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German Vacation Habits (April 1, 2004)

A journalist notes that the German quest for the perfect vacation experience often ends in severe disappointment. Unrealistic expectations, he argues, have given rise to a culture of complaining, which finds ample and eloquent expression in the huge number of complaints filed with mass tourist organizations. The author finds it ironic that, for many Germans, the quest to expand their horizons through travel invariably leads to situations that reveal their true narrow mindedness. His wide-ranging article ends with a discussion of tourism in the new Eastern federal states.

How the Germans Vacation

“Vacationing” is a very German verb. We take pains to broaden our horizons, go to court over cockroaches. And we think: tourists, they’re always those other people.

Hundreds of thousands of German vacationers sit in front of their computers after the holidays to vent. The verbosely recorded grievances read like so: “For reasons of age – I am 61, my wife 59 – we took ground-level apartment no. 234. Since the house was occupied solely by Germans, we often left the balcony door open at night. On the morning of the third day, I was awakened – along with many neighbors – by the shrill cries of my wife: a large German shepherd had jumped over the balcony railing and started licking my wife’s legs as she slept. She was not only paralyzed for minutes on end, but was so shocked, that the entire vacation became literally all about the dog. Since you are responsible for the safety of your guests, I will begin by demanding a refund of at least half of my wife’s travel expenses on account of this experience.”

Apart from Christmas, no other days of the year are subject to such pressure of expectations as vacation. It is quite possible to slide into a crisis or fall into a depression during one’s vacation time. What is psychologically difficult to resolve is quickly projected onto the external circumstances. If a cockroach scurries through the bathroom or a gecko hangs head down from the ceiling in the hotel, we end up in court months later. The smallest annoyances lead to large grievances. You can’t imagine what goes on in the legal departments of large German tourist organizations. Travel employees have become complaint managers, for the citizens of Germany have worked hard for the title “world champions of complaining.”

Germany was the first country in Europe that enshrined the right to travel in the Civil Code. The intent was to create concrete criteria for lawsuits and to make judicial discretion less of a factor in individual civil disputes. To that end, the jurist Otto Tempel created the so-called Frankfurt Table. It painstakingly lists what percentage of travel expenses can be demanded back for what sort of deficiency. Bugs get you between 10 and 50 percent; cockroaches, however, only count if there are more than ten.

No other nation of people insists on the perfect vacation experience as much as the Germans, and hardly any other nation uses the word vacation as a verb: vacationing! The person who vacations is not twiddling his thumbs; linguistics shows that vacation [*Urlaub*] in no way means the same as holidays [*Ferien*], that is to say, a day off or a public holiday. You start the active vacation by packing the Frankfurt Table into the suitcase (some add the cockroaches right then and there) in order to look for shortcomings instead of beautiful things at the destination. The German culture of complaint is spurred on by the tabloid press. With clockwork regularity, they publish the Frankfurt Table shortly before the beginning of the travel season, like some basic right to a discount. What they do not publish is the fact that only a fraction of all complaints yield the hoped-for success.

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A Brief Typology of Tourists

It is obvious that tour operators do not like to give out information about this; such cases can cast a dark shadow over the sunny side of the company. You see, “100 meters to the sea,” as it says in the catalogs, does not necessarily mean “100 meters to the beach” – the precarious thing about the purchase of a vacation package (in contrast to the purchase of a stereo system) lies in the fact that the product cannot be adequately evaluated either before or during the purchase, and perhaps not even afterwards. Grievance managers will say only this much: complaints come from all classes of society. The journeyman plumber from Berlin asserts his presumed right to a vacation just as much as the doctor’s wife from Bielefeld, the New Economy manager from Hamburg as much as the history teacher from Passau.

These four individuals have been carefully chosen, as they embody, in exemplary fashion, the four different types of vacationers that tour operators expect to see when they create their products.

There is, first of all, the Berlin journeyman plumber as a package-deal vacationer. In the summer he travels to Mallorca and in the winter he might even go to the Diani Beach Club in Kenya, and on the drive to the airport of Berlin-Schönfeld he will be wearing shorts and white ankle socks even in February. At the beach he’ll expand his horizons, sample scuba diving or go on a day-safari to the Tsavo National Park. The Masai who dance around the tables at the buffet as they beat their drums are to him still “real negroes,” and after returning from his vacation he greets colleagues with “Jambo, jambo!”

