



Germany Travel Planning Podcast

Ep 10 – How to Book Better Flights to Germany with Michelle Chang

Transcript is autogenerated

Cate (00:00)

Hey there, welcome to episode 10 of the Germany Travel Planning Podcast.

If you're hoping to find a great deal on flights to Germany—or maybe even score a lie-flat business class seat—you are *going to love* this episode.

My friend Michelle Chang – a fellow traveler and expert at finding great flights and upgrades to destinations all over the world – shares tips and strategies that will help you book better flights to Germany and beyond.

If you're dreaming of traveling to Germany, you're in the right place. Hey, I'm Cate co-founder with my husband Aaron of MyGermanyVacation.com and host of this podcast. Our goal is to help you plan and enjoy a meaningful and unforgettable trip to Germany and surrounding countries. So let's dive in.

Cate (00:18)

I am so excited to talk with Michelle today about booking better flights to Germany and beyond because we both book a lot of flights to Europe, but Michelle knows so many great tips and tricks. Welcome, Michelle.

Michelle Chang (00:31)

Thanks, always happy to talk travel with you, Cate



Cate (00:35)

Why don't we start with your introduction? Just tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Michelle Chang (00:41)

Yeah, so I have a blog called Intentional Travelers. My husband and I have been digital nomads for over a decade now, and we sort of started with a sabbatical as Peace Corps volunteers, loved living abroad, and after that just found ways that we could keep having travel in our lives, even though our budget was extremely low.

So that really challenged us to find creative ways to make travel work and we learned a lot in the process. So I just like to share the things that we've learned and especially help people who struggle with maybe researching online or using their smartphones and some of those tech challenges.

Cate (01:27)

Yeah, yeah, and so the whole time I've known you, like you have gone all over the world and it's been so amazing. Most recently, you flew from the US West Coast to Istanbul in first class and I have to say I'm totally jealous of that, awesome. So I wanna hear about that experience, what was it like?

Michelle Chang (01:47)

It was awesome as you can imagine. It's something that we were really looking forward to. And because it was, I think over 12 hours, Seattle to Istanbul, you know, if that was an economy, I think I would have been dreading it. But because the seats are better and bigger, you know, you get a window seat, it's actually like three windows in your seat and you get multi-course meals, just great service and lie flat seat so you can relax better and even get some sleep. It really made the experience something that we could look forward to.



Cate (02:28)

Did you actually get sleep?

Michelle Chang (02:30)

I hardly ever sleep on planes if I'm just sitting straight up. That's the only way is if it is a lie flat seat. I don't get, you know, a full night, but I think I probably got four hours, four or five hours off and on between the two meals that they gave us. So it definitely feels better when you land because even that, those few hours of sleep can make a difference.

Cate (02:57)

yeah, and that's really great. If you're gonna land and then get in a car and drive, that can make a huge, huge difference.

So a lot of our clients would love to fly first class. They ask me about this, flying first class or even premium economy. So what are some of your tips for booking those types of seats on flights to Europe?

Michelle Chang (03:17)

Well, I want to talk mostly here about the award tickets, because that's pretty much the only way that we have booked business class or first class seats. We haven't actually paid for them out of pocket, but we can talk about whether that's worth it or not. But the big thing to know is you really need a plan further in advance. Or if you happen to be a very last minute traveler, within the last few weeks before the trip, you might find some more availability at that time too. That's because award tickets work a little differently. So they release a set number of seats and usually it's about 11 months in advance. And that's all the availability that's gonna go out there. So once they're booked, they're gone. So we usually look nine to 11 months in advance for those really big overseas flights that we want on business class.



Cate (04:13)

Yeah, that's really smart to look in advance. I know we've been like more last minute travelers in the last few years. When we book vacations, we book really far in advance. But the last couple of years flying to Germany all the time, we use miles. And so we've been booking a lot of last minute tickets coming home usually. And we flew home just a few weeks ago we found a ticket home in premium economy.

So it wasn't quite first class, but it was premium economy. And I couldn't believe how good of a deal it was. We used miles and we actually could have gotten the Polaris, but it was twice as many miles. And so we thought, well, we'll just bump up to premium economy and not use up all of our miles. But I couldn't believe how good of a deal it was. And it was for a flight the next week. Like we just booked a week in advance.

