

German Culture 101

A Guide to Living in Germany



1st edition

Copyright 2023 © by Helena Suchochleb, **TCT | Teaching, Communication & Translation**

www.tct-international.org

Editing & Layout: Helena Suchochleb

Printed in Germany

Contents

1. Formality	3
2. Greetings	3
3. Sundays Are the Holy Grail of the Working Week	4
4. Punctuality	4
5. Directness.....	4
6. Public Transport	5
7. Soccer & Other National Sports	5
8. German Food	6
9. German Beverages	8
10. German Holidays	9
11. German History	10
12. Immigration in Germany	11
13. Money	11
14. Living & Accommodation	12
15. <i>Dirndl & Lederhosen</i>	12
16. <i>Pfand</i>	13
17. <i>Mülltrennung</i>	13
18. Public Toilets	13
19. <i>Hausschuhe</i>	14
20. Bureaucracy	14
21. Last but not least.....	15

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

Now that you have arrived in Germany to study or work here, you'd like to find out more about German culture and what Germans are *really* like. We're here to help you!

1. Formality:

Most Germans tend to be quite formal. If you do not know someone closely, address them by their last name, led by *Frau* (Ms./Mrs.) or *Herr* (Mr.) and use the capitalized formal address *Sie* and *Ihnen*. If people prefer that you'd address them using the informal *du* and *dich*, they will let you know. The same is true for titles: If known, address people by their titles. It's a sign of showing respect for their accomplishments as well as the correct formal address. Once you get to know people better, they may offer you a more informal way of addressing them but you should not regard this as a given. In writing, *Sehr geehrte Frau ...* or *Sehr geehrter Herr ...* are the standard phrases still used throughout most industries.

2. Greetings:

While there are quite a few differences with regard to local greetings, you can never go wrong with *Guten Tag!* A formal handshake is the best way to greet a German in a professional context or if you do not know them better. Friends might hug each other – Waving from afar is also quite common.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

3. Sundays Are the Holy Grail of the Working Week:

Note almost all shops are closed on Sundays, with very few exceptions: Sunday is a so-called *Ruhetag* (“day of rest”), so only stores at central stations and some small kiosks might be open. Instead, enjoy your weekend or make an excursion to get to know your city a bit better! Take into account that trains and busses run less frequently on the weekends and holidays.

4. Punctuality:

Punctuality is regarded as very important in Germany – In the academic world, you have the additional bonus of the *akademisches Viertel* (i.e., the “academic quarter”, meaning that classes only start 15 minutes after the time noted on your curriculum, so you have some time to get from A to B). That being said, you’ll likely hear a lot of complaints about busses and trains not being on time. Germans like to complain, especially about their public transport! Berlin’s public transport service provider even ran a successful Marketing campaign saying you could blame your delay on them.

5. Directness:

Germans can be quite direct, so more often than not, they will prefer telling you the truth over a socially expected reply that meets international small-talk standards. So remember: What can sometimes be mistaken for rudeness is only us being direct with you – *Alles klar?*

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

6. Public Transport:

The public transport system in Germany is well developed. There are special student tariffs and some employers may even reimburse you for your travel costs, also the inner-city ones. In most major cities, there are regional (**RE**) and regional express trains (**ICE**), the metro (**U-Bahn**), city and regional busses that run by day and night. City trains such as the **S-Bahn** exist as well and in Berlin, you can also find trams and special night, metro and express bus lines (to be recognized by the **N**, **M** and **X** before the line number). You may take your bike with you on the U- & S-Bahn and on regional trains at extra price. Trams only exist in the former Eastern part of Berlin, so for anyone with an interest in History, it's easy to tell which part of the city you are in in terms of Cold-War history.

7. Soccer & Other National Sports:

Soccer is the most popular sport in Germany, so you'll be quick to start off any small talk or chat with a discussion of last week's game – The regional teams of the *Bundesliga* (1st German soccer league) have many ardent supporters, so pick your team wisely before you choose sides! Other favorite sports in Germany include winter sports -like skiing-, tennis, table tennis, field hockey, basketball and handball.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

8. German Food:

People tend to get their breakfast at home or at the local bakery. There are also many coffee shops lining the streets of the major German cities that also sell food. If you stay at a hotel, they may offer breakfast as well. Traditional German cuisine is surprisingly rare – Most major cities offer the general mix of international cuisine, so you will probably find something for your taste. There are a few restaurants offering traditional German cuisine and you might find products like asparagus and sauerkraut at your local supermarket and sometimes sold by little improvised stalls along the road. If you are looking for specialty cuisine, most supermarkets have an extra aisle for international products – Otherwise, there are small specialty shops selling Asian, Greek or Indian food, for example, in most major cities.