The doctor's wife from Bielefeld would not do anything like that. She is a creative vacationer, and although she books a package deal, there is something special about it. When the children were still young, the family once scrambled through the mountains of Nepal. A genuine trial! After that, they only went to the Robinson Club, childcare included. If the children are out of the house and the husband can't find someone to fill in at the practice, she'll try her hand at watercolor in the Provence or make pottery in Tuscany. With age she has become more sensitive as far as food is concerned, and a suntan is no longer a sign of a successful vacation. In her luggage she has a book by John le Carré, just in case, and on the flight back she buys body lotion by Biotherm in the Duty Free Shop for her sons.

The history teacher from Passau carries in his hard suitcase, apart from Baedeker, a recorder to tape the conversation with the tour guide as well as a pencil and notepad and a small ruler. He is the classic educational vacationer. In Egypt he measures the tomb chambers, and a temperature of 40° Celsius (104° Fahrenheit) does not sway him to remove his wool sweater. If he sees a shoe shiner in the hotel, he walks on quickly and thinks: I am not a neo-colonialist!

The dynamic New Economy manager from Hamburg will always smile a little condescendingly at him, for the truly self-respecting person is a trend-vacationer. His destinations are hotels, it doesn't matter which country they are in, the important thing is that they are "designed," have a lounge, and inundate him twenty-four hours a day with chill-out music. *Men's Health* is right on top in the trend-vacationer's Samsonite – vacation to him also means working on his washboard abs. The trend-vacationer brings along his 3,500-Euro mountain bike or his surfboard. Sometimes he'll travel alone, which reminds him of his student days, when he was on the road on his own with a neck pouch.

Snapshot with Cremation

It's part of the ritual for the individualist-tourist to set himself apart almost compulsively from the package-deal tourist. He would never call himself a tourist, but claims for himself the more sophisticated-sounding term "traveler." If he notices German package-deal tourists at the next table in a Turkish beach town, he will speak only English. And if he hears of complaints like those from the Bavarian couple who felt bothered by the natives in Africa, he says: Yikes, how inhuman! He himself manages with ease to attend a cremation on Bali and to pose for a photograph in front of the open casket with the priests and the female dancers, a photograph in which the Balinese are stony-faced. However, he cannot imagine what would happen if backpacking tourists from Borneo stormed into a cemetery chapel in Münsterland, cameras at the ready, while the priest was still reciting the Hail Mary. Needless to say, the German individualist-tourist reviles the German package-deal tourist who carries his own habits around the world and barricades himself inside hotel grounds.

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The “Bacardi-Feeling” propagated by advertising, for example, is a chimera. Only a minority (about five to six percent of German vacationers) has ever gone on a long-distance trip outside of Europe. Spain, on the other hand, has been the most popular foreign holiday destination for Germans since 1986. Seven million Germans already flew to Mallorca alone in 1975; in 1995 it was thirteen million. For the end user, this data has one advantage: it shows the individualist-tourist the path to the countries where he can avoid the German masses, and show the German masses the path to themselves.

Behind the Wheel out of Fear of Terrorism

The most obvious change in the travel behavior of Germans, however, can be seen in the rediscovery of the car. Last year, 36 of 100 vacationers used the car, in the coming season nearly half of all families with children intend to travel by car. The 20th Tourism Analysis of the Hamburg BAT Leisure Time Research Institute lists fear of terrorist attacks and economic constraints as the reasons. And perhaps what was heard in the fifties will be said again: “Without car traffic, no tourist traffic.”

Back then, the preferred destination of the West Germans was Lake Garda; *Lili Marleen* was blaring from the radio. The camp grounds were mass camps, surrounded by barbed wire. Protest signs that said things like “*Überall is Gitter und das ist bitter, überall ist Draht und das ist schad*” (Bars everywhere – how bitter, wires everywhere – how sad) could not dampen the collective fun. You washed and ironed and cooked under the eyes of others. Society showed itself classless in swimming trunks – this was not substantially different from the camp grounds in East Germany or Bulgaria. The long-distance travelers had hardly returned and candles were dripping from the Italian wicker bottle in the basement party room. Housewives were exchanging spaghetti recipes.

