

Culture Shock in Germany

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By Diana Rhodes

For most of my life, I've been unafraid of change. Like many people, I crave challenge. But when I got married, sold my home and car, left a job I'd had for 10 years, and moved with my new husband, his cat and my dog from Seattle to Germany all within a matter of weeks, I feared I had pushed my luck.

The move, for my husband Tucker's job, is for three years to Ingolstadt, a city of 130,000 people in Bavaria. Thankfully Tucker and I share the need for change and a sense of wanderlust. When the job offer comes, we immediately start listing places we'll visit in Europe – return trips to Italy, France, and Spain and first visits to cities like Prague, Ljubljana, Krakow, Berlin, Munich, Salzburg, Vienna. Who could ask for more?

After completing reams of paperwork, we ponder what belongings to take, to get rid of, to store. Thankfully we have movers to do the packing. In mere weeks we sell our cars and homes and household things that took years to accumulate. It feels like going backward – the opposite of the American way of buying and consuming and hoarding. But it gives us the sense of freedom we need to begin our new lives. We put our things on a ship pointed toward Europe where we'll meet up with it in one month.

The curious thing about travel to a foreign country, especially one where you don't know the language, is that once the plane lands and the doors open, the experience begins. There's no biting it off in little pieces. You step off the plane and you're in – up to your neck.

In the first weeks and months, it feels like Germans do everything the opposite of the way we are accustomed to. Why do you have to bring your own bags to the grocery store and bag the stuff yourself? Why does the garbage man take all the garbage some weeks and other times leave bags behind? Why does the bank expect you to come to their lobby to print your own bank statement or charge you if they mail one to you? Why are the kitchen sinks so small? The beer mugs so big? Why do they wash your hair after they cut it and not before? We asked these questions more than once. But soon, much sooner than we expect, we're accustomed to these methods that once seemed so foreign. But something we haven't gotten accustomed to, thankfully, is the thrill of hopping a train or driving a few hours and finding ourselves in a different country – usually in a city we've only dreamt of. And that keeps us hungry to continue learning new ways to live. We realize how fortunate we are for this experience.

A fool would ask for more.

Sidebar: Ten Ways to Ease into a New Culture

1. **Join an expatriate group.** Members will help you locate goods and services you need (doctor, dentist, English bookstore, pet store) or sort through cultural norms.
2. **Enroll in language lessons.** Study the language of your new country and you will feel more in tune with it. You'll also meet others like yourself who are finding their footing. Language institutes and community colleges are good sources for lessons. Do some self-study first, because you'll likely be taught *in* the language you don't yet know.

3. **Do something every day that grounds you.** For me it was running -- along the Danube, which connected me to something I did daily at home.
4. **Do something every day that scares you.** Opening a bank account, buying a train ticket from the automated machine at the train station, mailing letters at the post office are daunting when you don't know the language or terminology. Figure it out and you'll feel victorious.
5. **Adopt a new habit.** Try something you've always wanted to do. I've long admired the scarves that stylish French women are known for. A simple silk scarf knotted around my neck made me feel more European. .
6. **Enjoy new foods and don't bemoan ones you can't find.** I missed bagels, but I quickly discovered that Germans make the best nutty wheat breads in the world, piping hot and everywhere.
7. **Explore on foot.** Find a cafe or bakery and make it your own. After a week or two, you have some familiar faces to smile at.
8. **Find instruction manuals in English.** I struggled with a German-English dictionary in one hand and the owner's manual for our new washer and dryer in the other. But manuals are easy to find in PDF form online in English.
9. **Document your days.** E-mails home will keep you connected, but recording your thoughts and experiences in a journal will bring back vivid memories years later, not to mention helping to relieve stress.
10. **Pack a box for the blue days.** You'll have days when you miss simple things from home. My blues box contained DVDs of "The West Wing," books I hadn't had time to read back home, photos, and a stuffed animal from childhood. I've pulled out the box a few times.

Finally, have patience. Go easy on yourself and those around you. When stress takes over, it's hard to remember this. But do.