Michelle Chang (05:04)

That is the other good time if you have that flexibility last minute. I think it's because there is that set amount of award availability, but if someone has booked it and then canceled it, they're most likely to do that kind of last minute. So I think that's when those last minute deals come up for award seats. And what we actually do is we'll book far in advance, almost like a placeholder.

And then we'll just keep looking to see if we can find something better because there's no cost anymore to change most award flights. You can cancel it, get all your miles back, get whatever fees you paid back. So there's very low barrier to switch up the flight if you find something better later.

Cate (05:53)

That's a great idea. I need to start doing that. Yeah, I know, like I was kind of surprised that we found such a good flight and just a week in advance and had actually we had to fly home on that day because that's where we got the best choice of tickets. Had we wanted to fly home two days later, it would have been twice as many miles.



And we would have had to fly coach and we would have had to pay for a seat reservation. So it was actually better all the way around to get the better class of seats. And it was way more comfortable than flying in coach. But yeah, so I think that's great. Like looking really far in advance or really, really last minute, although the last minute can be so stressful. So I don't really recommend that unless you have a lot of flexibility. It definitely is. Yeah. So

Michelle Chang (06:39)

Yeah, it's kind of a gamble.

Cate (06:44)

Do you think it's worth upgrading from coach to first class or even premium economy?

Michelle Chang (06:49)

I think this really depends person to person and it has changed for us as we get older. So, you know, we take into account the length of the flights. I'd say, yeah, if you are older, you have mobility issues that might come into play, just your comfort in sitting in an economy seat versus a first class seat, your budget, if you can even afford it.

And then the other thing we factor in is the recovery time once you land. thinking, okay, it's economy. I know I'm not going to sleep. Am I going to have to, you know, go, go, go as soon as we get there? Do I have like, I don't know, a business meeting or something where I really have to be on? Or do I have a leeway? Maybe I'm coming back home and I know I don't have to work right away. I have a few days to rest. Then economy is not so bad.

if I don't sleep that flight, it's not so bad. Our personal strategy, as I mentioned, we've never paid out of pocket for those upgrade first class seats. We save up our miles for lie flat seats on overseas flights that are at least seven to eight hours. So if it's less



than that, we will save our miles and maybe use money or we'll save our miles and can book economy instead of business class flights. And then

Yeah, we'll pay money for shorter, cheaper flights.

Cate (08:20)

Yeah, like flights within Europe or within the US. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think that's really smart. What about, okay, so actually we're gonna go to the other end of the spectrum. What do you think about low cost airlines? We get a lot of questions about the low cost airlines like Condor or what there's Norwegian Air, I think, or something like that, something flying through Norway.

And I think I just read that Southwest Airlines is going to be flying to Europe now. Yeah, I just read that somewhere. I'm not totally sure. I don't know too much about that. But so what do you think about flying low cost airlines to Europe? Have you flown any of those?

Michelle Chang (08:52)

Okay.

You know, I would prefer to fly low cost airlines on shorter flights personally because they tend to be less comfortable. You know, the seat space is really compact. A lot of times they'll charge extra fees for choosing your seat or bringing luggage or even carry on luggage.

That sounds more manageable to me in short doses, whereas I'm coming from the West Coast to get to Europe. I don't necessarily want to do that for hours and hours. If you're a budget traveler and budget is your top priority, then definitely consider it. Some are better than others, but yeah, personally, I wouldn't do the low cost airlines except for like short kind of inner Europe flights.



Cate (09:53)

Yeah, I've had the same experience. We've had some clients who have flown some of those to Germany and they said that it was fine. Some of them said they actually were able to upgrade to, you know, like premium economy or first class and it was, they were able to pay for it and it was less of an expense and it made the flight nicer. But every time I've looked at those airlines, I haven't found anything that was such a good deal.

And when you do add on all those other expenses, can add up to be just as much as the other airlines. So I think it can work, but maybe there's no specific benefit for the international flights. But I think it's really smart to look within the US or within Europe. They can be great for finding cheap flights within Europe.

Michelle Chang (10:43)

Yeah, definitely.

Cate (10:44)

In our Facebook group recently, some travelers were saying that they are looking for flights for this summer, but they are really, really expensive. Do you have any tips or tricks for finding the best flights when you're not using miles?

