



Germany Travel Planning Podcast

Ep 30 – Germany by Train vs Car: Pros, Cons & Insider Tips

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Today we're diving into one of the most common and highly debated questions travelers ask us. Should I take the train or should I rent a car on my trip to Germany?

Welcome to the Germany Travel Planning Podcast, the show that helps you plan a super fun trip to Germany and surrounding countries. My name is Cate and I'm your Germany destination specialist. I'm here to help you plan your best trip ever.

We've gotten this car versus train question from most of our clients. It's something that I spend a lot of time working out for our clients who do consults or who do custom itineraries. And we've also had many people in our Germany travel community ask for input. So you might be wondering what is our answer? Well, our answer is always it depends. But don't worry, we're going to unpack the pros and cons of both driving and taking the train.

And I'm going to share with you some real life experiences that we've had with both, you know, just to kind of help you figure out what will be best for your trip. Because spoiler alert, there's no wrong answer here. Okay, let's dive in.

So let's start with trains. We're gonna talk about the pros and the cons, and then we'll move on to cars and the pros and cons of renting a car. So Germany's rail system is extensive, and it can be a pretty amazing way to see the country. But there are some challenges you need to consider. And before I forget, we do have an episode focusing just on what it's like to take the train. It's episode 23, and I'll link it in the show notes.



But if you're interested in hearing more about what it's really like to take the train at this present time, I would definitely go listen to that. I share more stories and I talk about the good, the not so good, and the really frustrating. So go listen to that.

There are many reasons to take the train. Riding the train in Germany is pretty straightforward. It can be very efficient, especially if you are planning to visit major cities. It can be a really good choice if you are focusing on major cities. Train stations are also almost always located in the center of town. So once you arrive, it's typically just a short walk or maybe, you know, hop on public transit or you grab a cab or an Uber. And then it's pretty easy to get to your hotel, especially if you're staying in the old town or the city center. We usually just walk.

And one of the things people love most about train travel is just how nice it is for everyone you're traveling with to be able to sit back and enjoy the ride. So if you would like everyone in your travel party to be able to enjoy traveling between destinations, then trains are a good choice. Everyone can just get on, relax in your seat. You can chit chat. You can enjoy the scenery. You can read. You can take a nap. You can eat snacks, can gaze out the window at the countryside. So it can be a really nice break from the whirlwind of sightseeing.

When we travel by train, we use that time just as like downtime, know, like listen to music or just like I said, read or just enjoy a bite to eat, chit chat for a little bit. Sometimes we also use it to read about the next destination.

And speaking of food, I mentioned snacks, you can bring food onto the train. You can bring both food and drinks onto the train. We always do that. We usually stop by a grocery store, pick up something to drink, pick up some snacks. And then sometimes depending on the time of day, we'll stop somewhere and pick up lunch or dinner or maybe breakfast if it's early in the morning, and we'll pick up something to go and take it on the train. So it's no problem to eat and drink on the train. So you can just sit back, you can enjoy a latte or you can enjoy a beer as you travel.



Some trains do even have a dining car, but not all of them. It's mostly just the ICE trains, the high-speed trains, and the dining car may or may not be open depending on the time of day. So it is smart to stock up on snacks and drinks and get something to eat before you board, just in case the dining car isn't open or sometimes there's a long line. Sometimes there isn't something you want to eat.

And actually most train stations have surprisingly good food options, especially the larger ones. They'll have everything from little snacks at the convenience store to bakeries with fresh pretzels and sandwiches or pizza. And then sometimes the larger ones will also have pretty nice food courts with hot meals that you can sit down, you can order and sit down, use real silverware and plates or you can get it to go. And then some of them actually also have pretty good grocery stores. I like to go to the grocery store and pick up some fruit, veggies, maybe a salad, something to drink, some chocolate, you know. So there's a variety of options.

So we take the train probably 50 to 60% of the time when we're in Germany, and especially if we're primarily just going to cities or larger towns. In fact, on our most recent research trip, we traveled all over Germany by train. Like we literally crisscrossed the country for three months and we only traveled by train and it was a mostly positive experience.

But there are some challenges these days when it comes to taking the trains and it's really important to be aware of both the pros and the cons so that you can make an informed decision. Okay, so let's talk about some of the downsides.

