

to indulge in a hot coffee or chocolate accompanied by a delicious piece of cake. You will find a large selection of the latter - simple, but tasty cakes as well as elaborate creations with cream and marzipan.

This concludes our little glimpse of different aspects of German culture. Of course you will not meet the “typical German” who embodies all these cultural specialties (well....maybe you will, but not very often). Also, this list may not cover all aspects, maybe during your stay you will discover something else you consider typically German. If so, you are welcome to mail me at suggestions@fairmount-publishing.com (or even ask for a whole questionnaire to fill out and share your experiences and opinions about your life in Germany) and let me know what should also be added to the list.

V. Bureaucracy and Laws

1. First impressions and tips

- “Difficult, time consuming and confusing.”

Bureaucracy is never something people enjoy dealing with, no matter in which country. It is something unavoidable and a move into another country makes it a further necessity to deal with authorities and laws. Naturally, foreigners have different experiences with authorities than natives do, as foreigners have to get work and residence permits, inquire about the regulations to bring pets into the host country and deal with other things a native never comes in touch with. Therefore it is no surprise that most foreigners find the bureaucracy in their host country more complicated and disagreeable than bureaucracy in their home country. In the host country they have to take care of many more issues and also have to face the difficulty of not being familiar with the host country’s laws and/or the language.

I was therefore pleasantly surprised to learn from the questionnaires that people had quite a well-balanced impression of German bureaucracy, as about 50 % reported that they had good or neutral experience with German authorities. Still, the experience of the other half was considered negative. An important factor here was whether the expats had someone to help them with their bureaucratic matters, like a university or a relocation agency (see pages 11 - 12).

From the comments made in the questionnaires, the worst impression people apparently were left with was after dealing with the

Ausländerämter (foreigners office, the place where foreigners apply for their residence permit). Government officials were often described as very bureaucratic and “unable to admit they might have made a mistake”. Again, this is something that is often said about government officials in other countries as well, and in my experience with German bureaucracy (in my previous job, one of my tasks was to obtain work and residence permits for the company's expats), I met three kinds of government officials – those who were very much as described above, those who generally just did their job and didn't care and those who were friendly, helpful and competent. The latter was actually the largest group. One example was the employee of an *Ausländeramt*. He had sent our Korean expat a letter informing him of his appointment and explaining what papers to bring. Then, not sure whether our expat would understand the - German - letter, he phoned me and asked me to inform the expat as well. I thought that was very considerate. An American friend of mine keeps being pleasantly surprised about the helpfulness and friendliness of people at the authorities she has to deal with.

Overall, I can say that even though the bureaucratic system in Germany may seem confusing, inflexible and inefficient, it works quite well and even smoother than in some other countries. Whenever you get frustrated, just remember that much of the confusion arises from not being familiar with the applicable rules, regulations and procedures as well as having language difficulties. It is not as bad as it seems at first glance.

It is important to make time and have patience when dealing with authorities, not just with the German ones, as Bonnie Barski states: “Sometimes I had to wait in long lines at the American Consulate or when getting my car registered at the TÜV. But I guess that's to be expected.”

Maureen Chase made the discovery that at some offices “there was a special line for people with children. We had my son with me so we were taken care of right away.”

The most important advice and one given by almost every expat is: know your German, at least some basic words or bring a dictionary or a friend or colleague who speaks German. Many government officials don't speak a second language and some bureaucratic terms are hard to translate anyway.

Other advice given in the questionnaires was:

- “Grit your teeth and get through it. There is no point complaining, demanding special treatment etc. (...) There is no reason behind

many of the regulations but they are the law of that country and as such must be respected.”

- “Be polite and always have official ID and lots of papers with you.” (I would add that when in doubt – bring all the official papers you have.)
- “Be patient. Making a fuss does not help you get things sorted faster.”
- “Never ever assume anything!!! Always ask! It took me five years to figure everything out.”
- “Read a book about what you need to comply with. If you do need to go to any sort of *Amt*, get there early in the morning and bring a good book! Also make sure you go to the right department and have the right forms filled out, otherwise you’ll have to queue up all over again.”

