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Welcome

Welcome to Germany and to our website German Guides (Deutschland-Begleiter.de): We've put together some information just for you to help to get acclimated to Germany and to feel truly at home much faster.

Perhaps many things will be a lot different than you initially imagined. In Germany people with very different backgrounds and value systems all live together. It's quite a colourful country! For this reason there are some basic cultural principles that you need to know and respect Germany can become your new home. Along the way you will undoubtedly have to clear many official hurdles. Regardless, we would like to offer you some helpful tips and pointers to assist you in becoming a part of German society.

To help you succeed, we at German Guides (Deutschlandbegleiter) want to invite you on a discovery tour to find out more about Germany and about the German people—to learn some of their usual (or unusual) habits, and how you can relate to them on a daily basis.



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Cultural traits that are common for Germans may be foreign to you

Many things that we will explain to you seem obvious and natural to them. They learned them from childhood as a normal part of their upbringing at home or in school. If you were to ask about them, a German would say, "Of, course. That's just the way things are!" Nevertheless there can be big differences in lifestyle among regions, and there are often small differences just among families. We at German Guides (Deutschlandbegleiter) want to emphasize the cultural traits that are generally true for most people, and thus are important for you to know.

Rules as the basis for freedom

One important fact to begin with: In Germany there are multitudes of rules and laws, and forms that go along with them. Sometimes we have the feeling that these regulations are too limiting, coldhearted or even somewhat inhuman. But the civil offices, and all that paperwork, are there to keep public daily life functioning at its best, and to promote harmony among the various people groups in the country. It might sound a bit unusual, but these measures are designed to simplify life on the whole.

Laws create individual freedom and personal space to develop our ability to work hard, to produce quality goods and services and to be innovative. Germany is known all over the world for these characteristics. If you initially have the feeling that you are constricted by all these forms and rules, then we would like to help you understand their purpose. Discovering the freedom they are intended to protect should help you lead a good life in Germany.



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Christian roots of German society

And now a bit about the people at German Guides (Deutschland-Begleiter.de): We are a group of Christians from different countries and cultures, who have found ourselves at home in many different types of churches here in Germany. We have collected a lot of this information with reference to the Christian roots of German society. Everyone, Christian or not, can benefit from these helpful tips about Germany and about our basic moral values. Even this cultural characteristic belongs to our "open society".

Contact to Germans helps in becoming a part of society

Once you arrived in Germany, your friends and often your family will most likely be far away. In the initial phase it is not always easy to build new relationships. We invite you to try to get to know new people who don't come from your home country or region of the world. Try to approach Germans with an open attitude.

Many helpers in organisations for immigrants, as well as the Christians who have put this material together, are volunteers.

That means that they chose to help without getting paid for their efforts, because they are interested in you as fellow human beings. The vast majority of Germans view you as an enrichment to the country and would be glad to get to know you personally.



Perhaps you might experience people who relate to you in a way that seems to you to be very strange or even abrasive. Rest assured: That's not usually intentional. It results from our own uncertainty about how to help you and relate to you.

Good relationships thrive on two parties growing together.

So we extend this invitation: Take a look around; build new relationships. Learn German and discover a lot about Germany. German Guides (Deutschlandbegleiter) wants to help you do this. Keep returning to our website www.Deutschland-Begleiter.de. We'll regularly post new information in addition to adding new languages to our website.



What you should know about Christian belief

More than half of all Germans feel that they belong to a church, a fact which shows that the Christian faith is a really important foundation for our society. Nevertheless many people no longer share this faith. Many of the tips for living together that we at German Guides (Deutschlandbegleiter) recommend are also found in the Bible. For this reason we would like to give you a brief overview of the Christian faith.

Christians believe in one loving and all-powerful God. He created the whole universe, including us, and he made us in his very own image. Since God created us in order to have a loving relationship with us, he also made us to be free creatures. He wants us to speak to him and to relate to him on his terms, but he lets us decide whether we want to relate to him or not.

People have misused the freedom God created us with to rebel against him, though. That is the reason we have been separated from God. This separation, caused by our rebellion, is what Christians call sin. It destroys the relationship between God and mankind.

Escaping the separation from God

But because God loves us, his creation, he sent his son Jesus into the world to fix our broken relationship and allow us to return to God and have peace with him. The symbol of this repaired relationship is the cross. When Christians kneel in front of a cross, they're not praying to it, but rather showing that they treasure God's forgiveness.

So, the cross is a symbol of God's forgiveness. It reminds us that he loves us and longs for us to return to him. We know that God loves us and wants to fix our broken relationship with him, because on the cross, Jesus offered his life as a payment for our rebellion.



The future in God's presence is certain

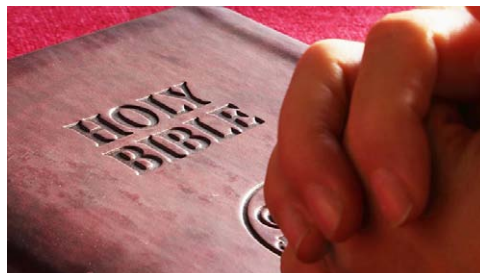
Being a Christian means that a person believes and trusts in this new relationship. Christians admit their sins and are sorry for them, and God forgives them. Our trust leads to a certainty—a certainty that we are saved and will have a future with God that will never end. God promises us this future! We can't and don't want to contradict God.

As Christians we no longer need to be afraid that God will punish us. We have the firm hope that after our physical death we will enter into heaven.



God's promises—promises that are written in the Bible—are the special gift he gives to those who believe. The Bible is Christians' holy book. It is the foundation of the Christian faith, because it teaches us who God is.

