



Germany Travel Planning Podcast

Ep 23 - The Truth About Taking the Train in Germany

Transcript is auto-generated

One of the most common questions I hear from clients is, should I take the train in Germany? I mean, I've heard some horror stories, so maybe we should just rent a car instead? Welcome to the Germany Travel Planning Podcast, the show that helps you plan a super fun trip to Germany. My name is Cate and I'm your Germany Destination Specialist, here to help you plan the trip of a lifetime.

In this episode, I share the unvarnished truth about train travel in Germany right now, the good, the bad, and the downright frustrating. I spill the beans about some of our own great and not so great experiences. I share tips for making train travel a smoother experience. And I walk you through what to do next if you decide trains are the way to go for your trip. So let's dive in.

Okay, so what is train travel really like in Germany right now? Let's first talk about what it used to be like in the old days, like in the 90s, because that's when I first started taking the train in Germany. Taking the train at that time used to be so easy. I mean, it was reliable. It was an easy and reliable way to travel all over the country. Honestly, it was almost boring how on time and efficient everything was.

It was really simple back then to learn how to take trains and when it came to tickets, it was so easy. There was a lot less pressure to plan in advance. Most tickets were the same price, no matter when you bought them. So, you know, maybe I'd get a ticket a day or two in advance if I knew I wouldn't have time to get one on the day of travel, because back then you had to go to the ticket office and stand in line or you had to



go to a ticket machine. But you didn't have to plan far in advance because the ticket price was the same, whether you booked weeks in advance or minutes in advance.

Tickets were also flexible. And if I remember correctly, for high-speed trains, or maybe it was all of them, your ticket was valid for any train on your intended route for three days. So you could change your mind and leave earlier or later, as long as it was within those three days. And you could also easily do a city stopover.

And I used to do that all the time and I loved the flexibility. I would just buy a ticket, hop on the train, I would do a stopover if I decided to. I mean, it was amazing. I rarely added a seat reservation because I could always find an open seat. Sometimes I had to walk through the entire train in order to find an open seat. And a couple of times I did have to stand on busy trains where everyone else had a reservation and those with standing did not. But most of the time it wasn't a problem.

And I remember it was, it felt like such a triumph when I found an empty six seat compartment and I had it all to myself for the duration of the trip. And I really, really missed those compartments. So in the past, in my experience, train travel was more predictable. It was more flexible. And I really, really do miss that. But I have to say that there are a few things that I'm very happy have changed since then.

One is that there's no smoking on the trains anymore. That was the worst when the only time I could find an open seat was in the smoking car. It's also easier to open the train doors and to get on and off the trains with luggage. The old trains had these really clunky, heavy doors that were so hard to open and they were awkward to open. And they had these steps that you had to climb up. And I remember it being really, really difficult with a lot of luggage.

With the new trains, the ride is much smoother and quieter. And having air conditioning on the trains is also lovely. The caveat there is that it's lovely when it works. It doesn't always work. So today, things have changed. These days, there are



more trains and there are more passengers. So train travel is more potentially chaotic, and sometimes trains are more crowded.

And a lot of much needed work is being done to train systems and tracks and stations. So there are delays, there are cancellations, and there are detours. That said, Aaron and I still take the train regularly. We've had mostly smooth and enjoyable experiences on the train. Experiences where our train arrives on time, we board, we find a seat, because either we've reserved a seat in advance if it's a high-speed train, or there's an open seat on a regional train. And then the ride is smooth, uneventful, and we arrive on time at our destination. I'd say 80 % of the time, that's been our train travel experience over the past three years.

15% of the time, however, we have experienced some kind of hiccup. I made a list of five different hiccups we've had, and I'll tell you about them, just so you can get an idea of what I'm talking about.

The first one was we landed in Frankfurt and we took a regional train from Frankfurt to Cologne. And this was in July. So it was in the middle of summer. We decided to take a regional train because we had the Deutschland ticket and we wanted flexibility. We were flying into Frankfurt. We weren't sure exactly which train we were going to want to take. So we decided we would just hop on a regional train and, you know, it's like three hours to Cologne. So it was fine.

