

Guide to German culture, customs and etiquette

This short guide shall make your adoption to German culture, customs, manners and etiquette easier. It may help avoid some of the most common intercultural misunderstandings when dealing with Germans. Nevertheless the following is only a basic introduction and is not meant to stereotype all German people you may meet. Generally all generalizations obviously contrast with the German society constantly evolving towards more pluralism.

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1. Facts and statistics

Climate:	temperate and marine; cool, cloudy, wet winters and summers;
Population:	81,8 Mio
Working population:	41,6 Mio (2012)
Unemployment:	7,3% (March 2013)
Ethnic make-up:	German 90,9%, Turkish 2,4%, other 6,7% (made up largely of Polish, Russian, Italian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian and Spanish)
Birth rate:	1,3 children per woman (2012)

Religion:	Protestant 35,1%, Roman Catholic 30,2%, No religion 28,7% , Muslim 3%, other 2,3% (2007)
Government:	federal republic, representative democracy
Univ. students:	2,5 Mio. (2012/13)
Universities:	427 (including universities of applied sciences, music and other specializations)

Languages in Germany

Germany's official language is German, with over 94% of the population speaking German as their first language. In West Germany all pupils learned English as the first foreign language at school; hence people should at least understand it. However, in East Germany English language skills are not that common as many people older than 35 years have learned Russian instead. Most prominent immigrant languages include Russian (ca. 3 Mio.), Turkish (ca. 2 Mio.) and Polish (ca. 1,5 Mio.).

2. German society & culture

2.1 A planning culture

- In many respects, Germans can be considered the masters of planning.
- German culture prizes forward thinking and knowing what one will be doing at a specific time on a specific day well ahead in the future.
- Careful planning, in one's business and personal life, provides a sense of security.
- Rules and regulations allow people to know what is expected and plan one's life accordingly.
- Once the proper way to perform a task is discovered, there is no need to think of doing it any other way.

2.2 The German home

Germans take great pride in their homes.

- They are kept neat and tidy at all times, with everything in its appointed place.
- In a culture where most communication is rather formal, the home is the place where one can relax and allow one's individualism to shine.
- Often, only close friends and relatives are invited into the privacy of the house.
- In some houses you might be expected to take off your shoes when entering (especially in East Germany). A short enquiry will help finding out.

3. German etiquette & customs

3.1 Meeting etiquette

- Greetings are often rather formal unless among friends.
- A quick, firm handshake with a straight look into the eyes is the traditional greeting. The other hands should be taken out of the pocket. A man should wait until a woman offers her hand first. Additionally, a handshake may be accompanied with a slight bow. Reciprocating the nod is a good way to make a good impression.
- Titles are very important and denote respect. Use a person's (academic) title and their surname until invited to use their first name. You should say *Herr* or *Frau* and the person's title and their surname. Always use 'Sie' instead of 'Du' unless you are offered a 'Du'.
- In general, wait for your host or hostess to introduce you to a group.
- When entering a room, shake hands with everyone individually, including children. A weak handshake gives others the impression that you are insecure and not convinced of your abilities. For this reason, always shake hands firmly without squeezing and without holding on to the other's hand for too long or too short a time. A firm handshake sends a message of trust, frankness, sincerity, consideration and honesty.

3.2 Gift giving etiquette

- If you are invited to a German's house, bring a gift such as fine chocolates, a bottle of wine or flowers.
- A gift of German wine, however, should be a more up market label. Remember that the Rhein-Main region is taking great pride in wine production.
- When purchasing flowers at a flower shop, ask the florist to wrap it up as a gift ("*Würden Sie mir das bitte als Geschenk verpacken?*") or wrap them yourself before presenting them to the hostess.
- Yellow roses or tea roses are always well received.
- Do neither give red roses as they symbolize romantic intentions nor carnations as they symbolize mourning nor lilies or chrysanthemums as they are used at funerals.
- A local food specialty of your home country is usually a good idea for a gift, provided it is not too exotic. Very unusual food gifts may well be under-appreciated.
- Clothing, perfumes, and other toiletries are considered far too personal to be appropriate gifts unless among good friends.
- Gifts are usually opened when received.

3.3 Dining Etiquette

If you are invited to a German's house:

- Arrive on time as punctuality indicates proper planning. Never arrive early.

- Never arrive more than 15 minutes later than invited without telephoning to explain you have been detained.
- Do a short phone call or send a thank you note the following day to thank your host for her/his hospitality.
- Switch your mobile phone off or put it on silent.

If you are invited to a restaurant:

- It is common for everyone to pay for her/his own meal.
- Generally, waiters and bar staff should be tipped approximately 5% to 10%.