Michelle Chang (10:57)

Yes, I actually created a whole course for this purpose, but my best tip is again to start searching in advance and make use of Google Flights as my favorite tool for research. They have features to help you understand if prices are high or low right now. So if you see a fare and you're not even sure, is this a good deal? It can tell you right as you're looking at it.

And then they have a track prices feature. So that's really useful to get notified if the price goes down and kind of know when to pull the trigger to actually buy that flight. So the further in advance you're watching, the more options you have, you're going to



kind of see the fares go up and down. Whereas if you wait to the last minute, again, it's a gamble and most likely the prices are going to keep going up and up.

because the people who buy last minute tend to be business travelers and they're not as price sensitive. So, supply and demand, it just becomes less of a deal as you get closer to your flight date.

Cate (12:07)

How long do you spend tracking flights? I'm just curious. I usually spend a few weeks, but I've always wondered if I should spend longer or shorter. What do you do?

Michelle Chang (12:18)

You know, if I can start looking even like eight months in advance, I could track the flights for a few months. But if I'm, yeah, two to three months in advance, then I'm probably only gonna look for a few weeks and just get it when it's as low as possible in that time period.

Cate (12:38)

Mm Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Something else we get asked a lot about is if we have a favorite airline or if there's a specific airline we recommend flying or don't recommend flying. So I would love to hear from you. Do you have a favorite airline or a least favorite airline?

Michelle Chang (12:54)

It's a good question. We have more of a rule of thumb or like a ranking hierarchy based on the continent actually that the airline comes from. But you can always, you know, Google and search for reviews of airlines if you've never heard of them. But generally we find that the service and the experience changes. So let's say we're kind of giving them grades.



In North America, I would give American airlines, not just American, I mean like United, Delta, da da da, a grade of a C.

Sometimes actually when you're flying those airlines overseas and especially in business class as you're going overseas, it's a little better. Maybe a B minus. I'd say Air Canada is slightly, it's probably B minus as well. But the European airlines tend to be better in my opinion and I don't think I'm alone. Then most North American airlines and then even higher than that would be like the Asian airlines or

Turkish or Middle Eastern tend to be really well known for their service. You get better seats, you get better food. It's also just a cool cultural experience to kind of kick off your trip to not just, you know, have the American service if that's where you're coming from, but to start kind of interacting with the culture and the food that is of that airline.

Cate (14:26)

Yeah, I agree. Speaking of Turkish airlines, we flown them a couple of times and we were really happy with them. I would, I'd be absolutely happy to fly them again, especially on a long haul flight. And Icelandair is another one that people like. I've flown them and they were great. You do have to buy, like you don't get free food. You have to purchase your food on the airline. I mean, on the flight.

And I was a little hesitant about it because flying over the Atlantic, it was just a single aisle plane. And I always like flying the bigger planes. You know, it's just more fun to fly international that way. So I was a little hesitant about that, but it actually wasn't that bad. I thought it'd be like really cramped and uncomfortable, but it wasn't that bad. And we actually had a much bigger plane flying when I flew from Reykjavik to Amsterdam, surprisingly, then from Boston into Reykjavik.



Michelle Chang (15:17)

I've heard good things about Icelandair and the other cool thing about them is they are really friendly towards stopovers so you can stay a couple nights in Iceland without paying any extra fees. It's kind of easy to build that in.

Cate (15:31)

Yeah, I did that. I've also done a stopover in London. I used to do that when I was younger and I would fly from the West Coast of the United States to Germany and I would stop over in London. And Portugal does that too, right?

Michelle Chang (15:44)

I'm not sure.

Cate (15:46)

Yeah, I think they do. I haven't done that one yet, but I'm pretty sure you can if you fly, I think it's TAP, right? That's the airline?

Another question that we get a lot is about airports in Europe. Are there any airports you really like or any airports you like to avoid?