It was summer, so it was crowded. I think we actually landed on a Saturday. And so it was a little bit more crowded than usual. The first train we got on was no problem. We found a seat, we had room for our luggage. That was okay. Then we had to change trains. I think it was like in Koblenz maybe. And something must have been going on. It was Saturday afternoon in the middle of summer and that train was definitely more crowded. Fortunately, we got on the train. We were one of the first ones to get on. We managed to get a place to sit, room for our luggage.



We were on time, the train was on time, but since it was summer, one of the trains was a little bit on the warm side. And because it was Saturday in the summer, it was a little bit more crowded. We were super jet lagged because we had just gotten off the plane and just sitting on a train. It was really hard to stay awake. I think we both kept falling asleep. So I was really, really glad that we were able to get a seat on that regional train because if we had had to stand the whole time, that would not have been fun.

The second experience was when we took a high-speed train from Vienna to Augsburg. We got to the train station in Vienna early, got to our platform, and then the train was delayed. And once the train finally arrived, probably 45 minutes late, we weren't sure which car to get on. And usually it's pretty easy to figure that out. But for some reason, we and everyone else trying to get on the train, we couldn't figure out exactly which train we were supposed to be on. And that was a little bit confusing. We got on one car, then we had to get off and get on another car. And it turns out we were originally correct. So, we got that all figured out. It was a little stressful running between cars, but we got that figured out. And we left. We had to change trains in Salzburg. And unfortunately, our train arrived late. And so we missed our train from Salzburg to Augsburg and that just kind of kicked off some other delays. So that was a little bit frustrating because we just knew we were going to arrive late and we did. We arrived in Munich late, then we had to take a different train to get to Augsburg. Our seat reservations didn't transfer so we weren't sure we were going to have a place to sit.

It all turned out that it was okay. We did find seats. That was no problem. We were able to just get on another train. That was okay. So it worked out okay in the end. It was just a little bit stressful. And we arrived in Augsburg, I think probably three hours later. And so we arrived probably at one o'clock in the morning. So we got a little bit less sleep. That wasn't ideal, but it was okay. To me, that was just, it was a hiccup. It was not great, but it was okay.



Another time we took the train, a regional train from Munich to Garmisch and they were working on part of the track. So our train pulled into, I think it was Murnau actually, and they told us we all had to get off the train and get on a bus. And then we took a bus from Murnau to Garmisch. So, you know, that was okay. I mean, it was fine. We got off the train with our luggage and got on the bus. There were a bunch of other people doing it too. We got seats on the bus. It just took a little bit longer. You know, again, a hiccup, it was fine. It just took us a little bit longer.

There was another experience where we were in Freiburg and we were going to take the train through the Black Forest. So we got to the train station, got to our platform, confirmed that we were on the right platform. We saw a train sitting there, but we sat down on the bench because when I looked at the platform, I was like, that's not our train. That's not where we're going. The train that we wanted to be on was actually on the same screen, but it was right next to this other train. So we sat down and we had, I don't know, probably 30 minutes before our train left. But I just had this nagging feeling that something was that I needed to like pay attention to this. And it took me a little bit to figure this out because this is something that I'm seeing more now that I didn't used to see very often.

The train that we wanted to be on was actually connected to the other train. So it was like two regional trains that were connected, but they were only going the same direction for part of the trip. And then they were splitting off. And we didn't quite catch that right at first. Fortunately, I did figure it out about five minutes before the train left. So we were okay in that situation, but it was a little bit confusing.

The last one, we were going from Offenburg to Colmar in France. We were routed through this very small train station and the platform had a weird number. It was like 101. This was a one horse town, so there was one platform. So we were a little confused by that. So we saw like platform one on one side, platform two on the other side.



We thought platform 101, this doesn't make any sense. We looked around, we didn't see any other tracks. So we sat down on a bench and we waited and waited. And then the train never arrived. And we thought, okay, think things are delayed a little bit. Finally, I got that, that like nagging sense that we're missing something. I got up, I walked around and I thought, what are we missing here? And I walked all around the train station and walked behind this little tiny train station and I found that there was another track behind the train station and that was track 101. So I ran back, I grabbed Aaron, we ran to get on the train and it was fine. You know, again, it was a hiccup. We arrived just a little bit later than we had planned.