By the way, your embassy or consulate is the right address for many bureaucratic matters (i.e. registering the birth of a child, obtaining documents). Embassy websites or hotlines can give you an overview of their services.

2. Immigration and Work Permit Laws

Germany’s immigration and work permit laws are very complicated as they regulate all kinds of different cases. Here, I will just give you a short overview of the law that will most probably apply to your case – coming to Germany to work, to study or as an accompanying spouse. Please be aware that this is not a complete guide to German immigration law and that it is always advisable to get the most recent information and the one applicable to your special case. The information given here reflects the status in the fall of 2009.

a. Entering Germany

Whether you need a visa to enter Germany or not depends on your nationality. There are three main categories:

i) EU-citizens

Citizens of EU-countries can enter Germany without a visa and they can stay here for 90 days without a residence certificate. Afterwards, a residence certificate is needed.

ii) Citizens of countries listed in the “Visum-Positivliste”

The so-called Visum-Positivliste lists all countries of which citizens do not need a visa to enter Germany. Currently, apart from the EU-countries, the following countries are included: Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Bermuda, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Hong Kong, Iceland, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Macao, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, San Marino, Switzerland, Singapore, Uruguay, Vatican, Venezuela, United States of America.

You can always find the most updated version of this list on the following website: www.auswaertiges-amt.de. The site is available in English as well. Under the “Welcome to Germany” menu all relevant visa information is published. It is recommended to check this website for updates and for certain restrictions.

If you are a citizen of one of these countries, you don't need a visa to enter Germany, but you can only stay in the country for 90 days and you are not entitled to work. If you intend to stay longer and work in Germany, you will need a work permit and a residence permit. If you come to Germany because you already have a job here, you can enter the country a certain period before you start work and without possessing a residence permit, as long as you get both within 90 days and do not start work before you have the work permit. However, it is generally strongly advisable to start the application process for both permits as early as possible so that you can receive them as soon as you enter Germany.

iii) Citizens of other countries

All citizens of countries that are neither members of the EU nor listed in the Visums-Positivliste need a visa to enter Germany. It is highly advisable to adhere to the visa regulations, because if you enter Germany without a visa or with a tourist visa, you will not get a work permit. So if you come to live in Germany, you should make sure that the whole visa process is handled thoroughly and that you are sure everything is handled according to immigration law. A German company giving you/your spouse a job here or the German university where you want to study will usually take care of these matters, but you will have to go to the German Consulate in your country to apply for a visa.

A list of German Consulates can be found here: www.auswaertiges-amt.de under “Auslandsvertretungen”.

b. Living and working in Germany

Here again, the country you are from determines what kind of permits you need. All foreigners living in Germany or staying here for longer than three months need a residence permit. EU-citizens are entitled to this residence permit (called residence certificate), as it is a certificate of the free movement granted to EU-citizens within the EU. In all other cases it is at the discretion – within the law - of the German authorities to decide whether a residence permit (and work permit) is granted (for example if you don't have a job and no other means of financial support, you won't get a residence permit).

i) EU-citizens

As stated in the previous paragraph, EU-citizens are entitled to a residence certificate (*Freizügigkeitsbescheinigung*) as long as they can prove that they have a job or means of support. The residence certificate for EU-nationals is a separate document.

EU-citizens do not need a work permit to work in Germany, the residence certificate also allows them the right to work, as this is encompassed in the free movement right.

However, this does not yet apply to the citizens of the new EU-countries (meaning those that joined the EU on May 1, 2004 or later). Citizens of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia currently still need a residence permit (EU-residence permit) as well as a work permit. Check <http://europa.eu> for detailed information.

ii) Non EU-citizens

If you are not a EU-citizen, you will need both a residence permit and a work permit if you intend to live in Germany. (There are certain exceptions to the requirement of the work permit, but they usually don't apply to expats as they are mainly connected to unlimited or special residence permits.)