Michelle Chang (16:03)

That's a good question. I think most airports are pretty good in Europe. Personally, I've actually found Frankfurt to be one of the most confusing airports. And I think it has something to do with the location of the security checkpoints being like right before the gate instead of centralized. So you think that you have...

gotten there in great time, but you still have the security checkpoint ahead of you before you actually get that last step to your gate. So that has been kind of tricky. But yeah, I found usually security and stuff has been pretty good in most places



Cate (16:47)

Yeah. And Frankfurt airport is huge. I mean, it is a massive, massive airport. We had the same issue when we flattered Berlin recently. We went through security and then they said that we needed to get to our gate pretty early. They gave us like an earlier time before boarding to get there. Make sure you get there by this time. And so we're like, okay. So we just got there. We had everything else to do. So we went to the gate and we had to go through another security checkpoint.

Yeah, I've found that all over Europe. Sometimes you just don't know how many of those security checkpoints you have to go through and it can take longer than you expect.

You have a Book Better Flights course and it's something that I have shared with our clients and community in the past. But can you tell us a little more about how your course helps travelers who are planning to fly to Germany or elsewhere in Europe?

Michelle Chang (17:40)

Sure, yes. So it is called Book Better Flights and I've basically taken my own flight research process, which I've refined over the years. And I've turned that into a flight booking roadmap. And then I created step-by-step tutorials. So you can basically see exactly what tools I use, how I use them, in what order. And you can easily apply my methods to finding your own deals with less overwhelm and also just avoid common booking mistakes. So the course focuses on Google Flights and a lot of the features that travelers often overlook because it can really save you so much time and help you choose better flights with more confidence, like really know that you have found the best deal out there. So the purpose of the course is to empower you with some skills and strategies.

It lets you learn on your own pace. You can do it in a day or over a couple weeks. And I think it's going to pay dividends by saving you time and money on any future trip.



Cate (18:47)

I love that it helps you feel confident that you found the best deal because I know so many people wonder after they purchase something, they always wonder like, could I have found something better? Did I overpay? I've always wondered that too. So I love that. think that's so, so important and super helpful.

You also have a toolkit of courses for independent travelers. Can you tell us about that?

Michelle Chang (19:10)

Yeah, so Book Better Flights is just one of several online courses that I've specifically designed for independent travelers who want to plan and travel smarter without feeling intimidated or hindered by technology. So they all feature practical bite-sized video lessons and actionable tips. A few other examples are I have a smartphone savvy travel course to help you master the most essential travel apps and phone best practices so you can travel more safely and smoothly, confidently in unfamiliar places. I have a hidden highlights course. My newest one helps you uncover authentic local gems and kind of tap into local advice, even in destinations that are completely new to you. You can also learn to more efficiently find the best accommodations for your budget and preferences. So that course is called the Smart Stay Finder.

So each course is pre-recorded. You can start whenever you want and go at your own pace. There's no tech expertise required. So if you can open an email or click play on a video, then you're ready to get started. And a lot of students say that they really like being able to go back through lessons or push pause, practice on their own. And then also they go back and reference the video lessons later on, maybe before they're gonna travel again.

So again, the goal is really to empower people with the knowledge and skills that they need to take full control of travel planning, just make those future trips



smoother, safer, more enjoyable. That way you can focus on making the memories rather than getting hung up on tech together in a toolkit. If you want access to all of them, I do have a membership that you'll get access for six months where can get individual courses.

Cate (21:08)

That sounds awesome and super useful. So and I know, I mean, you do such good work. So I know those courses are excellent and very useful. I'm going to link them up in the show notes. So anyone who's listening can check them out and just go to the show notes and then they can find the information and click over and read more about it. Okay, last question. Where can everyone find you online?

Michelle Chang (21:33)

Yeah, you can find us at [Intentionaltravelers.com](https://intentionaltravelers.com). You can subscribe to our newsletter and start getting our free travel tips and learn more about the courses on the website. Of course, we're on social media as well at Intentional travelers.

Cate (21:48)

All right, thank you so much, Michelle.

Michelle Chang (21:50)

Thanks, Cate. Happy travels.

Cate (21:53)

Thanks so much for listening to the Germany Travel Planning Podcast. If you enjoyed today's episode, please leave us a review. Leaving a review is a fantastic way to support the podcast because it helps others discover our Germany travel content and trip planning tools. We also encourage you to share this podcast with your fellow travelers. Be sure to check out the show notes for the links and resources I mentioned in today's episode. And visit our website, mygermanyvacation.com for expert travel resources.



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