So these things were frustrating and annoying and a little bit stressful, but I look at it as like, you know, when you're flying, there could be a delay. Or if you're driving, you could get stuck in traffic. You could miss an exit. So for us, they were frustrating and annoying and stressful. But they didn't have any major impact on our itinerary in any severe way.

Now for you, it might be different. I've been traveling on trains in Germany for a long time. And I know my comfort level. And I know how to figure things out. You might be listening to those experiences and saying, my god, that sounds really, really stressful. And that's something to really think about.

So now maybe 5 % of the time we've had really not great experiences. And I can tell you about two, because we've, I, only had two that we could really think of in the past three years. And both of those happened on our most recent trip, which was just a few months ago in the winter, November and December. So I will tell you about those experiences because like I said, I'm going to give you the unvarnished truth.

The first experience, we were in Berlin and we were taking a day trip to Dresden. We decided to use the Deutschland ticket. We took the train from Berlin and then we took it to Dresden. And it took like, I don't know, two, three hours. It took a little bit longer. If



we had taken the faster train, it would have cut off maybe an hour, I think. But on the way there, it was totally fine. We had to make, I think, two transfers.

And there were a bunch of other people on the train who were doing the exact same thing we did. So we all got off the train, transferred to the next one. Very simple, very small train stations, but just moving across the platform. We got seats, no problem. It was fine. On the way home, it was a totally different story. We got to the train station early. We got there probably 30 to 40 minutes early. And so that was because we wanted to be the first people on the train so we could get a place to sit.

A lot of times the regional trains will arrive early and people will get on right away and you sit for maybe 20, 30 minutes, but you get a place to sit. So that's exactly what happened. Train arrived, we got on, we got a place to sit. We were feeling very smug. Like, this is great. We did this just right. You know, this was probably, I don't know, six, seven o'clock in the evening. So it was already dark.

And the train leaves, everything's going fine until maybe, I don't know, 30 minutes into the train trip. And the train stopped at a small train station and they said that something had happened on the tracks and they couldn't continue. So we had to get out, all of us. I mean, the train had a lot of people on it. So we all had to get out and nobody knew what to do.

And so I went checking in the app and we're talking to other people and we're trying to figure things out. And finally we all figured out, like this huge group of us, we figured out that there was another train coming in about 40 minutes and we could get on that train and go a different route. Long story short, we had to wait, it was cold, it was crowded. We finally got on the train and that train was so packed. And so we all had to cram into this train. There were tons of people. Standing room only. We're all coming back from Dresden. So I don't think anyone really had luggage.



And we had to stand for like, I don't know, hour, hour and a half until we got to another station. People did start getting off. So it slowly got better, but we did not get to sit the entire time. Then we changed trains and on that last train, another like hour or so to Berlin, that one we did get to sit down. So that one was not fun.

I really was not sure that we were going to get back to Berlin. I was worried that we were going to get stuck somewhere. So that was not fun. It turned out okay, just not fun.

Now this last experience. This one, this one was really not fun because we had our luggage with us. So we were going from Frankfurt to Cologne. You can take a high speed train from Frankfurt to Cologne and it takes like an hour. And I definitely recommend doing that over doing what we did. But remember, I feel pretty comfortable traveling around Germany. So when I looked at this train route, because again, we had the Deutschland ticket, we didn't know exactly when we were going to want to leave. And we wanted ultimate flexibility. So we thought, we'll just take the slow train, it's fine. It takes longer, it's okay. And so we got on the train early in Frankfurt, we got a seat, we had plenty of room for our luggage.