You will not get the residence permit unless you have already registered with the authorities (you will have to take your *Anmeldebestätigung* – see page 90 - to the *Ausländeramt* to get your residence permit). There are several kinds of residence permits, however, for people who come to work in Germany or as an accompanying spouse, the *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* will usually be the one that's applicable. The *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* is limited, but after a longer residence in Germany, there is the possibility of receiving an unlimited

Aufenthaltserlaubnis. Still, this will generally not be the case for expats who just come to stay in Germany for a limited number of years.

Students require a different kind of residence permit, it is called *Aufenthaltsbewilligung* and is more restricted than the *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* as it is only issued for a definite purpose (like university studies) and for a limited time. There is no chance of getting an unlimited *Aufenthaltsbewilligung*. Also, if the purpose of the *Aufenthaltsbewilligung* is served (in a student's case: graduation), the residence permit expires automatically.

There are different kinds of work permits. They can be limited in time (this is the usual case) and also to one employer or one location. If you get a job for a company in Berlin, for example, your work permit is only valid for that special company and only for Berlin, so if you decide to change jobs, the work permit has to be changed accordingly. Some work permits just have one of the limitations mentioned above and some are for all employers and for all of Germany. You should look at your work permit carefully in order to avoid any unpleasant surprises. Also, once you have your work permit, make sure it doesn't expire before your work period ends, because you are not allowed to work any longer until the work permit is extended. Usually, I would advise starting the application process for an extension about four to six weeks before your current work permit expires.

The same applies to your residence permit. Depending on the dates your permits were issued, your residence permit could expire at a different date than your work permit. Strictly speaking, once your residence permit expires you are not allowed to stay in Germany. Therefore, here as well, carefully check the expiration date and don't forget to start the application process on time. If you have a reliable employer and/or a good relocation service, they will keep track of expirations themselves and contact you when it is time to apply for an extension, but you shouldn't rely on this completely.

Legally, you are required to always carry your work permit with you (at least whenever you work). Your residence permit and work permit are stamped into your passport, which you should always carry with you anyway. (If your regular passport expires, the residence and work permit has to be transferred to the new passport.) Having all necessary documents with you can make things so much easier if any government official ever asks for verification that you are allowed to live and work in Germany.

3. Special German Laws

- “Complicated at first but liveable with.”
- “I get along ok but it is not easy to get information about them.”
- “When in doubt, ask neighbors, colleagues or friends about details.”
- “I did and don’t always obey them correctly as they can be complicated, but I try.”

Every country has certain laws that are strange to foreigners. Of course you can get fined for breaking a law even if you aren’t aware of it and in order to avoid getting into such a situation, it would be advisable to familiarize yourself with some of the regulations that are ‘typically German’. If you know of an additional directive you think should be listed here, you can email the relevant information to me at suggestions@fairmount-publishing.com.

a. *An- and Abmeldung* (Registration and De-registration)

You will encounter several official procedures revolving around your move to Germany, some of which I already mentioned in the section about German Immigration Law. One of the first things you need to do after you arrive is to register at the local municipal authorities (*Ordnungsamt, Einwohnermeldeamt, Bürgerbüro* or *Rathaus*, depending on the town you live in). Every person living in Germany, Germans and non-Germans alike, must always be registered with their local authority. Many cities and towns in Germany already have their own websites (generally the name of the city with the ending .de) that inform you of where to go and of the opening hours. You can also call the Rathaus or the municipality (*Stadtverwaltung*) to find out where you have to register. You register by informing the authorities that you have moved to their town and notify them of your new address (take your rental contract or other documentation of your new address with you, just in case). Then they will give you a confirmation of your registration which is called *Anmeldebestätigung*, which basically just confirms your address in Germany. Without this *Anmeldebestätigung* you will not be able to receive your residence permit!