What began in the fifties with the trip across the Alpine passes in the VW Bug has now come to fruition: the German citizen has become Europe’s most willing consumer of vacation happiness. On vacation he indulges in something resembling life, whereas in his everyday life he is grimly sparing with his money and emotions. Germany is the land that torments him with taxes and work and doctor’s fees and cutbacks, and he doesn’t want to be reminded of this during the pleasant weeks of the year. Germany is not the land of sweet leisure, of grand performances by waiters, of easy flirtation. Perhaps that is why Germans agree on nothing more than that the primacy of the foreign vacation. In other words: they have to escape, and they do.

Once Castro, today Westerwelle

On average, 70 of 100 Germans spend their long [annual] vacation out of the country. That the number was smaller last year (62%) was chiefly due to the fact that many did not have the money. Above all, East Germans listed money shortages as their reason for staying home. Their eagerness to travel has dropped about as rapidly as the unemployment figures have risen. Before 1989, however, they were no less mobile than the West Germans, as Heike Bähre writes

in her scholarly work on tourism policy in the transformation of the political system [*Tourismuspolitik in der Systemtransformation*].

East Germans were open to the world, but the world was not open to them. Except for Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, they could take vacation only in their own country. In return, however, the state did everything it could. Trips were supposed to be possible for everyone. That every enterprise had to maintain its own vacation home was just as foolish, economically speaking, as the fact that locals in the shopping centers “marched up to the cashier past the line of vacationers and were given preferred service.” The state-promoted economy of scarcity led to peculiar conflicts. For example, one clerk in East Berlin who sold underpants and children’s socks complained in a letter that the “foreign tourists, especially Poles, are buying up certain lines of goods.”

Klaus Wenzel survived the *Wende* equally well as his Hotel Neptun in Warnermünde on the Baltic Sea. It rises into the sky as one gigantic block of concrete; all rooms have a view of the sea. “Before the *Wende* it was international here, Egyptians came, Americans, Australians, and New Zealanders, our employees were trained in three languages,” says the hotel director. In East Germany, the Neptun was a contractual hotel of the union, Wenzel greeted guests like Fidel Castro. Today, the guests are almost exclusively Germans – like Guido Westerwelle,* for instance.

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With the same ideology that it used in the sixties and seventies to convert the developing countries in South-East Asia and North Africa into touristic sellouts (“We bring money and jobs”), the Western tourist industry moved into the new states after the fall of the wall. The Hotel Neptun, for example, has changed ownership five times so far as a “tax saving model.” At the same time, the Baltic Sea, especially the coastline in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, has become the Germans’ most popular domestic vacation destination. And in the process it has relegated Bavaria to second place.

After the hot summer of 2003, hardly anyone is still carping about the bad weather. In his own country, however, the German is an even more difficult guest than elsewhere. While he will tend to come out of his shell a little under the southern sun, becoming a little more relaxed and generous, here at home he remains a realist. He has no penchant for riotous behavior and, as Klaus Wenzel puts it, he is constantly on the road with the price-value ratio in his head. “In this, the Leipziger is no different from the Hamburger.” The German vacationer feels entitled to expect that everything in the eastern part of the country will be cheaper; for his satisfaction the employees should be friendlier and more competent than in the West.

* Guido Westerwelle is a German politician and the leader of the Free Democratic Party of Germany (FDP) – eds.

Perhaps the German vacationer has a lot in common with the cartoon character businessman Scrooge McDuck. He goes through the world ruthlessly and without mercy and lives according to the motto: survival is everything. Except that the German vacationer is less flexible than Scrooge McDuck. And most of all, he is less flexible than marketing expects him to be. Not only is he sitting down in the driver's seat of his own car, he is also showing himself to be touchingly conservative before every vacation. In the age of the Internet, when every hotel and every vacation park and every tour operator has its own homepage, he continues to get his information from the travel bureau.

He leafs through the catalogs of the operators and relies as always on his own travel experience. "Even for the info-elite with an *Abitur* or a college degree," write the Hamburg leisure-time researchers, "information from the travel bureau is more relevant in the decision making process than online offers."

And after the vacation, hundreds of thousands of Germans will sit down at the computer to vent. For nothing is harder to take than a succession of happy days.

Source: Thomas Niederberghaus, "Wie die Deutschen Urlaub machen" ["How the Germans Vacation"], *Die Zeit*, no. 15, April 1, 2004.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap