Germany Travel Planning Podcast
Ep 22 - Reflections on Being a Tourist
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Cate (00:00)
Today I'm sharing some personal stories and reflections on how my thoughts about being a tourist and my travel experiences have changed over the years. I talk about my journey from being starstruck by Germany's bucket list landmarks to discovering the joy of wandering off the beaten path, even when it doesn't turn out the way I'd envisioned. I also share suggestions and tips for finding balance on your trip and the one thing that is the most important element of any meaningful and

If you're new here, hello, this is the Germany Travel Planning Podcast, the show that helps you plan a meaningful and super fun trip to Germany and surrounding countries. My name is Cate and I'm your Germany destination expert. I'm here to help you plan the trip of a lifetime. So let's dive in.

Cate (00:54)
The first time I went to Germany I was 16 and I was moving there for a year to go to a German school, live with the German family, make German friends, and learn to speak German. And I had never been outside the United States. So I was super excited to have this completely immersive experience and it was amazing. I wanted to see it and do and experience every single thing I possibly could.

Anytime I had the opportunity to go see something, visit something, go somewhere, I took it and I did as much as I possibly could. I just inhaled all of these experiences. And I really wanted to see the big sites because these were the things I was familiar with. You know, this was back in the 90s, a little bit before the internet. And so I didn't

have a huge amount of access to things, you know, I didn't know that much about Germany. I had...

seen things on the news, I had seen things in my German textbook, maybe in postcards, books, photos, people had talked about things. That was basically it. There wasn't, you know, I didn't have like a whole lot of exposure to Germany before I went there. But there were things I wanted to see like Brandenburg Gate or a remnant of the Berlin Wall or go into a castle. Because these are the things I was familiar with and I thought these are the things I'm supposed to see, right? And they were exciting.

And I remember it was just as mind blowing experience to stand in front of the Brandenburg Gate. can still remember. I still kind of get chills when I think about this, but to stand there and see the Brandenburg Gate or to see the Berlin Wall, you know, the remnants that were left and to think like, I am in person seeing this with my own eyes. It was just mind blowing to me. Or to go into a castle.

and think I am in a castle. I'm in this incredibly old castle. It was just the coolest experience. So I kept going back to Germany. I went back in college for a year, lived in a different part of Germany, and then I moved back to teach English and lived in a different part of Germany. And I kept going back. I was in grad school for a long time. You I got my PhD in German, so I was in grad school for many years and went to Germany over and over and over.

And I traveled all around Europe a lot and then I got to travel to other parts of the world once I finished grad school. And I found that I had kind of this shift at some point and I don't remember exactly when it was. But I found myself, like I saw a lot of the big sites and again, I was so excited to see things like Big Ben and Buckingham Palace and.

the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona and Eiffel Tower in Paris because again, like seeing these things with my own eyes was just so amazing. It was thrilling. But then at some

point, I don't know, maybe it was after I saw a lot of those bigger sites, I found myself kind of gravitating towards other things. And I think this also comes from having lived in Germany and being so integrated.

into daily life in Germany, I started becoming really interested in normal everyday things. Like I really enjoyed seeing some of the bigger sites, but I found myself kind of getting frustrated by, there's so many people here and ~ it's so crowded and it feels like Disneyland

and I think in some way, after I lived in Germany for a while and I was, you know, kind of figure out my identity as somebody who's lived in two different countries, and there's a whole lot of other stuff there, I'm not gonna go into that. But I enjoyed the big sights, but I...

really started gravitating towards just kind of like everyday things. And I have to say that I think at some point I kind of started feeling like the really popular sites, maybe there was something, I don't know. I'm really not quite sure. I'm just kind of doing this off the cuff. I haven't really thought about this deeply. I'm just sort of talking right now, thinking out loud. But I think I kind of wanted to

not be a tourist anymore. Maybe that's it. And I was really fascinated and intrigued by all this just everyday stuff. And maybe I saw that in some way as being more authentic. Maybe that was it. So I kind of went through a long phase where I would see some of the big sites, but I would kind of complain about all the crowds and you know, all that. And, ~ and then I would start

doing things like going to a grocery store. I remember I was in Costa Rica for work and I went into a grocery store and just spent like an hour wandering around through the aisles. And I now do this in every country I go to. I love doing it. And I just would wander through the grocery store because I found it fascinating to see what kinds of

food they had and what they didn't have and how things were packaged and what I could recognize and what I couldn't recognize.

and I would get on a tram in whatever town I was in and I would just ride it out to some random stop and then get off and wander through the neighborhood and maybe find a place to eat or go into random stores. So, you know, sometimes I would find just like kind of like secondary ~ museums or sites or whatever, but I feel like a lot of the things that I really got interested were just.

