

# Travel Grant Report

**By Martin**

“How better acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria can be stimulated through following the examples of countries that are better advanced in this respect”

This won't be a basic report you might be used to, and, as I wrote in my application, I have spoken to several people. I have seen a lot of great ideas and some of them I have taken and implemented into the current projects of the National Bulgarian LGBTI foundation.

Never have I believed that I would win a travel grant project and have the opportunity to travel across Europe and speak to different people with the hope of finding new way, or at least just ideas of helping LGBTI youth in Bulgaria.

The idea and the experience were surreal, but I will share them anyway.

It all started when I visited my friends in Dusseldorf. Bear in mind that none of them knew I was bisexual at this stage; they knew about my travel grant, they just did not know what the research topic was. My first gay encounter in Dusseldorf was at the so-called “kirmes,” where I met a boy from Grindr (a dating app for gays). I was so thrilled about getting to know the gay culture there that I didn't want to let go of it, and after our fun times at the kirmes, my new friend took me to a “gay exhibition.” There we met two of his closest friends, who were married to each other, and that was first ever encounter with a married gay couple. They also had a baby. Even though I consider myself a very open-minded person, I have to admit that it was strange. My friend, the couple, and I had a lovely time at that “gay exhibition” drinking wine, talking about stuff, talking about the gay culture. And during our conversations, I have realized that the gay couple I had met were good people. They could be parents

just as anyone else. Then it dawned on me that I had considered it unusual at first was because I was looking through the prism of married straight couples, the “normal” ones. I find it amusing how prejudice can take us to certain thoughts, and how what we’re used to, our habits, stimulate our insecurities when the “order” is disturbed.



Hi, I'm Martin and in the next few weeks I will be travelling to Germany, Spain and Sweden, as part of my work with Single Step and the help of Schwarzkopf-Stiftung Junges Europa.

The topic and purpose of this journey is to explore "How better acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria can be stimulated through following the examples of countries that are better advanced in this respect." Stay tuned to find out about interesting people and organisations and dive into the success of other countries in this regard.

After that night, I laid in bed for hours, unable to sleep, thinking how such a small physical distance of a few thousand kilometers can have such a large cultural difference with a completely different mindset about sexuality. And that drove me further into myself, and I grew a great yearning to confess to myself and to everyone around who I truly was and what I stood for.

The inability to accept who I truly was and the need for other people to accept me were always bothering me. I wanted to be open, but I was afraid. And in that moment, I found myself in front of a mirror saying, after a long time, "I'm bisexual." Instant and powerful relief overcame my entire being, tears ran from my eyes as the pressure of my vanity lifted, as I liberated myself. I no longer cared about what people think of my sexual proclivities or if it bothered that I was acting a little girly because that didn't matter. Because I was free.

In the course of next week, I met with several young boys, but one of them left a large impression on me. This boy was heart-broken because of all the hate and disapproval of all LGBTQ people, even in an advanced country like Germany. Johan's story was a powerful one, but I'm sure that you can guess all the trauma that had transpired because of who he is, so I won't get into too many painful details. Instead, I will take to another young boy, another out of many that had really shook me, and this is Johan's story:

His name is Johan. We met online, and decided we would grab a coffee. He was a 19-year-old gay man from Dusseldorf - tall, handsome, with a great smile and an attitude to the moon and back.

Born and raised in Germany, he has been openly gay since the age of 14 and fully accepted by his family. However, he was still struggling with accepting himself. Even though Germany is a very gay friendly country, he still would not allow me to post photos of him, because he was scared of homophobia and being out in general.

The struggle for the young generation has been awful - he gave me examples of times he had been beaten and bullied on the street, which is a warning red dot for Germany. Even though, they legalized same sex marriage in 2017, this only shows they still have a long way to go.

Dusseldorf, Germany

And here is the big difference compared with Thorsten`s story:



A week into my travel grant, I managed to do a lot in Dusseldorf, Germany. Explored the city, met up with a few people and one of them was a 56 year old retired accountant from Dusseldorf named Thorsten, who shared his story.

Thorsten loves to read and explore the world. He spent a few years in the States before coming back to his native Germany.

He came out to his parents at the age of 16, being raised around a lesbian aunt and her partner made it really easy for him. Not knowing what gay sex was when he came out.

Q: What was the reaction of the community surrounding you?

A: There was almost no reaction. Neither positive nor negative. They took it as an information and we all went back to our daily routine right away.

Q: How did living in Germany benefit you?

A: It's not about Germany only. It's about Western Europe. There is a very normal way we can live as gay. At least in bigger cities. Deep in the country side it may be different.

Q: What are you insecure about ?

A: I am not insecure at all right now. We have the same legal rights as a straight couple. There will always be people complaining about other issue. We need to focus on the real problems around the world. Being gay is not the centre of my happiness. That's it.