Now you may have heard or read some negative things about German trains. They're not what they used to be, unfortunately. They're doing a lot of work to upgrade the systems. Honestly, it's coming a little bit late. So that's why things are a little more chaotic now than they used to be. So trains might be delayed. They might have detours. Trains can be canceled. You know, this is going to go on for a couple more years because they have a lot of systems and tracks and train stations that they're



upgrading and it's just going to take some time. And so there's just going to be a little bit more chaotic.

If you go listen to episode 23 that I mentioned, I go into more of this and share more of our experiences. But I will say that the vast majority of the trains that we have taken in the last three years have either been on time or they've only been delayed a little bit where it's just kind of annoying, but it's nothing terrible. But we have had a couple of trains that have been pretty delayed and it has been a little bit stressful. So you have to think about that. If your train is delayed or if your train is canceled, how will you react? Will that be something that you can, you know, it might not be fun, but you can just deal with it, it'll be fine. Or is that something that will be really stressful and could severely negatively impact your trip?

Now there's also a bit of a learning curve when it comes to figuring out the routes that you want to take, which trains to take, which tickets to get, because there's a lot of different ticket options these days. Booking tickets, prices can change. It's a little bit more like booking flights now. And you get the best rates booking far in advance. And then also deciding if you want to go first class or second class, making seat reservations.

You know, because seat reservations are not included with your ticket. That's something really important to know about German trains. When you book a ticket, you're booking space on the train. You're not booking a specific seat unless you add a seat reservation. And seat reservations are not available on every type of train. So it's not hard to find your routes and book tickets and everything once you're used to it. But if you're new to it, it will require some research and just getting to know some basics about train travel.

If you have our DIY Germany travel planner, take a look at step two, which is all about transportation. We have a Germany train travel made easy guide. And in that guide, we have cheat sheets. We have a video where I walk you through everything you



need to know about booking tickets and traveling by train. And then there's some other information that will help you know what to do if your train is delayed or canceled or whatever. So if you already have our planner, definitely take a look at that because that will make everything related to trains so much easier.

If you're thinking, okay, I really want to take the train, but I don't have time to go figure it all out myself. Don't worry, we can help. If you're interested in a custom itinerary, we actually figure out all of the trains for you. So what we do is we plan out your route and I will actually tell you, okay, I recommend you get this ticket. I recommend this train. And then I also can show you exactly how to do things like get a seat reservation or if you want to add in a little bit more transfer time. I actually record a video showing you exactly how to do it for your itinerary. So that's another option if you would like to have personalized help with that.

Okay, let's go back to seat reservations for a minute because as I mentioned, this is where train travel can get a little tricky because you do not get a seat reservation when you book a ticket. So if you're traveling during holidays or festival times or other peak times like summer or school holidays or even some days like Friday afternoons, evenings, Sundays. You know, there can be a lot of people traveling by train. On high speed trains, it's not so much of a problem because you can book a seat reservation in advance. But on regional trains, you can't reserve a seat. So there's always a chance that you'll board a train, you'll find all the seats filled and you'll have to stand in the aisle or in the doorway. And if it's a short train ride, that's not that big of a deal. But if you're taking a longer train journey, that's not super fun, especially if you have luggage or if you have young kids. We've had to do this a couple of times. We mostly get seats. We mostly don't have a problem with not getting seats. But a couple of times, we just didn't know that it was going to be busy and we have had to stand a couple of times. So it was fine, we got through it, but you know, it wasn't the best way to travel.



Another thing to consider is that trains, while their train system is extensive, it doesn't reach every corner of the country or every site. Small towns and rural areas may require multiple transfers, or you might just have to take a lot of different trains or even trains and buses.

And so it can just be a long travel day depending on where you're going. And as I mentioned before, because of a lot of ongoing infrastructure updates all across Germany, there are more delays and detours and even cancellations. So while trains are often reliable, you'll want to leave some extra wiggle room in your schedule just in case you do encounter a delay or in case a train is cancelled and you need to take a little bit later train or in case there's a detour and you have to get out and you know hop on a bus and they get back on the train or something like that.

And also consider just how this is going to affect your trip, right? For some people it doesn't matter they're totally fine with it and for others it just causes a lot of unnecessary stress which is not necessarily what you want on a vacation.