3.4 Table manners

- Remain standing until invited to sit down. You may be shown to a particular seat.
- Table manners are Continental: the fork is held in the left hand and the knife in the right while eating.
- Germans do not generally serve other people. Plates of food are passed around the table and each person takes what and how much he wants. The host will, however, often ask his guests if they would like more to drink. In the case of wine, the host usually does the pouring, but if this is a large table, it is perfectly normal to pass the wine bottle to the person who wants it and he would pour for himself or herself.
- Do not expect Germans to ask you if there is anything you do not eat. Because Germans are direct communicators, they will expect someone to speak up if she/he wants something, disagree about or don't like something. Irritation and inconvenience will rather result if you remain silent and “spring” the problem on the host only when the dishes are being served.
- Do not begin eating until the hostess starts or someone says '*Guten Appetit*' (Good appetite) then repeat the words and start eating.
- At a large dinner party, wait for the hostess or host to place her/his napkin on her lap before doing so yourself.
- Do not rest your elbows on the table.
- While eating, always leave your hands on the table besides your plate.
- Finish everything on your plate.
- Bread-rolls should be broken apart by hand.
- Indicate you have finished eating by laying your knife and fork diagonally across your plate.
- If you do not want any more food or drink, say so politely. Germans will not ask again, as they expect you to express your personal wishes. They will also not take it as impolite or an insult if you say “no”.
- Do not start drinking alcoholic drinks until the host gives the first toast.
- An honoured guest should return the toast later in the meal.
- The most common toast with wine is '*Zum Wohl!*' ('To your health').
- The most common toast with beer is '*Prost!*' (lat. 'May it be beneficial').
- Mainly on smaller dinner parties and occasions all participants clink glasses after the toast. When clinking the glasses never cross anyone else's arm and carefully look into the eyes of

the person you are clinking with, from the time the glass is raised, until it is placed back on the table.

- If many people are being toasted, make eye contact with each individual around the table as you make the toast. This rule becomes even more important to remember as you move west to east through Germany.
- In some of the more informal restaurants (like universities' cafeterias) you may share a table with others, instead of waiting for a free table. If this happens you are not obligated to initiate conversation with your tablemates and socialize with them throughout the meal.
- The person who extends the invitation will be the person who pays. It is not at all expected that the guest should even offer to pay. Do refrain from dramatic and persistent efforts to obtain the bill, as this will not only create confusion and embarrassment in the German hosts, but in some cases it could be that you do, in fact, end up with the bill. Don't forget: Germans are likely to take your insistence literally!
- If a German colleague or friend merely suggests that you go out together to get something to eat, this is not to be taken as an invitation! Typically, in German restaurants, the waiter will come at the end of a meal and ask if the total should be *“zusammen”* (totaled together on one bill) or *“getrennt”* (separate bills). Unless you have been explicitly *“eingeladen”* (“invited”), you can expect the waiter to be asked for separate bills.

3.5 Rest room manners

- Use the lavatory in a sitting position.
- Also men should always sit while using the lavatory (especially in private houses as the cleaning is most probably done by the host).
- Toilet paper has to be thrown into the lavatory.
- If you prefer not to use toilet paper, please make sure not to wet the bathroom floor or lavatory.
- Use the toilet brush to erase any possible traces.
- If the rest room is used for ritual washings make sure to leave it clean and dry afterwards.
- Open the window if necessary after use.

3.6 Communication

- Germans value their privacy and mentally divide between public and private life. As a result, Germans often wear a protective shell when working. Since intimacy is not freely given, this may be interpreted as coldness. However, this is not the case. After a period of time walls and barriers eventually fall, allowing for more intimate relationships to develop.
- Communication styles in Germany may be perceived as direct, short and to the point. Formality dictates that emotions and unnecessary content do not have a place in a conversation.
- Be prepared for Germans to assume quite openly that you are from a part of the world based on how you look. Despite the fact that Germany is a de facto “multicultural” society today, it is, like most European countries, a traditionally non-immigration, mono-cultural country. Moreover, despite the “cross-culture” (*multi-kulti*) trend in the media today, the psychological distinction between “German” and “foreigner” is very much based on ethnicity.

Therefore, people of “visible ethnicity” should be prepared for a typical line of questioning from perfect strangers that attempts to establish where you are “really from”.

- Be prepared to take the first step as the newcomer to introduce yourself to an established group when you arrive in a new environment (e.g. office, student dormitory, social gathering, new neighborhood, etc.). Unless you are specifically invited to join a group, do not automatically expect the established group to send out the “welcome wagon”.
- Giving compliments is not part of German customs and can often cause embarrassment and awkwardness. Employees would, of course, be appreciative of praise from superiors, but do not expect it. Compliments, especially from strangers or very casual acquaintances can, in fact, be taken with suspicion (“What does he/she really mean to say or want?”).
- Small talk is an elusive and difficult skill for many Germans, even at university.
- Feel free to have serious discussions in social settings – Germans like talking politics and philosophy.
- Thereby avoid Nazi references in any casual conversation. Showing sympathy for Germany’s dark and ever shadows casting recent history is considered an absolute taboo.