We're just like everyday life. I would just wander through all these neighborhoods. And I've done this all over Germany. I've done this for years in Germany, which is why I know Germany really, really well. But I think that the positive part of that is that I can find anything interesting. I can go anywhere in Germany. I can go anywhere, like plop me down anywhere, and I will find something interesting. I will find it interesting. I think that's a really good skill to have as a traveler.

So I think that was really positive. And I feel like I learned a lot about other places and I'm just fascinated by everyday life, right? I worked as an intercultural trainer for many years. And so I've like really dug into intercultural similarities and differences. I find that stuff absolutely fascinating. So the point I'm getting to here is that, you know, as travelers, we want to go see

the big sites. I worked with hundreds of clients now over the last couple of years. And I think we all have this challenge that we want to see the big sites. We want to see the Brandenburg Gate. We want to see the famous Disney Castle, Neuschwanstein, that a lot of us have grown up with. We want to do a river cruise. We want to see the Alps. ~

~ We want to see the Berlin Wall. We want to experience them and say, wow, we're actually seeing this right now. I am right here. This thing that I have dreamed about

seeing for so many years. I am right here. That is thrilling. That is a fun part of traveling. But at the same time,

We want to have our own experience. We want to ~ get off the beaten path. We want to ~ something where there aren't a whole lot of crowds. We don't want to spend the entire time we're traveling in a new country hanging out with other tourists or eating tourist food or only seeing shops that are selling things to tourists. And it seems like to see those big sites, we have to put up with...

know we to put up with the other tourists. It sounds kind of funny to say that because we're tourists when we go see these things. So this is a challenge that we all face when we are traveling in other countries I mean when I go to a new country I want to see the big things but I also want to ~ get off the beaten path. I want to see everyday life. but here's the challenge with getting off the beaten path.

Sometimes it works out really well, sometimes it doesn't. I can tell you so many experiences I've had where I have gotten off the beaten path and sometimes it has not been interesting. I go out to a random neighborhood and I'm like, okay, this is a bust. This is not great. This is okay. It's not super interesting, not memorable. Or one time Aaron and I were in Prague and...

I said, let's just get on a tram, we'll just go out to a random place, we'll get off and then we'll just go to the first restaurant we see. We did that and we sat down at a table and then we were like, we hear English. So we ended up talking to the people sitting at the table next to us and it turns out they were from a town 45 minutes away from my hometown.

So sometimes getting off the beaten path, you feel like you kind of wasted your time because it's not memorable or it's not interesting or it's not very exciting. And that's kind of the downside sometimes of

getting off the beaten path. There's no guarantee that you're going to like it or you're going to remember it. Although sometimes, like with that Prague experience, sometimes it can be such a fail that it is memorable in not necessarily the way you want it. So, you the other challenge with getting off the beaten path is that, you know, it does take time. You have to explore.

And then sometimes that time, sometimes it pays off. A couple years ago, Aaron and I were driving in the romantic road area. We were driving to Fusen and I had Google Maps open and we had some time to kill. And so I found in Google Maps, I found this random the site that said hammock with a view. And so I said, okay, let's go check this out. I'm very curious to see what this hammock with a view is in Southern Bavaria an hour and a half away from Fusen.

So we navigated there and we were navigating through all these little tiny roads and we were like, okay, we have no idea where we're going, what we're gonna see. And we finally got there and it turns out there really was a hammock with a scenic view. And it was out in this very rural area in some rolling hills and there was a little like bar, restaurant type thing.

an event space and it turns out that there was a wedding going on. And so it was really fun. We parked our car. Once we realized that there was actually, weren't crashing the wedding. There was actually an area for, ~ you know, the people could go to a lot of people were riding their bikes on this trail and hiking this trail. And so they would stop at this little place and get a bite to eat or something to drink. And then there was a wedding going on as well. And what was so fun about that.

was that it was our anniversary. And so on this day where they were having this wedding, and so we sat on this hammock enjoying the view, and then we turned around and we watched part of the wedding ceremony, or not the ceremony, the reception. What was even better was that we noticed that they were setting up this ~ stand and then they put a log on it.

