

Saturday in bed, do it. Give your brain a rest from the continual barrage of new information. A Saturday spent this way can go a long way to improving your mood. Be careful though, if you find you are spending every Saturday for two months in bed, it may just be time to get out and find out where those tennis courts are.

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4. Peculiarities of German Culture

You are aware that the German culture is different from the one in your home country. Maybe you know Germany already from previous travels, maybe it will be the first time for you to set foot into the country that will be your new home. Undoubtedly you already have some ideas and expectations about Germans and German culture. In my questionnaires I asked whether the expats noticed any differences between their home culture and German culture (of course all of them did) and whether they could name anything they found typically German. The answers were manifold, depending on the respondents' home country and where she or he lived in Germany. Two things that were almost always stated were that Germans are very private and also that they are unfriendly (as has been mentioned before). These issues seemed to have made the strongest impression on expats and also featured as being the main cultural difference. Therefore they will be at the top of our little list of peculiarities of German culture. I will give you some background information and explanation about German peculiarities and I hope it will help to give you a first impression of what you will expect in Germany.

a. Unfriendly and private Germans?

- "I think the main [problem] was how direct / discourteous Germans are."
- "People were very unfriendly and unhelpful."

- “[The] biggest difference is the non-openness and unfriendliness of the German people.”
- “People seemed at first not as friendly, especially in shops.”

These are some of the statements made in the questionnaires when asked about the first impressions of Germany and cultural differences noted. In a similar survey among Germans about their experiences during their stays in other countries, they almost always pointed out how much friendlier people in these countries seemed to be compared to Germans. Therefore it clearly has to be said – Germans don’t come over as the most friendly people on earth. However, it isn’t as bad as it looks. Many expats pointed out in the questionnaires that – after a while - they discovered that Germans actually were not per se more or less friendly than other nations, it just took a while to find that out. The last quote I put in the list above was made by Alice Waldron from the UK. I think it sums it up best – at first, Germans do not *seem* friendly. So what is it that gives us this first unfavorable impression of unfriendliness?

In my opinion, the reason lies in the general reserved attitude Germans have. Just recently I talked to an American friend who had returned from a journey to Ireland. She had gone to a pub with some friends and after a while another person came up to their table and chatted and joked with the others. To my friend’s surprise he said after a while: “Oh by the way, my name is Mike.” He hadn’t known any of the people at the table and yet they had chatted as if they were best friends. I myself was often aware that although I frequently had most animated conversations with total strangers in waiting lines, at bus stops etc. during my stay in the US, this would never happen to me in Germany (actually, by now it does happen occasionally – are we Germans changing?). It is just not part of German culture to be extremely open to strangers. Germans are not into small talk and they also highly value their own privacy. They usually wouldn’t dream of starting to talk to someone they didn’t know, as it could be seen as an invasion of the other person’s privacy and in most cases it would end up in some meaningless dialogue, which simply wouldn’t make much sense to Germans (after all, not many deep meaningful conversations have developed between total strangers in waiting lines). They would only talk to a complete stranger if there was a certain reason for addressing that person – asking for directions, inquiring whether it was the right waiting line or to get some other information. However – this of course is not valid for all Germans and some expats will make completely different experiences. Sarah Happel told me: “I have strangers talk to me almost every single day, at the grocery store, at the park, at the drugstore, on

the U-Bahn. Maybe it's because I have kids and so many people come up and talk to my kids. But even alone, people – mostly elderly, but sometimes my own age too – start talking about something. – Do you know I've had older people open up their purses and give my son 50 cents to go buy something at the store? Or some chocolate or a bite of something sweet? This strikes me as very friendly and every single time we go to the bakery or meat market they give my son a free pretzel or a piece of *Wurst*.”

So you see it cannot be said generally that all Germans are reserved. It also depends on where the expats comes from and what their own cultural background is with regard to approaching others and respecting privacy. Again, Sarah Happel – married to a Fin - offers some valuable insight: “Germans may seem cold to someone coming from Italy or France or even the USA, but people coming from Nordic countries find Germans very warm and talkative.”

There is a custom of exchanging greetings in certain situations, but nobody would necessarily expect a conversation to follow the greeting. Maureen Chase noticed this custom of exchanging greetings and considered it a sign for what I just said – people are polite and reserved. She said: “I notice that people say '*Guten Tag*' or a similar greeting when entering a doctor's office, and everyone else in that room responds the same! Funny. In the supposedly friendly US we don't do that. You just walk in and have a seat. When entering a store [in Germany], you always greet the person who works there, and they greet you. You say goodbye as well.”

I would even go so far as to say that the lack of customer service many expats criticized has to do with the strong value for privacy (although there definitely is a lower standard of customer service in Germany than in many other countries). When I went shopping in the US, at first I found it charming how I was welcomed with a cheerful “Hi, how are you!” as soon as I stepped foot into a store and I found the questions as to whether I was looking for anything specific or whether the salesperson could be of any assistance very attentive. After a while, though, it got on my nerves a little. I prefer being left in peace when I browse in a shop and I think many Germans share this. They want a salesperson to be courteous but to stay in the background until the customer asks for assistance. The lack of customer service in Germany however is mainly commented upon by Americans who are used to excellent customer service in their home country. Expats from European countries don't really find German customer service any better or worse than that in their home countries.

So, don't be surprised if you will find people you encounter in daily life to be lacking a certain openness for small talk or the customer service you are used to. It is a combination of being reserved and of valuing their and your privacy. What might appear unfriendly to you is the manifestation of a long tradition of not wanting to be intrusive and of opening up only to people one knows well. Don't take it personally! In fact, as some expats told me, a good way of dealing with this reserved behavior is to realize and keep in mind that it is not meant personally. I had an experience in England once where I felt somewhat insulted by something that was not meant in a rude manner, but was just the customary way of exchanging greetings. I was still a teenager and visited my mother's English friends with my parents. My mother's friend greeted me with "How do you do?" and I, assuming that she inquired about my well-being, started to tell her that I was in fact doing fine and had had a lovely trip etc. etc. However, I didn't get far with my statement as she had already proceeded to the next guest to exchange greetings. I thought it was discourteous to ask me how I was and then not listen to the reply. Later I learned that the "How do you do" English people say to each other as a greeting is not an inquiry but just a form of greeting, like "Hallo" and you are meant to reply with "How do you do?" and nothing else, just as Americans expect you to reply to an "How are you?" with a "Fine. How are you?", even if you are not fine at all. If you are an American or an English person, you will not consider these greetings rude and of course they are not rude at all, but a person not used to them might think differently. It's the same with German reserved behaviour. It is not meant in an unfriendly way, it is just a customary manner.

You will notice that this German attitude can make it difficult to find German friends (but I advise you to try and make German friends while you are in Germany as it will be far more beneficial in overcoming culture shock and exploring your host country's culture than just socializing within expat circles). How are you supposed to meet Germans if they are so reserved? There is an extra chapter on that starting on page 119, so I will just say here that it will take persistence, but it is, of course, possible and, as Bonnie Barski says: "Once you know them, they're like people everywhere." Andrew Brocklehurst, who came from the UK, has reached a conclusion that I hope many of you will get to share during your stay in Germany: "Germans are friendly if you are."

b. Hierarchical and Formal Structures

When you are introduced to an American, he will usually immediately tell you to call him by his first name. This custom applies