3.7 Public behaviour

- If you do not speak German, be careful of automatically addressing a person in English. While Germans generally speak very good English, some may well feel offended at the presumption. There is some noticeable reluctance among especially the 55 and above age group, which generally doesn't feel as secure in the language as the next younger generations, which have grown up with a prevalence of English introduced into many aspects of German commercial life.
- Chewing gum while talking to someone is considered rude.
- Eye contact during the introduction is serious, direct, and should be maintained as long as the person is addressing you. Even in public between strangers, eye contact or out and out staring can be direct and not necessarily smiling. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all stares in public are meant to be threatening. Nonetheless, do not expect direct eye contact to necessitate some greeting or acknowledgement; the German will also not expect anything from you. If the visitor is visibly foreign, this can unfortunately result in a mistaken perception of the Germans as cold and unfriendly to foreigners.
- You can expect the distance of comfort between strangers in public to be smaller than is considered normal in North America and Australia, but more than in African and Arab countries. While people in conversation typically maintain a comfortable distance of at least 0,5 m between them, the person directly behind you in the supermarket line can be literally breathing down your neck.
- Simply placing your hand on someone's shoulder may be irritating and make you appear too authoritative. If the person is not a long time friend of yours, then a handshake is the only situation in which you would make physical contact with someone.
- If you should accidentally bump into someone or kick her/him under the table, then you should immediately excuse yourself, with, "*Entschuldigung, das war nicht meine Absicht.*" ("Excuse me, that wasn't my intention").

- Be prepared to move yourself and your goods fast through the checkout line at the supermarket. This is where visitors from cultures with “rubber time” can get a good look at how “time-dominated” cultures work. Pitching your groceries into your bag or shop-cart, digging out your money and pocketing the change, and getting out of there as fast as you can before the cashier starts swiping the next customer's stuff through, is some mean feat of dexterity and co-ordination! Some elderly people simply hand their wallets over to the cashier and have her/him count out the change.
- Germans are able to consume large quantities of beer in one evening, but public drunkenness is not acceptable. It is best to know your limits, pace yourself and eat plenty of food.
- Be aware that some Germans may bathe topless or even at full nudity at the beach. The nude beaches are labeled with “FKK” for “Freikörperkultur”, which means free body culture.
- Do not expect German colleagues to take you out much for meals and evening programs, as they will assume that you will want to have time to yourself after work, since this has high priority for them in their culture.

4. Work etiquette and protocol in Germany

4.1 Relationships & Communications

- Germans do not need a personal relationship in order to work together.
- Germans pay great deference to people in authority, so it is imperative that they understand your level relative to their own.
- People often work with their office door closed. Knock and wait to be invited in before entering.
- German communication is formal.
- Following the established protocol is critical to building and maintaining good work relationships.
- As a group, Germans are suspicious of hyperbole promises that sound too good to be true, or displays of emotion.
- Germans will be direct to the point of bluntness.
- Expect a great deal of written communication, both to back up decisions and to maintain a record of decisions and discussions.

4.2 Meeting etiquette

- Be prepared to make appointments for most things. Germans don't usually feel comfortable discussing especially serious things “on the go”, so don't expect to be able to just drop into the office unannounced for any detailed discussions. Making appointments for a more detailed telephone conversation is also not unusual. Give at least one or two weeks’ notice for an appointment.
- Casually changing the time and place of an appointment is not appreciated. Allow for at least 24 hrs, if you can, to change or cancel appointments.

- The preferred times for meeting appointments are between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. or between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.. Avoid scheduling appointments on Friday afternoons, as some offices close by 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. on Fridays.
- Be sensitive to vacation and festival periods here. Germans generally have six weeks of paid vacation, which means someone is almost always “*im Urlaub*” (“on holiday”). Therefore, be prepared to take this into consideration when making appointments or planning visits. For instance, Germans commonly take long vacations during July, August, December and Easter, when schools break.
- Punctuality is taken very seriously. If you expect to be delayed, telephone immediately and offer an explanation.
- There is a strict protocol to follow when entering a room or passing a threshold: The eldest or highest ranking person enters first.
- Do not sit until invited and told where to sit.
- Meetings adhere to strict agendas, including starting and ending times.
- Always maintain direct eye contact while speaking.
- At the end of a meeting or a speech, some Germans signal their approval by rapping their knuckles on the tabletop.

4.3 Dress code

- While generally German business dress is understated, formal and conservative, universities and academics are somewhat more relaxed about dress etiquette, though possibly with feasible differences among the different faculties of the same university.