



How families in Germany celebrate special occasions

Birthdays

Birthdays are an important day in Germany, a day when people get cards, emails, phone calls or personal visits to wish them health, happiness and every blessing for the coming year. There are often presents and a birthday party with family and friends. These are all tokens of appreciation for the person in question and the motives lie in Germany's Christian roots: everybody is valuable, very special and unique in God's eyes.

Irrespective of whether you celebrate your birthday every year or have never done that, you are valuable in God's eyes because He loves you and is glad you are alive. In German somebody celebrating their birthday is often known as the "birthday child", however old they may be.



Birthday parties

If you're invited to a birthday party, the custom is to bring a little present for the "birthday child". In many cases, there will be birthday cake or other delicious food, or even an evening meal. But you normally wouldn't just go to a birthday party on a spontaneous impulse or without an invitation because in Germany the custom is to specifically invite people with a card or by email. And if you can't attend, e.g. because you've no time, the polite thing is to thank the person for the invitation and say why you can't come.

When somebody has a birthday, you congratulate them with a handshake or if you know them very well, you can hug them. Most people say in German: "Alles Gute zum Geburtstag!" ("All the best for your birthday!") or "Herzlichen Glückwunsch!" ("Congratulations!"). You can also wish them God's blessing (Gottes Segen), happiness (Glück) or good health (Gesundheit).

The "birthday child" may well bring cake or candies to work or school. If your birthday is coming up soon, it's probably best to ask your colleagues at work or your teacher whether this is the usual custom where you are.



Sometimes there will be a really big birthday party, e.g. for somebody's 50th or 60th birthday. In Germany you reach adulthood when you turn 18, which is also celebrated in a big way. At 18 you are allowed to drive a car unaccompanied, sign contracts and vote in state or federal elections (although in some German states the voting age has been lowered to 16). Normally, 18-year-olds are also deemed to be fully criminally responsible.

Children's birthdays

On a child's birthday some 5-10 friends will often be invited to the party. The child's parents will normally prepare some games or other activities for the children, e.g. a treasure hunt or making things. At these parties the children will normally eat together and bring presents for the birthday child.



Weddings

Weddings are one of the most important family celebrations in Germany. There's a German saying that "it's the nicest day in your life". For the past 150 years or so, every marriage has to be solemnised and legalised at a registry office. Before that, weddings always took place in churches and even nowadays, many couples do not want to do without a church wedding. As a result, weddings are often celebrated on two different days.



The wedding at the registry office is often celebrated with a small circle of family and friends, specifically the witnesses to the marriage. A church wedding is a festive service with the couple expressing their marriage vows in the presence of God, a pastor or priest and their guests. After receiving God's blessing, they exchange wedding rings, which are normally worn in Germany on the fourth finger of the right hand as a symbol of the marriage vows.

After the marriage service, there is normally a glass of sparkling wine outside the church for all the guests who take it in turns to congratulate the married couple. This is followed by the wedding celebrations, normally in a restaurant with good food, often with music or dancing, and in many cases with amusing contributions by guests who take this opportunity to show their appreciation for the couple.



For financial or space reasons, married couples will often invite more people to the church service and a glass of sparkling wine than to the subsequent celebrations, which take place with family and close friends. Normally such wedding celebrations will be attended by 50-150 people. Neighbours and friends of the couple will usually bring presents – in many cases wedding cards containing a gift of money.

In some regions of Germany there are specific wedding customs, e.g. doves are released or the married couple have to saw through a wooden log. Sometimes jokes are played on them, e.g. filling the couple's flat with balloons. If you are invited to the wedding celebrations, you would normally bring a present. Some couples mention the kind of present they'd like on the wedding invitation. Others would just want money, e.g. for the first flat, car or honeymoon. Normally, German couples set off on their honeymoon straight after the wedding celebrations – for a week or longer.



Baptism

Baptism is a Christian tradition based on the Bible where we read that Jesus was also baptised. Baptism symbolises the death of a sinner separated from God and that person's resurrection with Jesus Christ (see Romans, chapter 6 and verse 8 in the Bible). It is a public commitment by the person being baptised that he or she wants to live with God. More information about what Christians believe is available on Deutschland-Begleiter.de.

Many parents have their babies baptised to place them in God's caring hands. This will often take place when the baby is around six months old and is an important celebration for family and friends. In a church service a small amount of water is poured over the baby's head as a symbol of their submergence in water (as described in the Bible). So-called godparents promise to accompany the child on their path through life and strengthen their relationship with God.

In many free churches babies are just blessed. Baptism is saved for later years when a person makes a conscious decision to live as a Christian. In such cases the person to be baptised will be totally submerged in a large font or even in a lake. Afterwards, there will normally be a celebration of the baptism with good food and presents for the person in question.



If somebody was baptised in a Protestant or Catholic church as a baby, they can take a conscious decision to live with God at a later stage. This takes place in a so-called confirmation service in a church. Confirmation is also an occasion for a big family celebration.