We are chugging along and then probably about 45 minutes, an hour into the trip, they came on the announcements and said, the train is going to end here. You have to get on a bus and take the replacement bus. So we got off. It was dark. We were in this little tiny town and we didn't really know what was going on. We did not know where to go. We followed everybody else. We saw a bunch of buses. And we finally figured out we were supposed to go across the street and get on this one bus. And they had one bus for everybody on the train. So we cram onto this bus. I mean, we're standing with our luggage, with our backpacks, and then we had to go probably 45 minutes or an hour to a larger town. And then they just dumped us out. And then we realized that there was another bus we were supposed to get on that was going to go to another place where we could get back on the train.



We could not fit on that bus. And the whole area was not able to be serviced by the train at that time. That's what I figured out. And so it was just a lot of replacement buses. So everybody was trying to figure it out. There was more bus traffic than usual. Everyone was confused. So I found a representative from the Deutsche Bahn and I asked them, I was like, when's the next bus coming? And she said, it's in an hour. So we had to stand there and wait for an hour.

And this was in December. And then there was this huge crowd forming. We thought, we don't even know if we're going to get on this next bus. So I'm looking at the app. I'm talking to the DB representative. I'm looking in the train station. And it was funny because I did finally figure out what we could do. And then I must have looked like I knew what I was doing because I had lots of people coming up and asking me, the non-Native German speaker, the non-German, to help them figure out how to get where they were going.

So I ended up helping a whole bunch of people figure out how to get where they needed to go that night, because we were all confused, right? So the bus came, we did get on the bus. Fortunately, it was not a huge crowd getting on our bus. We did get seats and everybody kind of around us, we were all kind of talking about this to make sure we were going the right way. It was a little nerve wracking though, because we were on this bus going out into, we were going through hills and, you know, out in this rural area. And I thought, oh my gosh, what if we get stuck in this little village with no place to stay? It turned out okay, though. We got dumped out at this little tiny train station and there was a big enough crowd waiting for the train that I thought, okay, I think a train will come by. A regional train came by, we all got on the train, then we all breathed a sigh of relief. It was going directly to Cologne and it was another maybe, I don't know, 45 minutes to Cologne.

We made it. It was late, I got to our hotel, I think after midnight. So it took us a lot longer to get there, but we did make it. So I think that's probably the worst experience that we had. And it was taxing on us and we really know what we're doing and how to



figure these things out. So I tell you these things because I want to be really honest, but you could avoid a lot of this. You don't have to, I don't think you're going to really get into situations like we did because if you were my client, I would not recommend you take those types of regional trains after dark in the winter. I would find a much more direct route for you that would be easier for you to deal with if there is a delay or a cancellation.

But I want to be honest and share what it is like because traveling in 2024 was a little bit more chaotic than traveling in 2023 or 2022. Okay, now you might be listening to these stories and saying, oh my God, I do not want to experience that, right? So just remember that that was the last two experiences I shared. That was just two trips in three years, okay?

So we've had clients and travelers in our Facebook group who have had few to no problems at all taking the train. And some of these are very recent. So let me just read a few of these experiences to you because I wanna balance out some of the horror stories I was sharing with you.

So this is from our recent post in our Facebook group. So somebody said, "It's the only way we go. We used to drive, but after sitting in traffic, we changed to train only. My hubby likes the DB app. I much prefer the train app."

Another person said, "We spent three weeks in December doing Christmas markets and traveling by train. Got the Deutschland ticket, very easy and economical. It was great, easy peasy. We had some delays, but overall it was a great experience. Would do it again in a heartbeat." Someone else said, "We love the DB and only use it for traveling. You need to know how to use the app and try to be as flexible as possible. We use them as well as the buses and it worked out great."

So my goal in sharing all of this with you isn't to convince you to take the trains in Germany or to scare you off from trains, but rather just as like a realistic perspective



to help you decide if they might be the right choice for your trip. Okay, so now hearing all of this, you might be wondering, okay, how do I decide if trains are really the right choice for me?

Or maybe you're starting to feel a little overwhelmed by all the possibilities and maybe like all the different train types, train ticket options, regional passes, when to book what, because there's a lot and it can be very overwhelming. I spent a lot of time sorting through this stuff for myself and for our clients. I mean, it's a lot, right?