One final thing to consider is that luggage is your responsibility the entire time you're taking the train. So you don't check your luggage, nobody comes and gets it for you. You will need to take it up and down the stairs to get to the platforms. You'll need to take it on and off the train and you'll need to lift it up to put it on a luggage rack or over your seat, or sometimes you can stick it like in between the seats. So are trains worth it?

Well, for many travelers, including us, yes, they are the perfect way to get around Germany because you can blend comfort and a cultural experience and convenience and the views can be pretty great too. But at the same time, because of the challenges that the train system is facing right now, it is good to really consider the challenges and how they will impact your trip and whether the trains will be the right way for you to travel or not.



All right, let's talk about renting a car and driving. Renting a car in Germany can be a good choice in some instances. Like if you're heading to destinations that aren't easily accessible by train. There are some castles, for example, that really are only accessible if you have a car. They can also be a really good choice if you want a lot of freedom with when you leave, when you arrive, and if you want to be able to stop whenever something catches your eye.

It can be really fun to be able to say, you know what, there's actually this thing that we didn't get to see. Let's leave three hours later than we had originally planned. We'll go see that. Then we'll hop in the car and we'll get going. If you take the train, most of the time you can't do that. And the ability to be able to stop wherever you want can also be great. Sometimes when we're driving, I'm just looking at Google Maps and I'll find something interesting and I'll say like, okay, let's just try this. Let's just go see what this is. And that's how you can find really cool hidden gems and have some really fun, memorable experiences.

Driving can also be a great idea if you want to bring more luggage than just kind of like a carry-on or if you don't want to have to carry your luggage around. It can be kind of nice to just walk out of the hotel, pop it in the trunk and then not have to take it up and down a bunch of stairs and on cobblestone streets and things like that.

And driving can be a really great choice if you want to take those really scenic back roads through vineyards or forested hills or through little villages and places that you don't get to see from a train window. A rental car is especially great if your trip includes smaller towns or villages or scenic routes like the Romantic Road, which you really do need to do by car.

Or if you want to explore a lot of the Rhine or Mosel Valley, the Black Forest, that's also really good by car. And these are areas where the train or sometimes a train-bus combo could get you to a city or a town, but not necessarily to specific destinations.



And then there's also certain things that you just can't do by train, like if you want to drive the Black Forest High Road.

So by renting a car, you're in complete control over where you go, when you stop, when you leave, when you arrive, and that can be a huge positive. In some cases, renting a car can actually be more cost effective than train travel, especially for families or small groups. Once you factor in the price of individual train tickets for multiple people, and especially if you're considering the more expensive flexible tickets or first class tickets, a rental car can end up being the better deal.

What you have to do is just really cost it out and see how the cost compares. And nowadays, one way rentals are easier to get than ever. And they're not always that much more expensive than picking up and dropping off at the same place. So that means you could, for example, fly into Berlin, see Berlin, pick up your car in Berlin, drive down to Munich and maybe go to the Alpine area, drive back to Munich and then drop off your car and then fly out of Munich. And you don't have to backtrack and spend a day driving all the way back up to Berlin.

We do one way rentals quite often. There are, however, some downsides with renting a car, so let's talk about those. First and foremost, someone has to drive. Someone has to navigate. So that can be a little bit of a bummer if you have one person who has to always be paying attention and you know, it can be tiring to drive and it can be tiring to drive in another country. So if everyone else is getting to relax, the other person who has to drive, you know, it can be kind of a bummer for them depending on how much they like to drive and they want to drive.

The other thing to consider is if you fly into Germany and you've flown all night, you're going to be pretty tired. And if you pick up the car at the airport, I don't recommend driving very far on that first day.



We generally don't drive for more than a couple of hours because even though we're fine for the first hour or so, the jet lag can just overwhelm you completely. Whereas if we take a train, we just hop on the train and if we fall asleep, we fall asleep. It's not a big deal. So I mentioned someone has to drive. Somebody also has to navigate. We use Google Maps or Apple Maps and that works really well.

But I still have to pay attention. I'm the navigator, Aaron's the driver. So I still have to pay attention because we've noticed that the navigation sometimes doesn't give enough advanced warning to know like, we've got to make this turn or we got to get in this lane so we can get off the off ramp. And sometimes that can be kind of difficult. And also, you know, the names of the streets and the towns there in German. So for me, that's not a problem. But Aaron doesn't speak German.