A classic to go is the *belegtes Brötchen*, a bread roll with topping that would probably translate to a sandwich, only that the German version does not necessarily have bread on both sides but rather just the bread on the bottom and the topping on top. Another bestseller is the *Laugenbrezel* (lye pretzel), sold in bakeries and supermarkets or as a snack in most major venues from concert halls to soccer stadiums. There are also lye bread rolls which you can eat with a topping of your choice, even though some of the traditional pretzels come with a butter filling. Sausages are a big thing and just like with beer, there are many regional differences: From *Rostbratwurst* over *Currywurst* to *Wiener Würstchen* and *Weißwurst*, meat lovers will find various palate pleasers. Other common foods include *Klöße* (potato dumplings), *Kartoffelsalat* (potato salad) and *Kartoffelpuffer* (potato pancakes). Did we say we like potatoes? Another German specialty is *Quark*, a curd-like dairy product similar to sour cream, which you may also use as a topping for...? Potatoes, that's right!

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

8. German Food (continued):

Germans are big on cake and pastries as well – Not only the *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte* is a German creation but many other sweet treats, such as various crumble cakes with seasonal fruit or poppy-seed cake. Afternoon coffee, the so-called *Kaffeekränzchen*, is a social event you might still find in some families or amongst elder people – The idea is to have coffee and a chat to catch up with the latest gossip. Modern coffee-to-go culture has taken its toll on this beloved tradition, though, so younger people might rather hang out at the coffee chain around the corner.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

9. German Beverages:

Beer is the most consumed alcoholic beverage in Germany, encompassing 14 different kinds of brews as well as a top ten of the most successful brands just to top things off – In total, there are as many as over 5000 different kinds of beers, so you will encounter a variety of choice for your taste. As far as non-alcoholic beverages go, *Biolimonade* (sometimes also referred to as *Bionade*, lemonade made from organic ingredients) and *Apfelschorle* (apple juice mixed with sparkling mineral water) are true bestsellers. *Weinschorle* is the alcoholic cousin of *Apfelschorle*, i.e., wine mixed with sparkling water. In the mornings, Germans like to drink coffee as well, even though not all local or national brands might be as refined as some of the international ones you might be familiar with.

As for water, please note that you will have to pay for water in German restaurants – It is not served free on the side as might be the case in other countries. Free refills are quasi non-existent, people rather share a large jug or bottle of water as a group. As a rule, if you ask for water in Germany, you will be served sparkling water; if you prefer your H₂O non-carbonated, you'll need to ask for still or tap water. Also, ice cubes are not always included, even though they are part of the service in most restaurants. Since the general water quality in Germany is quite good, a lot of people drink water directly from the tap at home as well.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

10. German Holidays:

The most celebrated German holiday is Christmas, with celebrations centering around Christmas Eve on December 24th, when children typically receive their presents after attending Christmas Mass if the family is religious or traditional. It is also the time to see Christmas concerts and markets all over German cities, with traditional Christmas cuisine such as Christmas cookies (so-called *Plätzchen*), *stollen*, a sweet German Christmas fruitcake, *Bratapfel*, a baked apple seasoned and filled with fruits, nuts and spices, *Apfelstrudel*, a puff pastry filled with apples and raisins that is topped off with cream or vanilla sauce and *Glühwein*, mulled wine with seasonal spices. December 25th and 26th are Christmas holidays, shortly followed by *Silvester* and *Neujahr*, New Year's Eve and Day on December 31st and January 1st respectively. Germans celebrate New Year's by toasting with champagne or sparkling wine and watching or sparking off fireworks at midnight. There are some fun traditions such as *Bleigießen* (lead-pouring) and special TV programs to ring in the New Year. Many people also hold pot-luck dinners, with group food like *raclette* high in demand. While Christmas and New Year's Eve are not bank holidays, some people get the day or half a day off by their employers. Other holidays include Easter and Pentecost as well as the anniversary of the reunification of Germany, celebrated on October 3rd each year (*Tag der Deutschen Einheit*).

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

11. German History:

German history is fraught with its Nazi past and *Aufarbeitung*, accounting for the past, is an important and serious topic in Germany. With monuments like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin's city center as well as *Stolpersteine* marking the former homes of Jews who were deported to school trips to former concentration camps, Germany has made it its mission to ensure that this dark chapter of its own past remains part of its national collective memory. Any signs or symbols glorifying the Nazi past and/or ideology are strictly prohibited, as is the demonstration of the former *Hitlergruß*, the salute to the *führer*. This is also the reason you may find that most Germans practice a rather subdued brand of national pride, the epitome of which usually is their fervent support for their national soccer team. While some politicians still debate whether there is such a thing as a *Leitkultur*, a core or mainstream culture, Germany is a country that is home to immigrants from many different countries and especially (but not only) the cities are filled with people from all sorts of international backgrounds.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

12. Immigration in Germany:

As just stated, Germany is home to millions of immigrants, with over 22 million people -every fourth German- having an immigrant background, meaning either they or one of their parents was not born in Germany. That is more than 27% of the entire population. The largest immigrant groups come from Turkey, Poland and Russia. These numbers are taken from the German census 2021 and by 2023, they have probably increased. Even though most immigrants speak German at home, this means a lot of people living here might speak a second language at home. English and French are the most widely taught foreign languages at school and especially English is spoken at many universities and international companies. You might find that a lot of elder Germans who grew up in the former GDR speak Russian as well, as that was the foreign language taught there at the time.

