



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

Currency Problems Faced by East German Vacationers (August 30, 1980)

A West German observer describes the difficulties faced by a growing number of East German tourists abroad. The problems were caused by the weakness of the GDR currency and the superior wealth of their Western cousins, which made them feel like second-class Germans.

When GDR Citizens Go on Vacation

Kept short of foreign currency

Klaus-Peter from Halle returned to his home in the GDR from a vacation on the Bulgarian coast with a golden tan. But when customs officers at Berlin-Schönefeld airport wanted to check his suitcase, it was empty. The young man stood sheepishly in front of the officers in nothing but his shirt, pants, and felt slippers. But he had by no means been the victim of thieves in faraway lands. He had sold all his possessions in Bulgaria. Had needed to sell them because he had met a young girl down there and wanted to woo her. But because his vacation allowance was limited by law, clever Klaus-Peter from Halle supplemented his travel funds by trading goods.

At first glance this story might sound strange or even funny. But it demonstrates the problematic situation faced by GDR tourists in other socialist countries. After all many of Klaus-Peter's compatriots do what he did. People from the GDR haul truckloads of objects for trade-in to their vacation spots in order to sell them to their Eastern brothers. Since the selection of goods available in the GDR is still better than it is in Bulgaria or the Soviet Union for example. Not all that popular in the socialist brother countries, on the other hand, is the East German "phony mark." The governments there are more interested in foreign exchange earnings from the West.

Also when traveling to Poland, GDR citizens now have to exchange, at minimum, 200 zlotys worth of East marks per day. In accordance with regulation, all zlotys bought in excess of this minimum can be changed back into East marks without restriction. In Czechoslovakia the minimum is 40 crowns per day; in Bulgaria it is 109 marks for an eight-day stay, and 309 marks for a 22-day stay. Similar regulations apply for Romania, Hungary, and the Soviet Union. GDR citizens have been prohibited from travelling to Yugoslavia for a while now, unless they are of retirement age. If travelers from the GDR possess Western currency, they may not take it out of the country under any circumstance; it is supposed to be spent in their own country. But those who are thus constrained are inventive. Some tourists have three weeks' worth of foreign

exchange entered into their “accordion” – an addendum to their passports – and then they stay only a short time. Western currency is smuggled in in tinfoil so as not to be discovered during the mandatory x-ray. Dollar bills are more popular than West German banknotes, which are more easily noticed during x-rays on account of the silver threads woven into them.

And it is not only money problems that can ruin a vacation for GDR citizens. When abroad they constantly feel discriminated against, overlooked as compared to Westerners. Someone put it aptly upon his return: “In friendly foreign countries, we’re the Negroes.” This is because socialist tourism officials are quick to forget their ethics when it comes to improving their foreign exchange balance. People from the GDR are removed from their lodgings, sent to worse campgrounds, and treated like second-class citizens in restaurants.

Even interpersonal relationships suffer. Local girls would rather snag a Westerner for a summer fling because sometimes he will take them shopping in a foreign exchange store or treat them to a drink in a hard-currency bar. Last year the cover for a discotheque along Bulgaria’s sunny seashore was ten levs, for which you received drink tickets. For a West German, who on top of everything else exchanges money on the black market at a fabulously favorable rate, that’s peanuts. For travelers from East Germany, however, it amounts to their allowance for two and a half days.

First-time travelers recognize with frustration the discrepancy between Eastern propaganda and reality. “The things they told us about the model country, the Soviet Union!” complains a tourist from Dresden in Moscow. “The barkeeper was kicking me out while a Texan next to me was relaxing and drinking whisky for twenty dollars because they ran out of change in the hard-currency bar.” “No one should ever say there is no prostitution in the land of Lenin,” the Dresdener continued, “but when the women approach me, the friendliness instantly evaporates when I reply in my Saxon dialect.”

Nevertheless, the man is happy to be able to travel abroad at all. He had to wait five years for the opportunity. Because the offerings of the “Travel Agency of the GDR” are far from sufficient to satisfy the demand of all customers. Thus, the available spaces are allotted in a kind of lottery. At the beginning of the year, all those interested choose from a catalog and receive so-called pre-booking tickets. The unlucky ones are on their own to plan a trip. Daily newspapers are full of advertisements where those eager to travel search for vacation apartments and offer their own homes in exchange. Traveling that way is also much less expensive. Customers of the state-run travel agency have to loosen their purse strings much more than, for instance, West Germans do.

A trip to Bulgaria, which was available to us here for 800 marks last year, cost 1300 marks “on the other side.” A six-day trip to Moscow, on sale here for 499 marks in 1979, cost 800 marks through the GDR travel agency.

But despite all of these impediments, the East Germans are as travel-happy as ever. Although statistics are near impossible to come by, the “Travel Agency of the GDR” supposedly arranges about 1.2 million vacations each year. “If they had another million tours available, they would sell those, too,” believes a tour guide from Dresden. “We just have a lot to make up for.”

Source: Wille Bremkes, “Wenn DDR-Bürger Urlaub machen” [“When GDR Citizens Go on Vacation”], *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 30, 1980.

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