom
Bes.	Besichtigung	apartment viewing
Bezugsf.	Bezugsfertig	ready for occupation
Bj	Baujahr	year of construction
BK	Betriebskosten	utility bills
Bik/ Balk	Balkon	balcony
BW/ BaWas	Badewanne	bathtub
DG	Dachgeschoss	top floor (lit. floor under the roof)
Du.	Dusche	shower
EB	Erstbezug	first-time occupancy
EBK	Einbauküche	fitted kitchen
EG	Erdgeschoss	ground floor
Etg.	Etage	floor
Gartant	Gartenanteil	share of garden
G-WC	Gäste-WC	separate guest toilet
HK	Heizkosten	heating costs
HMS	Hausmeisterservice	janitor service
Hs.	Haus	house
KDB	Küche, Diele und Bad	kitchen, hall and bathroom
KEI./ KR	Keller/ Kellerraum	basement room
KM	Kaltmiete	rent excl. utilities
KoN/ KN	Kochnische	kitchenette / pantry kitchen
KT	Kaution	deposit
Kü.	Küche	kitchen
	Kühlschrank	refrigerator
MKM	Monatskaltmiete	monthly rent excl. utilities
MM	Monatsmiete	monthly rent
möbl.	Möbliert	furnished
mtl.	Monatlich	monthly
MV	Mietvertrag	rental contract

NK	Nebenkosten	utilities
NKM	Nettokaltniete	net rent excl. utilities
NR	Nichtraucher	non smoking
OG	Obergeschoss	upper floor
Part.	Parterre	ground floor
Prov.	Provision	commission
ren.	renoviert	renovated
Sp/ Stpl.	Autostellplatz	parking space
SZ	Schlafzimmer	bedroom
teilmb.	Teilmöbliert	partly furnished
Terr.	Terrasse	terrace
UG	Untergeschoss	basement
Wfl./ Wohnfl.	Wohnfläche	living space (incl. kitchen and bathrooms)
Whg.	Wohnung	flat
WM	Warmmiete	rent incl. utilities
WoKü/ WK	Wohnküche	combined kitchen and living room
Zi	Zimmer	room
ZH	Zentralheizung	central heating
ZKB	Zimmer, Küche und Bad	(bed)room, kitchen and bathroom

12.2 Frequently Used Terms

German	English
Abstellkammer	broom closet / pantry
Dachboden / Keller	attic / basement
Garten / Balkon	garden / balcony
Heizung	heating
Herd / Backofen	stove/ oven
Keine Haustiere	no pets
Kühlschrank	refrigerator
Spülmaschine	dishwasher
Strom	electricity
Teppich / Laminat / Parkett	carpet / laminate/ parquet flooring
Trockner	dryer
Unmöbliert / möbliert	unfurnished / furnished
Untermiete	sub lease
Waschmaschine	washing machine
Waschkeller	laundry room
Wasser	water
Zwischenmiete	temporary lease