The Currency Problems of East German Vacationers (August 30, 1980)

Abstract

A West German observer describes the difficulties faced by a growing number of East German tourists abroad. The problems were caused by the weakness of the GDR currency and the superior wealth of their Western cousins, which made them feel like second-class Germans.

Source

GDR Citizens on Vacation
Short on foreign currency

Klaus-Peter from Halle returned home to the GDR from a vacation on the Bulgarian coast with a golden tan. But when customs officers at Berlin-Schönefeld airport went to check his suitcase, it was empty. The young man stood sheepishly in front of the officers in nothing but his shirt, pants, and felt slippers. But he had not been the victim of thieves in faraway lands. Instead, he had sold all his possessions in Bulgaria. It was necessary to sell them because he had met a young girl down there and wanted to woo her. But because his vacation allowance was limited by law, clever Klaus-Peter from Halle supplemented his travel funds by selling his raw materials.

At first glance this story might sound strange or even funny. But it shows the problematic situation faced by GDR tourists in other socialist countries. Many of Klaus-Peter's compatriots do what he did. People from the GDR haul truckloads of items to their vacation spots in order to sell them to their Eastern brethren, since the selection of goods available in the GDR is still better than it is in Bulgaria or the Soviet Union, for example. On the other hand, the East German "phony mark" [*Schlusenmark*] is less coveted among the socialist brother countries. Governments there are more interested in Western foreign exchange earnings.

Even when traveling to Poland, GDR citizens now have to exchange at least 200 zlotys worth of Eastern marks per day. In accordance with regulation, all zlotys bought in excess of this minimum can be changed back into Eastern marks without restriction. In Czechoslovakia the minimum is 40 crowns per day; in Bulgaria it is 109 marks for an eight-day stay, and 309 marks for a 22-day stay. Similar regulations apply in Romania, Hungary, and the Soviet Union. GDR citizens have not been permitted to travel to Yugoslavia for a long time unless they are of retirement age. If travelers from the GDR possess Western currency, they may not take it out of the country under any circumstance; it is supposed to be spent in their own country. But those who are thus constrained are inventive. Some tourists get three weeks' worth of foreign currency put into their "accordion"—which accompanies their passports—and then they stay only a short time. Western money is smuggled in tinfoil so as not to be discovered during the mandatory X-ray. Dollar bills are more popular than West German banknotes, which are more easily noticed during X-rays on account of the silver threads woven into them.

But it is by no means only money problems that can ruin a vacation for GDR citizens. They constantly feel discriminated against abroad, overlooked compared to Westerners. As someone put it aptly upon return: "In friendly foreign countries, we're the Negroes [*Wir sind die Neger*]." This is because socialist tourism officials are quick to forget their ethics when it comes to improving their foreign exchange statistics. People from the GDR are removed from their lodgings, sent to worse campgrounds, and treated like

second-class citizens in restaurants.

Even interpersonal relationships suffer. Local girls would rather snag a Westerner for a summer fling because sometimes he will take them shopping in a foreign-currency store or treat them to a drink at a cash bar. Last year the cover for a discotheque along Bulgaria's sunny seashore was ten levs, for which you received drink tickets. For a West German, who on top of everything else, can also exchange money on the black market at a fabulously favorable rate, that's peanuts. For travelers from East Germany, however, that amounts to their allowance for two and a half days.

First-time travelers react with frustration when they experience the difference between Eastern propaganda and reality. "The things they told us about the model country, the Soviet Union!" complains a tourist from Dresden in Moscow. "The barkeeper kicked me out while a Texan next to me was relaxing and drinking whisky for twenty dollars because they ran out of change in the cash bar." "No one should ever say there is no prostitution in the land of Lenin," the Dresdener continued. "But when women approach me, the friendliness is gone the minute that I reply in my Saxon dialect."

Nevertheless, this man is happy to be able to travel abroad at all. He had to wait five years for the opportunity, because the offerings of the "Travel Agency of the GDR" are far from sufficient to satisfy the demand of all customers. Thus, available spaces are distributed in a kind of lottery. At the beginning of the year, all those interested choose from a catalog and receive so-called pre-booking tickets. The unlucky ones are on their own to plan a trip. Daily newspapers are full of advertisements where would-be travelers search for vacation apartments and offer their own homes in exchange. Traveling that way is also much less expensive. Customers of the state-run travel agency have to pay much more than, for instance, West Germans do.

A trip to Bulgaria, which was available to us here for 800 marks last year, cost 1300 marks "on the other side." A six-day trip to Moscow, on sale here for 499 marks in 1979, cost 800 marks through the GDR travel agency.

But despite all the handicaps, East Germans are still as travel-happy as ever. Although statistics are nearly impossible to come by, the "Travel Agency of the GDR" supposedly arranges about 1.2 million vacations each year. "If they had another million tours available, they would sell those, too," believes a tour guide from Dresden. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

Source: Wille Bremkes, "Wenn DDR-Bürger Urlaub machen," *Frankfurter Rundschau,* August 30, 1980. Republished with permission.

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