And then the bride and groom came out and together they sawed the log while everybody was smiling and cheering and clapping. And Aaron and I looked at each other and we just started laughing because that's a tradition that we included in our wedding. And so it was just such a wonderful, spontaneous, memorable moment that we just happened to see this on Google Maps.

And that was just such a great off the beaten path experience.

So the thing is is that we have this challenge. We want to see the big sights, but we don't want to spend all of our time with all the other tourists. We don't want to have a cookie cutter experience. But getting off the beaten path is really iffy and it takes time. And we also don't want to leave our trip to chance. And you don't want to come home after two weeks and say, I just kind of wandered around a lot.

and had a couple of experiences, but a lot of it was just kind of, you know, you don't want that either. And then, you know, I see in like Facebook groups, I read this online, I hear this from people, I have said these things myself, whether to go to the big tourist sites or not. And like I said, circling back to my original story, at first I wanted to see all the big sites. I loved them.

I didn't care about the tourists. It made me feel like I had, I don't know, it just seemed like such a triumph for me to be at those sites that I was embracing being a tourist. And then at some point, I didn't want to be a tourist. I didn't want to be seen as a tourist. I wanted to be the thing furthest from being a tourist. And I think that's because I was living in Germany and I wanted to be integrated into German society and culture.

and I didn't want to be seen as a tourist. So I kind of poo-pooed everything that was tourist at that time. And then I went back when I was older and I was working with students in Germany and I had friends come visit and I would take them to these

places that I had been to many times. And I could see their excitement. And like they were seeing these things for the first time and they were having that thrill of being like, I'm here. I'm actually here seeing this with my own eyes. This is amazing.

And that like sparked something in me to be able to say, okay, you know, being a tourist is not bad. So, you know, I think this is a pretty normal progression that a lot of us go through. And so where I am now is I can really enjoy those tourist spots.

So I also love getting off the beaten path. I feel like now I have a really good balance of enjoying the touristy stuff and enjoying the non-touristy stuff, I enjoy it all because I can find something interesting no matter where I am.

I recommend balancing some of the bigger sites and the touristy places. Like definitely go, go to those. If there's something that you want to see, go and see it and experience it. It doesn't matter that there's other tourists there. Who cares? Really, who cares if there's other tourists there? Go and experience it for yourself. There are ways that you can experience these popular places in a non cookie cutter way.

Cate (16:01)
One is you could work with a private guide and tell them ~ the big sites you're already planning to go to and tell them that you would like them to help you get off the beaten path. And then you can talk to them about what that means to you, what that could look like. And if you're doing a private tour with a local, then they can definitely get you off the beaten path. You could tell them,

I want to take me through a really cool neighborhood and what are ~ cultural things that I'm not going to see as a visitor, a first time visitor to this neighborhood

Another way that you can get off the beaten path is if you have our DIY Germany travel planner, take a look at our planning map because we have our recommended

sites and castles and all of that. But we also have recommendations that are a little bit more off the beaten path.

but are still easy to get to from all of the major cities and the major sites to make that easy. So it's easier to find something that's a little off the beaten path, but you can see ahead of time, ~ maybe I didn't know about this thing, but this looks really interesting. And that's how you can kind of like find that balance so that you can work in some things into your itinerary that are new to you that you didn't know about before.

But because you can preview them ahead of time using our map and looking at our photos, because we try to put in a lot of photos so that you can see the context of that site or destination, city, town, whatever. And then you can read through the description and our comments and notes and stuff. so that way you have a good idea that you're going to like it.

And I also recommend adding in if you have time. I know sometimes there just is not enough time to do this. But if you have time, working in a secondary town.

And my secondary town, I'm thinking of, ~ you know, maybe it's a small city or maybe it's a smaller town or a village, something that is interesting, but maybe doesn't have the sights that you would have heard of. We have those on our map too, because I've been to a lot of those. We just like to stop, I really like wandering, so we like to stop in all these random places.