You will also receive your tax identification number (Steuer-Identifikationsnummer) which – if you receive payments from a German company – has to be given to your employer’s payroll department. At the end of each year, you will receive a paper from the payroll department

that lists your German income as well as all taxes or social security deductions for that year. You need this confirmation for your tax return.

Whenever you change your residence within Germany, you have to go to the local authorities to notify them that you intend moving away and that your current address will no longer be valid (this is called *Abmeldung*). You will get a confirmation called the *Abmeldebestätigung*. Of course you will have to re-register in your new town, where you will receive another *Anmeldebestätigung*. As you see, you can't say Germans aren't thorough. If you move out of Germany, you should also do the *Abmeldung*.

Basically, it is not a major procedure and as several cities have now introduced the so-called *Bürgerbüros* (citizen's offices), which are usually efficient and quick, waiting times are often not that long either. Still, when you first arrive in Germany, it is of course confusing. If you don't have the chance to use a relocation service to handle this for you, you might want to ask a friend or maybe someone from an international club to come with you the first time. Don't forget that this procedure needs to be done every time you move within Germany. Otherwise you will get fined, as Rod Dixon, an expat from Zambia, experienced: "Make sure you know all of the areas you need to be registered. I was fined €20 for not notifying the authorities I had moved."

b. *Ruhezeit* (Quiet Period)

There are some "quiet periods" in Germany, which means that no excessive noise is allowed during certain hours of the day, this includes using a drill or an electric lawn mower, playing very loud music or doing any construction work. The quiet periods are between 10 pm and 7 am on weekdays (this includes Saturdays) and between 1 pm and 3 pm. Sunday in general is a quiet period! Therefore, you will see no construction work going on Sundays (unless the workers have a special permit).

If you have a party that's too loud during the quiet period, people can (and sometimes will) call the police to report a disturbance of the peace. Sometimes neighbors will inform you if they plan a party that might be quite noisy even after the official quiet period will have started, so that you can be prepared and won't complain. If you live in an apartment complex, you will probably receive the house rules (in German) in writing, they will also include details about the quiet period. There have been innumerable court decisions about what may and what may not be done in the quiet period. Whereas the running of a washing

machine (but only one that doesn't exceed certain noise levels) might have to be tolerated in an apartment building on Sundays, the lawn mower will not be accepted on that day.

I quite enjoy the quiet period and don't find it difficult to adhere to it. It also depends on your neighborhood how strictly it is followed, so as always, it is advisable to watch and learn. Maureen Chase has even seen the positive side to it and says: "The quiet period is okay with me. When we were moving in it was hard to suppress my need to hammer and make noise on Sundays, because I wanted to get set up quickly, but I respected it. In the end, I find we have more family time on Sundays because more stores are closed and we can't make noise at home, we have to be quiet. I like it."

c. Garbage separation

- "I'm really surprised that you don't find tons of garbage dumped on the side of the road. It's a major pain to get rid of anything here."
- "Garbage disposal seems to be very user unfriendly. Recycled cans are only collected once a month and for a non-German the explanation of collection days and colors is confusing to start with."

Getting rid of garbage can indeed become complicated. Garbage is separated and sometimes it is confusing to figure out where which piece of garbage belongs to. When asked about difficulties with special German regulations, almost all expats in the questionnaires pointed out that while they were very willing to adhere to the environmentally friendly German garbage separation rules, they sometimes were just too confused or uninformed. While cities hand out calendars illustrating the dates (usually with a color scheme) when garbage will be picked up, these calendars as well as any accompanying information are usually in German. As the rules are very detailed, even Germans can be unsure where to put their garbage. My parents live in an area where the garbage separation system is incredibly strict and complicated (they even have to disassemble yoghurt containers and put the different materials in three trash cans!). I hardly dare to throw anything away while I'm there because I never know which garbage belongs where.