Dusseldorf, Germany

Every experience of coming out, of sharing your sexual desires other than being straight, is very personal and difficult because it depends on the individual's environment, the atmosphere of his culture, and the mentality of those closest to him or her. It could be heart-breaking, met with a lot of resistance, or it can be faced with a lot of support and understanding. It all varies.

And that is what I contemplated after coming to peace with myself and who I was, but you never really know how people will react to your coming out. So, I wondered, should I or shouldn't I?

Alone with my fears and worries, I went to Madrid; the research had to continue.

Arriving in Madrid, I was instantly mesmerized by the city. The weather was really hot, the sky was its own color, the city was wide and beautiful, but what struck me like a lightning was the gay culture. It was unbelievably widespread and strong. People respected the gay culture, people liked the gay culture, and not in the hypocritical way, but actually accepted gays for who they were. I am only assuming that there are people against, but I hadn't experienced anything that would suggest such a thing, nor had I heard any complaints. In short, Madrid seemed like gay heaven. It was very unusual. Very powerful. I didn't know how to handle it, so I sought explanation, and on the very first night of my stay there, I met with Angel.

This is his story:



After my trip to Germany it was time to leave for Madrid. In recent years Madrid has become a top destination for LGBT travellers and that's why I chose it as my second destination. I missed Madrid pride but the gay culture there is so strong that I didn't really need to attend pride in order to feel it. I met Angel, a 20-year old bisexual man, the very first night there. He is not a local; he came to Madrid to follow his dream of becoming an actor and is currently working as a waiter while trying to pursue his true calling. He shared his journey of coming out as bisexual with me and I was impressed by how smooth it was. When he came out to his mother her reaction was "And this is changing what exactly? No matter what you are, you will always be my son."

Madrid, Spain

In my eight days in Madrid, I had met with several boys, but the story of Angel stuck with me. It could be the story itself that had amazed me, or it could have been Angel. We were spending a lot of time together, meeting every noon at five to explore the city, to meet the Spanish gay culture, to see how things work there. He had thought me a lot in those days, I have seen a lot, and I have heard thousands and thousands of stories of how great the gay culture was in Spain, but especially in Madrid. Of course, some of those stories took dark turns, an easy leap from utter happiness to striking fear. Not everyone will accept the things they don't understand. Still, Madrid

was far more accepting of gays than I could see Dusseldorf. I'd say that most of Spain has this more accepting mentality of gays. It had more clubs, more gathering, less violence, and less name-calling. It's not perfect, but I'd say, from my experience, it's the best place to be.

Those eight days in Madrid have passed like it was an eight hour trip. Madrid will always be in my heart one of the best travel destinations in Europe for gays to visit. But it was time to move on to the best part, and certainly the best place for gays I was going to visit—Stockholm. I got there just in time, as the Euro pride was coming up. This is how it went.

In Stockholm, I had finally summoned the courage to let other people see me for who I really was. And in that moment of bravery, I took my place front-and-central in the Euro Pride mass. I was me, I was free. I didn't have a care in the world. After that beautiful event for the world, and the personal voyage for me, I spoke Anna, and she shared her story of coming out with me.

Anna and all the people I had met before her, all their stories and experiences, all their faces inspired me to stop hiding my sexual desires from the rest of the world, and I listened.



"My name is Anna and I'm a lesbian. I met Martin during his trip this past summer when we were both in Stockholm for Euro Pride."

Q: When did you come out?

A: I came out when I was 16 and it was very stressful. My parents didn't accept my sexuality at all, even though we live in Sweden.

Q: How did you manage without your parents' support?

A: You know, me being used to relying on them made it hard, but that's when I found the groups at RFSL. I met all kinds of people there, people like me. I believe we helped each other a lot. The important thing is to not keep it in yourself and to seek support and help.

Q: Are you happier now?

A: I have never been happier in my life. I have a beautiful girlfriend, a lot of supportive friends and finally my family has accepted me for who I am.

Stockholm, Sweden

But it was time to share that with those closest to me. I have to say, after resolving to tell everyone the truth, I was happy. I wasn't lost anymore, I was at peace. I had accepted myself. Let people think what they want to think because that liberating feeling that had overcome me is worth a lot more than their acceptance and their opinions. I am thankful to all those faces, all their stories, all that they have shared with me. Anna, Angel, Johan, Thorsten were only a few of the people that have helped me discover myself. I am also thankful to all those people that have stood by my side, supporting me, during the worst times of my life so far, during the difficult times of my sexual exploration and coming to peace with it and who I truly am.

The opportunity that I had this past summer is still feeling surreal to me. I have grown as a person, I have become free, and my greatest hope is that my story and all the other stories I have shared with you here, help you and all other sexually open-minded people in Bulgaria.