You might be wondering which trains do I take and how do I fit everything together for a smooth trip that maximizes my time and minimizes my stress? Well, I want to mention real quick that's exactly why we created our Germany Train Travel Made Easy Guide, which is available on its own or as part of our DIY Germany Travel Planner. It walks you through the entire decision-making process from whether to take the train at all or maybe to rent a car instead, to which ticket is right for itinerary, to how to book and how to book seat reservations, what to expect at the station, when to get on the train, and what to do if something doesn't go as planned.

If you'd rather talk it through with somebody, I do offer one-on-one consults where we can sort through your entire itinerary and figure out your transportation strategy and make sure everything will work together really, really well. I do this with a lot of, like most of our clients actually. And especially if you're feeling stuck between renting a car or taking the train, I can help you with that.

Sometimes renting a car is better, sometimes the train is better, sometimes it's better to take a combination of the two. And I can help you figure all of that out. So I'll drop the links to all of these resources in the show notes.

Okay, last topic for today. If you take the train, here's how to make it a good experience. Buy high speed train tickets in advance. That way you can get the best fares. Don't leave this off to the last minute.



Unless you want to pay a lot more for your tickets. If you do travel by high speed train, add a seat reservation. It does cost extra. It is not automatically added to your ticket. I think it is added to one type of first class ticket, but generally in Germany, you are reserving space on the train. You're not automatically reserving a specific seat. So definitely add a seat reservation to the high speed train.

Consider using the Deutschland ticket. It could save you a lot of money. We have a guide to this ticket on our website, because we've used it a lot. And I'll link to that guide in the show notes so you can check it out. You can also go to mygermanyvacation.com and search for "Deutschland ticket." This ticket could work really well for you, but it may not at the same time. So check that out. Or if you decide to do a consult with me, that's something we can also look at. And I can help you figure out which train tickets will get you the biggest bang for your buck.

The next tip is to pack light. The less you're carrying, the easier it will be to move through train stations, climb onto trains, stow your bags above your seat or in the luggage racks. And also it'll be just so much easier when you're changing trains, especially if you have a shorter transfer time.

And the last tip is to build in buffer time. If you have a train connection that you really cannot miss. I recommend adding in more transfer time. If you use the Deutsche Bahn website, you can easily increase that transfer time. That way you're less likely to miss your connection. Also, if you have booked a tour or something really important at your destination, make sure that you have a cushion between when your train is to arrive and when you need to be at that tour or whatever it is that you've booked. We add in far more buffer time now than we used to.

Okay, so should you take the train in Germany? Maybe, but maybe not. Either way, I hope this episode has helped you feel more prepared to make that decision and move forward with confidence. And if you would like help sorting through all the



options to figure out what will work best for your trip, definitely check out our DIY Germany Travel Planner or just get the Germany Train Travel Made Easy Guide. Both are on our website.

You can also book a live one-on-one consult with me. If you'd like help figuring out your route, sorting through train ticket options, or anything like that, I would love to help you. Or you can also just let us figure everything out for you with our complete custom itinerary service. We want you to feel confident walking into the train station, knowing where to go, what to do if something goes sideways, and that's what our tools and services are designed to help you do. Because we want you to have the smoothest, most wonderful, most memorable trip you can possibly have.

Okay, until next week, happy travel planning!

Before you go, two quick things. First, if you found our podcast helpful, please leave a five-star rating and even better, a review. That helps more travelers find our podcast.

And that means we can keep creating episodes to help you plan an unforgettable trip to Germany and surrounding countries. And second, if you're just starting to plan your trip and you want to enjoy the best of Germany while also skipping those rookie mistakes most travelers unknowingly make, you'll love our best-selling DIY Germany Travel Planner. Think of it as your travel savvy best friend who's handing you everything you need to know to plan your perfect trip. And if you'd like personalized support, upgrade to a one-on-one consult, itinerary review, or even a complete custom itinerary and travel plan. You'll find everything on mygermanyvacation.com.

Thanks so much for listening to the Germany Travel Planning Podcast, and until next week, happy travel planning!