You are expected to separate your garbage correctly and the garbage men may refuse to empty a garbage can that does not contain the designated trash. Therefore I want to give you a quick overview of the garbage separation system even though there are regional differences, so it is best to inform yourself about any such distinctions.

If you don't live in an apartment building (where garbage collection is organized for the whole building) you have to sign up for garbage collection (sometimes this can only be done by the proprietor of the house, so if you rent accommodation you won't usually have to worry about this.). When you go and register with the local authorities you can ask them where you get the forms for the garbage collection as this is handled by the cities. If the city you move to has a website you can check there where you have to go. Some cities also offer the downloading of the necessary forms.

Due to the mandatory garbage separation (explained below) you will get two garbage cans - one for *grüner Punkt* garbage and one for surplus garbage (not paper or glass). In some cities you may also possibly get a green garbage can for *Biomüll* which is compost. The garbage collection fees you have to pay depend on the size of the garbage can (which you can choose) and the frequency of collection (each week, every two weeks or every four weeks). As mentioned before, you will be handed a calendar that notes the dates for the trash collection, this calendar will then be mailed to you yearly.

Generally there is:

- “regular” garbage
- *grüner Punkt* (green dot) garbage = recycling
- compost and
- items that are recycled such as paper and glass.

You will find special containers in your area for paper and glass (some apartment buildings even have their own paper container). Glass is divided into clear, green and brown glass. Be aware that it is forbidden to put glass into the containers during the quiet period and on Sundays and public holidays. Please note, though, that there is a deposit on certain bottles. I will supply more information about the deposit system later.

Grüner Punkt garbage usually consists of plastic materials and packaging, you can recognize it by the logo with two arrows (it is not always green, though!). Everything with such a green dot on it has to be put in the garbage can for *grüner Punkt* garbage (usually the yellow garbage can or a yellow trash bag). The website for the *grüne Punkt* (www.gruener-punkt.de) is also available in English and you will find plenty of good information on how to dispose of certain garbage items. You are advised to wash out packaging (e.g. yoghurt containers) before disposing of it.

Everything that is neither glass nor paper nor *grüner Punkt* goes in the regular garbage can (unless you have a compost can or a compost corner in your garden). This does not apply to (electric) appliances or possibly toxic garbage (e.g. paint). The calendar for garbage disposal usually tells you how to dispose of those items, otherwise you can also contact the garbage collection company.

Large items like pieces of furniture, mattresses etc. do not go into the garbage cans, they are bulk rubbish (*Sperrmüll*). You have to let the garbage collection company know that you have bulk furniture and in what quantity, then they tell you when they can pick it up. You will be charged for this service and depending on the condition of the items you might want to inquire if a charity agency might have use for them, as they sometimes pick up such items for free.

Old clothes and shoes are also frequently donated. You will find special containers for them in certain areas, but there are also regular collections (*Kleidersammlung*) which are usually announced by a leaflet in your mailbox.

On most bottles and cans there is a deposit (*Pfand*), so you should be careful not to throw them away as you will get your deposit back after you return them to the store. When the new version of the deposit system was introduced in 2003, bottles and cans had to be returned with the receipt to the same store where they were bought. This caused a lot of protest as it was extremely inconvenient to the consumers. Therefore it was finally changed, but still you can usually only return those bottles and cans to a store that are from brands that store sells. Some stores now have convenient machines where you get rid of the bottle or can and you get a receipt that the cashier deducts from your purchases. Most stores still have counters (usually close to the drinks section) where an employee will take your empty returnable bottles and hand you the deposit. Literally all non-alcoholic drinks now come in returnable bottles and cans. They are marked with the word "*Pfandflasche*", "*Pfand*" or "*Mehrweg*".

Bonnie Barski has some good advice as to how dealing with the deposit system could be more convenient: "When the deposit on bottles came, I began to have our drinks delivered in cases (...). You only pay the deposit once, and you get it back later. It's a convenient way to buy drinks. That way you don't have to buy heavy bottles in the grocery store."