

A British Commentary on the German Passion for Travel (April 5, 1984)

Abstract

From a mid-1980s vantage point a British journalist marvels at the tourism mania that made the citizens of the Federal Republic world champions in vacationing, especially in southern climes. West German tourists' massive spending balanced out the FRG's trade surplus.

Source

Wanderlust Spirit of 26 million Germans

If you come across pioneer tourists in the darkest corners of Africa, on the shores of remote islands, or in fully equipped mobile homes halfway up a mountain, they are likely to be Germans, for Germans are the world's greatest globe-trotters, and many a fashionable resort owes its existence almost entirely to the Teutonic wanderlust.

Last year more than 26 million German tourists set off on holiday, with 16 million going abroad—a higher proportion than anywhere else in the world, if you exclude such quirks as Monaco and Kuwait. The summer holiday abroad is as sacrosanct as the car and one of the last things to be sacrificed, even in straitened times. Though in 1983 the amount of money German tourists spent abroad fell—by 2.6 per cent—for the first time since 1967, it still remained a formidable amount: DM 38,400m (£10,130m).

Where do they all go? Principally, of course, south to the sun, to Italy, Austria, Spain, Turkey and Yugoslavia, where the natives will now naturally write their menus in German and wish you *guten Morgen* unless corrected. Favourite destinations are unchanged, with Italy coming first in absolute terms (Germans accounting for 43 per cent of all tourists) and Austria the runner-up (where Germans make up 70 per cent of tourists). The British still have the lead in Spain, Portugal and Greece, but the Germans are the biggest group in Turkey, Yugoslavia and Switzerland.

There are changes from year to year, depending on fashion, the strength of the ever-welcome Mark and the weather. Last year's heatwave seemed to make the prospect of a trip northwards less daunting, and Britain, Holland and Denmark attracted more Germans than the year before.

But Eastern Europe—excluding, of course, East Germany—paid the price for its poor facilities and disorganization: the pioneers have moved on to the new “in” places in Africa and Asia, and the pensioners have been put off by horror stories of low-cost holidays in Romania and Bulgaria.

Germans are remarkably independent holidaymakers. Most travel by car and 70 per cent set off on their own, making their own arrangements—though the tendency to congregate in established colonies in Europe's camping sites suggests the gregarious instinct, or at least the preference for a clean and tidy environment, is not altogether conquered.

But the travel industry is still very big business in Germany. Newspapers regularly run fat travel supplements, and the big chain stores watch every fluctuation in the holiday market with close attention, as it makes a difference of several million marks to their turnover.

Today's version of the German hiking instinct is responsible for the vast acreage of canvas villas, the ever

more sophisticated palaces on wheels with their “D” plates, that adorn Europe’s camping sites.

On the whole, Germans do not stint themselves when abroad. The average holidaymaker spent 18.2 days abroad, cashing DM 71.80 a day. Most money, statistically speaking, is spent by German visitors to Scandinavia, who tend to be young, single and female. Those going to Yugoslavia, by contrast, are mostly young and male; those to Denmark, families or groups; and those to Austria older, regular visitors.

For those who stay at home, Bavaria is the biggest draw. But the rest of Germany, a country much underrated both by its own citizens and foreigners, is equally striking and worth visiting. Those foreigners who do—far fewer than the number of Germans going abroad—are mainly the Dutch, constituting 21 per cent of Germany’s visitors.

Russian nobility no longer go to Baden-Baden, and perhaps today’s equivalent, where the smart and the chic gather to see each other and be seen, is the long, thin island of Sylt, off the Danish coast. It is only on the beaches here that Germany still has an intellectual centre, where you will find the stars of screen and stage in a state of mental and physical undress, while the bulk of their compatriots are revealing all flesh to the sun 1,000 miles farther south.

Source: Michael Binyon, “Wanderlust Spirit of 26m Germans,” *London Times*, April 5, 1984. ©The Times / News Licensing. Republished with permission.

Recommended Citation: A British Commentary on the German Passion for Travel (April 5, 1984), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-842>> [May 14, 2025].