13. Money:

As of 2002, the Euro has replaced the *Deutsche Mark* (or *D-Mark*) as official currency – Today, it is valid in 20 European countries, facilitating international travel in the Euro Zone by eradicating the hassle of money exchange. Germans tend to be quite conservative with money, meaning that while most major international credit cards are accepted, Germans still tend to pay cash a lot more than other countries' citizens. While the financial sector is transformed by digitalization and online and phone banking have become more accepted, you should make sure to always have some cash at hand in case you need it. Especially smaller businesses might not accept credit cards. You can open a bank account at every German bank but make sure to check whether they raise any fees first.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

14. Living & Accommodation:

Especially students form *Wohngemeinschaften* (WGs), meaning shared apartments. There is also student housing available in all major cities, even though living space can be sparse at the beginning of the new semester. The cost of living varies greatly with the city you live in and also with your standard of living – If you know how to live on a budget, then you'll be able to save some extra money for your next vacation! If you are part of an exchange program, you can also check whether you have the opportunity to live with a German host family. Please note that most German apartments have central heating but no air conditioning. Also note that most public buildings in Germany, such as schools, universities, libraries and even hospitals, do not have AC, at least not by default. Most public transportation and cars do, however.

15. *Dirndl* & *Lederhosen*:

Dirndl and *Lederhosen* are the epitome of German culture, aren't they? Far from it! It's a traditional dress in the state of Bavaria in Southern Germany and even there, it is hardly everyday streetwear. It is, however, used heavily in Marketing of the German Tourism industry and by Bavaria's major soccer club, *FC Bayern München*. Similarly, the *Oktoberfest* is a big annual event only in Munich and your chances to spot Germans in *Dirndl* and *Lederhosen* are probably greatest there. So you might have to rethink your traditional image of Germans a bit! Oh, and by the way: Bavarians are not the only ones to have regional traditional clothing – If you ever take a trip to the *Spreewald* and catch one of their famous boat rides, you might catch a glimpse of an entirely different type of traditional wear.

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

16. Pfand

Germany has an elaborate system of *Flaschen-* and *Dosenpfand*, a bottle and can deposit which asks you to return your empty bottles and cans to the supermarket (chain) at which you bought it in return for some cash. This is just one of many measures to secure eco-friendly waste disposal, just like...

17. Mülltrennung

Germans take separating their trash seriously; so much that garbage separation has almost become a religion. Usually, households have trash cans for regular trash, white and colored glass, plastic, biodegradable, electronic as well as paper and cardboard trash. To make things easier, trash cans are color-coded: Black is for the regular trash, while yellow is for plastic and blue for paper and cardboard trash, for instance. Most German households start at home, having at least two different trash bins in their apartment. So explore the trash cans around your new living quarters so you know where to leave what.

18. Public Toilets

Please note that most public toilets in Germany ask you to leave a few coins for the cleaning staff, so you should always have a bit of change with you in case you need to visit a public toilet. Coins in cash come in handy for other things as well, such as when you'd like to get a shopping cart at the local supermarket – It's like a deposit (*Pfand*) for shopping carts. Do you see a pattern there? 😊

Welcome to Germany: German Culture 101

19. *Hausschuhe*

If you've ever been a guest in a German household, chances are that you've stumbled across this particular German brand of hospitality and coziness. *Hausschuhe*, house shoes or slippers in English, are to be found in almost every apartment or house and are offered to guests to keep their feet warm and floors and carpets clean. Some Germans might also ask you to leave your street shoes at their doormat - Consider it Germans' way of dealing with a lot of bad weather throughout the year. Rumor has it that if you've worn house shoes or slippers, you have successfully passed one of *the* major initiation rites into German everyday life.

20. Bureaucracy

One of the most frequent but also true stereotypes about Germany is its vast bureaucracy. Blame it on the Prussians, who basically invented the official documentation of everything, thus starting what today is a huge bureaucratic apparatus tasked with running the country. In some cases, this yields swiftly-run citizens' services and great organization; however, it often also means long waiting hours, queuing with waiting numbers and endless communication with different offices as well as lots of filling out forms and documents. So try to do things online as much as possible, take a book with you, breathe in deeply and remember: As far as bureaucracy is concerned, if you make it here, you can make it anywhere and proudly add some serious organizational and time-planning skills to your resume. Also, complaining to other people queuing about long queues is one of the quickest ways to make friends here! 😊

Last But Not Least

Keep in mind...

... that Germany is home to a variety of regional differences, including different dialects, customs and peculiarities. Therefore, “the” archetypical German does not exist. Still, you might find some national differences that are definitely part of the national culture. Be curious and explore what really is cultural as opposed to regional or individual difference! That being said, we hope you have a great time exploring the land of poets, thinkers and color-coded trash cans!

Enjoy your time in Germany!







TCT

Teaching,
Communication
& Translation