And we have not all of them. We have some on our map. We didn't want to overwhelm everybody with tons of stuff on our map. we have some. An example is

Grottenburg-Obdatauba because it's a beautiful, historic, very well-preserved medieval town. It's totally worth going to. But there's another town not too far away called Schwibisch Hall.

that town is also really, really interesting. But it's different from Rottenburg. So if you can, work in a stop at Schwäbisch Hall. We did this one time, we just stopped there for a couple of hours and we just walked through the town and it was very mellow and it was really interesting. But you know, it's like we worked it in as an extra.

And for some people who know Germany very, very well, they can go to a town like Schwäbisch Hall and that is new and exciting for them. For other people who might be new to Germany, they might go to Schwäbisch Hall and say, well, this is kind of pretty, but I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to see here.

It might just not be quite enough. So work in, if you can, maybe one secondary town somewhere, some town or village or small city that is just more of an everyday normal place. We have stopped in some random towns and found really interesting things,

but they're interesting as like a bonus, not the main course, I guess. Maybe that's a good way to describe it. Also, build time into your itinerary to wander. My opinion is that it's really good to have a solid plan for your itinerary, to know ahead of time how many days you're gonna spend in each place, and then to have an idea of things that you want to see and to have your top priorities

very clear so that you can get tickets ahead of time, make sure that you will actually get to see and do those things.

But it's also a good idea to have time to wander. And it's interesting because I'm totally a wanderer, I'm an explorer. I absolutely love wandering. And I don't have to have an agenda, I don't have to have a destination. I can just wander around and I am perfectly happy to do that. And I know some people really do not enjoy that.

They need to know where they're going, they need to have a goal. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. So if you are that type of person, maybe you, you know, because I don't want you to miss out on coming across something really interesting. So if you are that type of person, think about how can you wander in a way that will work for you. maybe you wander from one site to the next and you decide to walk.

a little bit longer, you know, the longer path through a neighborhood. Maybe that would work for you. Another thing is don't schedule every restaurant for every evening. Schedule a few. If there are specific places you want to eat, you know, specific restaurants, or you need to eat at a certain time, or you have a larger group, then schedule reservations and work that in to your itinerary as just as you would a castle visit or a tour.

but I highly recommend

on the other nights, build in some time so that you can just go spontaneously, find a place to eat. And even better, get out of the old town and go to a neighborhood, maybe ask in your hotel, where's a good place to go? Or I can find a lot of restaurants that are just everyday restaurants where a lot of locals go. And just go there and choose one and see how it goes.

So to sum up, because I feel like I've kind of been wandering through this episode, I usually map out episodes before I record them. And I decided I would try something a little bit different for this one. And I just hit record and decided I would just share some of these thoughts that I've been mulling over. Okay, so to sum up, what I recommend is when you're creating your itinerary, create a list of the things that you really want to do and see and experience.

of those things, figure out what are your priority. once you've got that, then see if you can work in a secondary city, town, village, just something, even if it's just a stop somewhere. Just so you can work in some place that's a little bit off the beaten path.

And like I said, if you have our DIY Germany travel planner, go look at our map because you can take a look at the places you're gonna go and then you can find one of those secondary places close to where you're going to be or on the route that you're going to take to get to your next destination.

and then you can see all the photos and you can see, you know, can evaluate which one you want to go to.

then make sure that you have opportunities for serendipity in your itinerary.

And that way you can balance seeing those really popular things with getting off the beaten path, but you can get off the beaten path in a way that is likely to give you the experience that you're looking for.

and if you would like help with this, I am more than happy to help you. I help a lot of clients with this

usually in a one-on-one Zoom consult because then it's live and we can talk things through right in the moment. But this is also something that I can help you with if you already have your itinerary finished.

then you can send it to me and I can do a video itinerary review.

And if you're just getting started planning your trip and you don't really want to have to plan everything out yourself, we can help you with a custom itinerary. You can tell us, I want to see these really popular things, but I really want to have times and opportunities to explore and I want to see some secondary sites

so we can make good suggestions for you. travel plan that we create for you. And the most important thing is having that attitude of no matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, you will find it interesting. You'll find something about it to make it interesting. That is the most important thing of all.