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Hannover, Germany

Germany: Looking back over my first year

I've been thinking about writing this for a while but the one year anniversary of my arrival in my new home came and went, and I hadn't put fingers to keys. So here I am, one year and 2 months in, finally getting round to writing down all the things that I've been thinking about since I arrived. Broken down into handy little categories, my musing on the things I've experienced and discovered living in Germany. And I hope it goes without saying that my tongue is firmly in my cheek here 😊

People: When I first arrived I attended a cultural orientation given by some colleagues who have lived here a long time. They said, "Germans are like coconuts. Hard to break open but sweet inside." I'd say that's pretty accurate. If you're lucky enough to find some Germans willing to let you into their inner circle (which isn't always easy) it can take a little time for them to warm up. But once they do they are the loveliest people. Their lives however are ruled by calendars and they don't appear by nature to be very spontaneous. Having a very poor short term memory, this makes it so much easier for me as my friends and partner share their calendars so we can easily plan ahead for time together. If it's in my calendar then I'll remember. Otherwise you're making plans with a goldfish.

I liked Hannover as a city. Small, easy to navigate, and pleasantly green. I found people to be a little intimidating and not always very friendly or forgiving of my lack of language skills (no matter how much Duolingo I practiced). When I moved out of the city I found that people were much friendlier and would say hello and pass the time of day. People are much more forgiving of my bad German and smile and offer assistance. It has been a stark change to my city living experience.

Food: Germany has a plethora of sausages but I have yet to find any that can compare to the good old British Lincolnshire sausage. That's not to say the sausages here aren't wonderful in their own right but just that none of them do the trick when you're craving sausage and mash or toad in the hole. Bread; in varieties and quantities hitherto unknown to me. And cheese.... Good lord is there a lot of cheese. I've never seen cheese counters so big!! The mine boggles. And pickles. Needless to say, I'm very happy with the food offerings on the whole. My only complaint would be that it is near on impossible to find a good Chinese or Japanese restaurant. One thing I have discovered is that food from northern Germany, where my partner is from, is very similar (if not exactly the same) as food from northern parts of the UK and also from Canada where I grew up. It really goes to show how when people emigrate, one of the touchstones they hold on to is their food. Food is comfort and a reminder of where they came from.

Work: The Germans guard their free time like Cerberus guarding the gates of the Underworld. Work starts and ends at the office and does not come home. My free time is protected BY LAW. Germans also rarely if ever talk about work when they aren't at work. We were told people would rarely ask us what we do and I've found that to be true. It was months after meeting my partner Michel's friends before they asked me what I did. I'm still not certain they understand

what I do as my job doesn't really exist in German schools. And I can't say that I actually know what any of my German friends do (apart from the ones I work with at school)! It's just not something that comes up. In the UK, asking about someone's profession would be one of the first questions you ask a new person you meet.

Getting around: Don't let the stereotypes of timeliness and efficiency fool you. Trains are late more often than not where I live and cutbacks and lack of investment into infrastructure has had a huge impact on services. That being said, trains are clean (including the toilets!) and I never feel unsafe when I travel alone at night. Buses are more reliable in terms of being on time. The Deutschland Ticket has been a total win for me. €49 a month unlimited travel on all regional transportation. Saves me a fortune.

Shopping: I don't care what anyone says, Sunday closing is still a ridiculous notion to me and I will never think it isn't. Saturdays in the supermarket are hellish as everyone buys their weekly groceries and panics over the fact that nothing will be open until Monday. It's like the last day of shopping before Christmas every Saturday afternoon in Rewe/Aldi/Lidl.

Socializing: Germans love a good Grillparty (BBQ). Last winter my partner's best friend invited us für Grillen and we sat outside in the cold eating grilled meat desperately trying to keep warm. A new experience for me and not at all unpleasant. Social drinking is big here like it is in the UK. Biergartens are a wonderful place to spend time in the good weather and the varieties of beers are again surprising and wonderful. I'm sure people do get drunk and lairy but it's not something I often see. Unless there is a football match on! People openly walking around with bottles of beer in the streets/parks/train station platforms who AREN'T drunk, has also taken some getting used to. They aren't getting pissed, it's just totally normal here to have a drink and take it with you. Yesterday on my way home from work I stood next to a group of work friends waiting for their train. They were all drinking beer and having a nice chat. I'm not sure it's something I would do, but I like the freedom of it.

Insurance: If I thought that German lives were ruled by their calendars then I didn't take into account how big a part insurance plays. In Taiwan I had health insurance and that was it. In the UK I had home insurance and that was it. In Germany; health insurance, home insurance, personal liability insurance, tech insurance..... the list goes on and on. We were told on arrival that we really had to get personal liability insurance, you know, just in case you go to a friend's house and accidentally break their priceless Chinese vase (actual example that was told to me by MULTIPLE people). The idea that a friend would expect me to claim on my insurance for something of theirs that I might break/damage by accident was kinda baffling. Living in the UK or Taiwan, if such a thing happened, I would of course offer to replace it or repair it or something but the idea of getting insurance companies involved would be unheard of. But it's genuinely a thing that people do here, so like a good new German, I got my insurance. Now I'm protected incase I knock over one of those priceless Chinese vases I've heard so much about. Bavaria: is not Germany, and Germans outside Bavaria want everyone to know this. I have definitely been beguiled by Germany. There is so much to love. There is also a lot that I find baffling and frustrating but it's the same with every place I've lived. I'm so grateful for all these new experiences, and I'm excited to see what else Germany has to offer.