So it just can take a little bit more time if you're the driver for things to click. You hear a street name or a city and it can just take a little, just a little bit longer for that to register. And we've noticed that sometimes the navigation just doesn't give enough warning. And so by the time you figured out, I actually need to get over to the right lane so that I can make this right turn, you've passed the turn and you have to go. You have to continue on, turn around, come back. And that can just add a little bit more stress to your trip. So when we're driving, I, as the navigator, am always looking at the map and giving Aaron a little bit more advanced notice. So I'm always telling him, you're going to make a right turn up here. Make sure you're on the right lane. We find that that helps make things less stressful for the driver.

Driving in Germany isn't hard, especially if you already drive on the right side of the road. But there are some differences and these differences are important to notice. There are differences in approach to driving, to road signs, laws, parking rules, and even some unwritten expectations that you might not know about if you're driving on the Autobahn. And sometimes this can feel a little bit overwhelming at first.



That's why there's a video tutorial about driving in Germany that we highly recommend. We recommend it to all of our clients and everyone in our travel community who does want to drive in Germany. I will link it up in the show notes so you can go check it out. We really wish we had had this driving tutorial years ago. It would have saved us so much stress. So I highly recommend go to our show notes, check it out and get that driving tutorial.

The other thing to think about is parking because you will pay for parking almost everywhere in Germany. Hotels will charge for overnight parking and they may or may not have on-site parking. If you're parking in a town or at a castle or some other site, sometimes you can pay with a credit card, sometimes you have to have coins. And the other thing with parking is that parking spaces are often narrower than what we're used to, say, in the United States.

There have been some times, especially in parking garages, where Aaron and I have just looked at each other and we thought, how are we going to get this car into that parking space? And sometimes I've had to get out and help Aaron inch into the space because it was that tight. We've always managed it. It's always been okay. And we kind of laugh about it now, but that's something to think about. Is that going to be something that you're okay with or is that going to be stressful?

Now I mentioned that hotels charge for parking and not all hotels will have on-site parking. So some places, especially in larger cities, you might actually have to park your car in a public lot that is a couple blocks away from the hotel. And that can add up. We've done that several times. If there's a hotel we want to stay at and their parking is the public lot a couple blocks away. So you just want to think about that because if you're thinking that you're going to be able to pull up right in front of the hotel, and walk three steps into the hotel, you might be able to do that, but you might not. So that's something you're gonna wanna look into when you're booking your hotel.



Another thing you wanna keep in mind is that most cars in Germany are manual transmission. Some automatics are available, but they do cost a little bit more. Not as much more as they used to. I feel like it used to be pretty expensive to rent an automatic, but now we found it just costs a little bit more. But they are in limited supply.

And the selection isn't quite as big as with manual transmission. So if you do want an automatic, I would book early so that you are sure to get one. One last thing to consider when it comes to rental cars, there will be additional fees. So of course you do have to pay for gas and gas does cost more in Germany than it does say in the United States. But there are fees for like if you want to drive your car from Germany into France or Switzerland. Usually it's like 30 or 40 euros, but you know, it could be more and depending on the car rental company you use, they could charge a little bit more than that.

There are also toll fees. Germany itself doesn't have tolls, but if you do drive in France, Switzerland, Austria, for example, you will need to factor in costs for tolls in those countries. And of course, then there's insurance. You might be able to use insurance through a credit card if you have that, or you can get insurance through the car rental company, but that will be an additional cost.

Okay, so I hope this episode has helped you think through some of the pros and cons of taking the train versus driving a rental car. Remember, there's no wrong answer here. It really depends on your trip, where you're going, and what kind of experience you want to have.

If you would like to have personalized help figuring out what will work best for your trip, or finding the best driving routes, or finding the right train tickets, or the train routes that will work best for your trip, we are happy to help. I help a lot of clients with this in the one-on-one Zoom consults that I do. And then we actually will figure all of this out for you if you book a custom itinerary. And we do also have information



about rental cars, driving, trains, train tickets, and all of that in the transportation section of our DIY Germany Travel Planner.

If you don't yet have access to our DIY Germany travel planner, check the show notes. There will be a link there and you can go check it out. It will help you plan every step of your trip with confidence and ease.

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.