8 Things You Should Know About Life in Germany

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Introduction

Besides learning a language, it is highly recommended to learn about peculiarities of a certain culture before visiting a foreign country, even if it is only for a short time.

It helps to avoid misunderstandings and reduce unnecessary friction and confusion, making your stay more enjoyable and enriching and allowing you to place situations and experiences into a larger cultural context.

Many international firms who send employees “overseas” therefore organize cultural crash-courses in which company members are briefed about dos and don'ts of the culture they are encountering.

In the same way this little booklet is intended to give you a little taste of how people behave in Germany, exemplified in 8 concrete situations.

I hope you'll find this both illuminating and entertaining.

Greeting People: „Du“ vs. „Sie“

When meeting people in Germany for the first time, address them by using the formal pronoun “Sie“. Children are **always** addressed as “Du”, even if they are strangers.

Sometimes during the development of a professional relationship you will be offered the “Du” at a certain point. It is up to you to accept or decline but you should know that being “per Du” with someone implies a stronger connection, trust and confidence.

German people are said to be very loyal, so if you reach the “Du” with someone, in many cases you can expect this person to be even more dependable than usual.

The Rule: Among friends say „Du“ - among strangers say “Sie“!

As always there are exceptions to the rule and so you will find people who will sometimes say ”Du“ to strangers in shops, on the street, etc.

But: If you are dependent on the benevolence of the person you are talking to, e.g. you need that person to give you a visa or agree to a business proposition – in all cases be polite! – use “Sie“. Saying “Du” to a superior *can* be seen as an affront!

In a restaurant, don't wait at the entrance!

When you go to a restaurant in Germany and wait for someone to show you to a table you will stand there and wait in vain.

The Rule: Look around, select a table and sit down. But make sure there is no sign saying „Reserviert“ (reserved).

There are exceptions to this rule in two cases: Either the restaurant you're going to is a certain branch of non-native franchise, e.g. Pizza Hut or the restaurant is severely upper class. In both cases there will be someone waiting for you at the entrance.

In a packed restaurant be prepared to share your table!

If the table you're sitting has two seats left and those are the only ones left in the restaurant people might ask you nicely if they can sit down next to you.

If you are in a situation where you enter a crowded restaurant and spot an empty seat, you can do the same.

Don't be afraid! Although you might sit together with strangers around a table, people generally ignore each other's conversations as if they're not even hearing what the other party is saying. But if you want to discuss something highly confidential, this might not be the best place!

The Rule: If seats are rare, people share.

Paying the Bill

In Germany it is very common that each person pays only for what he or she has eaten and drunk. It is very rare that one person pays for everything and then the others contribute after the bill has been paid.

Usually you call the waiter over and he will put the bill on the table. Together with the others you calculate who has to pay what amount. In many cases the waiter will even ask „Getrennt oder zusammen?“ (together or separate) and calculate individual amounts for you. It's not considered penny-pinching but is very common.

The Rule: Every person pays for what he or she has consumed.

There are exceptions when being invited in a business context, by family members or – of course if you are on a date. In those cases the bill will often be paid by one person.

Also be careful if paying a meal for an acquaintance of the opposite sex. It might send a signal you are not intending to send!

The Tip!

It is very common to pay a tip and while not mandatory it's very much appreciated if you give a tip unless you were dissatisfied with the service.

Also the tip doesn't have to be very high. Some people recommend 5-10 % but in most cases rounding up the amount is totally enough. You can simply say “Stimmt so” (“keep the change”).

The Rule: Pay a tip. It doesn't need to be a lot.

Exception: If you are really not happy with the food or service, send a signal by not paying a tip. It's your right as a customer.

When making a phone call state your name first!

In Germany you always mention your name before the reason for your call. This gives the other person a way to address you during the call and makes also sense for politeness sake since the other party will do the same.

The Rule: On the phone first say who you are, then say what you want.

Also, never call someone after 9 o'clock in the evening! (Even 8 is already very late. Best to finish all your official calls before 7!) Unless this is a serious emergency, a 24 hour hotline or a really good friend your call will be regarded as a nuisance.

The Invisible Third

Let's say you walk through the city with a good friend of yours. Suddenly this friend spots an old colleague or acquaintance in the crowd and has a brief conversation with him or her. Don't expect your friend to introduce you.

In this situation most Germans make themselves invisible for the duration of their friend's conversation and reduce their participation to a polite smile while being completely ignored.

Although this might feel very strange if it happens to you it's just an example of German pragmatism. If there's no serious need to introduce people it will not happen only for formality's sake.

The Rule: If the encounter is brief and „out of the blue“ don't bother introducing „peripheral“ persons.

If you feel a need to introduce your friend or acquaintance, etc. feel free to do so. But don't expect others to introduce you! Also, if a meeting is scheduled and/or formal, introductions are usually the norm.

Eye-Contact

When you are talking to someone and don't look that person in the eye, it will be regarded as lack of interest, respect or attention. Also people might think you are trying to hide something or are simply shy.

In other words: Keeping eye-contact is very important when speaking to people. Especially if you want to make a good impression,e.g. in a job interview this is a must!

If you come from a culture where eye-contact is not required, you might wonder where the difference is between gazing at your shoes and staring somebody down. In this case, try to observe how natives do it. See how intervals of keeping and breaking eye-contact move along and match yourself to their rhythm.

Generally, if you run around in Germany people will not look you directly in the eye unless they want something, but it seems that even eye-contact in public with strangers is far more common than in other countries. So don't worry about it.

The Rule: When speaking or listening to someone, keep eye-contact. But don't stare.

Appendix

It is in the nature of publications like those that there is an arbitrary number of facts that can be mentioned about any culture. Neither does this guide claim to be comprehensive nor are the points ordered in any hierarchical order.

All of the above are general observations only and while true in many cases may be proven wrong by many instances in everyday life. Due to the increase of globalized culture, differences in between specific cultural characteristics become blurred, especially in big cities and international circles.

This little booklet is intended to encourage you, the reader, to go out and make your own discoveries. If you have any questions, comments or constructive feedback, please feel free to send a mail to info@learnoutlive.com.

For more information about German culture and language, see also the Learn Out Live German department at learnoutlive.com/german.

If you liked this book, please share it with your friends.
Thank you for reading.

– André Klein (learnoutlive.com/andreklein)
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