

*Ever wish someone had told you that important nugget of information **BEFOREHAND**?*

One local spouse offers the “What I Wish I Knew” to arriving families

Ask anyone how they feel about living in Germany and you'll get a mixed reaction. Some might say, “Wunderbar.” Some might say, “Nicht so gut.” But one thing everybody agrees on is that getting settled in a foreign country can try even the most patient of souls! Now, I think I'm a pretty easygoing military spouse. My husband and I lived in five different homes in the first five years of our marriage, including South Korea, and the longest we've lived anywhere since has been two and a half years.

Here we go again

So moving into a new house does not bother me. It's the moving into a new home coupled with learning a new language, money, laws, weather, neighborhood and culture that starts to wear out my patience.

So looking back almost three years, the things I wish someone had told me to expect when we moved to Bavaria can be broken down into three categories of frustration: Housing, Driving, and Shopping.

First up, housing – This, for me, has been the biggest block of frustration, and probably will be for you too, because we invest so much time and effort trying to feel settled in our new “home” environment.

Plus, it's really the first thing we encounter here that is so completely different. From the moment you arrive in your temporary and/or permanent quarters, things may seem a little quirky. To wash your newly unpacked clothes, don't expect hot water. Some German washing machines don't use hot water.

To dry those clothes, you will have to stick the dryer vent tube out of the window when running it (in some places) and expect it to take half a day to dry. Really! So, while your clothes dry, head to the Commissary for your first visit, but don't forget your military ID card – and a Ration Card.

Getting your Java and fuel for your vehicle

That's right, your coffee is rationed, along with cigarettes, liquor and fuel for your POV, and they are strict. And don't think about having your favorite specialty coffee shipped to you. It's not allowed through your APO. You must obtain a fuel card for each POV including rental cars prior to pumping gas at the on post AAFES gas station. The monthly ration is 400 liters for small cars and 600 liters for SUVs and light trucks.

After a visit to the Commissary, you'll be ready to cook your first dinner in, what I like to call, the German “mini-bake oven,” an oven somewhat smaller than a traditional American oven. But wait. First you have to know the conversion for Fahrenheit to Celsius. Quick math: Take the Fahrenheit temperature and subtract 32. Then, divide by 1.8. Bon appetite!

Once your household goods arrive, be careful with your electronics or you could make some costly mistakes. To vacuum, you cannot simply put an adaptor plug (the little white round things) onto your American vacuum cleaner and plug it into the wall.

Sure it will fit, but you can then add a new vacuum to your move-in budget.

Here we go again

Remember, our electronics/appliances are 110v and your new home's outlets will be mostly 220v. Unless that vacuum (or microwave, radio, lamp – pretty much your entire house) is dual-voltage, you must use a transformer (the silver metal boxes) that can convert your 110v vacuum to 220v

Don't blow a fuse!

Check your local thrift shops for a “slightly used” one with the correct “max load” for your vacuum or you'll blow the fuse in the transformer too. Can you tell I had some problems with electronics?

There's one more quirky thing about the electricity. 220v and 110v have different Hertz. They are 50 Hz and 60 Hz, respectively. What are Hertz? Hertz are the number of times per second the electrical current reverses direction. For you, this means that your 110v clock will not keep proper time because the cycle of the electricity is different. You'll understand this the first time you or your spouse is late for PT.

Here's an easy solution to many of the appliance/electricity problems. Buy an inexpensive 220v alarm clock, microwave, coffee maker, and maybe even a vacuum cleaner, to use while living here and then pass them on.

And, finally, one of the hardest things for me to get used to in my home has been recycling. I did not expect it to be so strict and exacting. Looking back it seemed a huge nuisance and I thought I would never be able to learn what went where. Now, it is second nature. And, I am still amazed at how little “refuse” is taken out of my house.

Taking out the trash

To start recycling, go to your local Self-Help Center. Get the yellow bags for plastics, the stand the yellow bag goes in, and the Recycling Manual for your area.

Some of our kitchens already have the small bins under the sink to separate glass, paper, cans, etc. If yours does not, you can pick up a sorter fairly inexpensively.

Keep with it and soon it won't feel like such a chore. I promise. And, hey, you won't need your big unsightly "American" garbage can in your kitchen anymore.

On the road

Next up - driving in Germany. This can be a harrowing experience. There are things that they just do not tell you in the driver's training course. Know that you will never look at your speedometer the same again! More quick math: To convert kilometers to miles, take the kilometers, multiply by 6. Then, drop the last zero. Now you know how fast you are going.

You should also know that Germans have a, what I call, "liberal passing policy." There have been many times I have hit my brakes in order to miss a head-on collision due to someone passing. They will pass on curves, on hills, and yes, even when there is on-coming traffic. Be prepared. Before you get out on the road, memorize the Priority Road rules and who has the right of way.

Bottom line: You must be a defensive driver, but get out there and enjoy the views of the Bavarian countryside.

On that note, there is one thing you should buy before leaving on your adventure—a GPS (navigational system). I truly believe it is the best purchase our family has made since arriving in Germany. I wish I had had one from our first week here. It is empowering - and the voice on some of them (we've named ours Sally) is good for a laugh when you're placing your faith in a machine!

Shopping

Moving on to shopping - The two things you need to know about shopping in Bavaria quite simply are, don't expect shopping bags and don't expect convenient hours. There is no 24-hour Wal-Mart here. When you venture out, you will see most shoppers carrying baskets or canvas bags. That's because German stores do not offer plastic bags like American stores.

In some larger chain stores they will give you bags for free; however, don't expect it. Most stores will, instead, sell you bags for 5-15 Euro cents each. My advice is, "When in Rome, do as the Romans." Go ahead and purchase a basket or reusable canvas bags. I have two that fold up, fit in my purse, and work great. Besides, who needs even more plastic bags to recycle!

The shopping hours are a headache for me even now. First, learn this word - "Ruhetag." Ruhetag means the day that a store is closed or "rest day." Now, don't misunderstand, the store is already going to be closed on Sunday and probably by 1400 on Saturday.

Ruhetag is an additional day during the week that they are closed. Most stores have one and I'm convinced no store in town has the same ruhetag just to keep it interesting. In addition to a ruhetag, most stores, even the chain stores, close during the midday hours and are very rarely open late in the evening.

By late, I mean past 1900. Pay attention to the "öffnungszeiten" (store hours) on the door so you will know exactly when they are open. I know not being able to shop when you want to will be frustrating at first. However; my best advice is to get used to the slower pace - and enjoy it while you can.

Finally, I've shared with you some of the things to expect when settling into Bavaria in hopes that I can ease your frustration and anxiousness. Now I'll share one more thing that was completely unexpected. Two and a half years into it now, I wouldn't trade this life for anything.

Alick, Ella, and I have made more friends here than at any other duty station. I have been more actively involved in this community than at any other. I have made more life-long connections here, all due to the willing spirit in this Army community.

I encourage you to take ACS' "Welcome to Bavaria" and a German Basic Language class. And, get involved in your Family Readiness Group and your Community and Spouses' Clubs. No one made me feel more "at home" as quickly as those organizations. Embrace the unexpected, expand your horizons, and throw yourself into this new life with gusto. What you give out, you will certainly get back three-fold.

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