Christians believe that the Holy Scriptures are inspired by God and that they tell the whole truth about him. The Bible is our final authority, in questions both of faith and of practical life. Because it was written down by humans, one sometimes hears accusations that it could have become corrupted or changed, but Christians believe that God himself takes care that his Word, the Bible, reaches people without getting mixed-up. Christians believe in one God who has many characteristics—he is all-powerful, he is the father, and he is love.



One God

By the way, Christians do not actually believe in three gods, as some people wrongly assume. We believe in one and only one God, who appears in three different forms: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This "trinity" is similar to a cube, which has six sides but is still one object. Mary is not involved in the divine trinity in any way. God did not have a sexual relationship with her.

If you would like to know more about our Christian faith, speak to Christians in your area. At our website you'll find a list of churches that you can contact. Or, simply ask the person who pointed you in our direction.



The Reformation **– Martin Luther and the world's most powerful message**

The Reformation shows just how radically people can change themselves and their environments when they open themselves up to God. After all, 500 years ago on 31 October 1517, a monk called Dr. Martin Luther radically impacted Germany and Europe.

Luther actually only wanted to discuss what needed to be changed or reformed in his Church. But the discussion had a much bigger impact than he expected – and his ideas are still shaping the way people think today. A new Church emerged as well. To remind us of these events, Reformation Day – 31 October 2017 – was a public holiday in all of Germany.



Luther's problem with the Church

In Luther's day, the Christian Church claimed your sins could be forgiven by paying a certain amount of money, a process known as indulgence. This made Luther really mad because in his experience he had really struggled with the sense he could never get right with God. It didn't matter what he did or forced himself to do, he could not work for or simply buy redemption from his guilt.



He found the solution to this problem in the Bible – in chapter five of Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Since we are justified by faith, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." That means that a person can only be saved and live with God in eternal life if Jesus serves as their advocate before God. For Luther it became perfectly clear that Jesus Christ had paid off the guilt or, as Christians say, sin that separates us humans from God.

That is why we humans can come to God – but only by God's grace. All we have to do is turn to Jesus and believe that he gives us this forgiveness from sin, i.e. have faith in him. The basis for this is the Christian Bible, in which we can read a lot about Jesus. The Christian term for this is gospel, which means good news. Luther's decisive insight can be summarised quite simply: Only the Bible, only by faith, only by grace, only through Jesus Christ.



The Bible in German

Luther translated the Bible into understandable German so that every German speaker was able to read and understand it. Some German translations of the Bible existed before his, but nearly all the Bibles in use were in Latin. Church services were also held in Latin, a language few people understood. Luther thought it was important for people to be able to read and understand for themselves what God wants from them.

Luther's translation of the Bible made that possible: Every German speaker could make up their own mind about Jesus Christ and read the Bible, God's word, in their own language. Besides, Luther's Bible was to have a huge influence on the development of the German language as such.



Impact of the Reformation

The Reformation not only rediscovered the basics of the Christian faith; it also paved the way for the Germany we know today. People can obtain information and form their own opinion. The foundations of the 18th-century Enlightenment in Europe can also be seen in the Reformation. This made free speech and social freedoms possible. And incidentally, other religions are also thinking about initiating their own "reformation", e.g. by translating sacred books so that every believer can read and form their own opinion about them.

A new Church emerged in the course of the Reformation. This was never Luther's intention but the result is that there are now two main Christian Churches in Germany: the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. Over the past 500 years, rather a lot has happened in this respect as well. In the course of time, the Protestant Church itself seemed to be in need of a new "reformation" and various free churches or communities within the Protestant Church were consequently set up. That is why there is such a broad variety of Christian Churches in Germany today.

In Germany around half of the Christians are Protestants and half Catholic. The Reformation in Germany also had a huge impact on the rest of Europe, particularly in the countries of Northern Europe – Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark – which had their own Lutheran Reformation.



Halloween

A very different festival has now become a firm feature of Reformation Day on 31 October: Halloween. It has its roots in the USA and is essentially a complete contradiction of what the Reformation stands for. Whereas what mattered to Luther was that people are given a good new life, Halloween is all about evil spirits. Pumpkins are hollowed out, children dress up and go round ringing doorbells to ask for sweets. Nowadays, lots of schools and nurseries celebrate Halloween. For more details of this festivity, see this link (in German): www.derweg.org/feste/kultur/halloween-2/



Freedom and rules

Europe—the so called “Christian West”—has a common history. Its culture developed over centuries from a foundation of common beliefs. One of these is a belief in Jesus Christ, based upon the Bible. Though many people in Europe and in Germany no longer share in a wholehearted belief in Jesus, their behaviour patterns, and many conventions of daily life, can be traced back to this foundation.



One aspect of this foundation is freedom. Jesus has always left people free to choose whether they will follow him or not. God loves us in a way that makes each person immeasurably valuable. Therefore every person is free, has equal rights, and receives the same worth. Many of these human freedoms are secured by the law in Germany. Everyone can hold his or her own opinion and enjoys freedom of religion expression. The press is independent of state intervention. The courts are subject to enacted legislation, not to the whims of civic officials.

Personal freedom remains extremely important in Germany. People can express their individuality and lead their lives as they see fit. However, this vast personal freedom does have limits. One individual's freedom should not be to another's disadvantage.

People who follow the rules are well-respected

In Germany, many of these limitations are put into laws. For example, there are rules about when you can and cannot listen to loud music in your flat. These rules guarantee people the freedom to sleep at certain times without being disturbed. So it is usual that no loud work (like in construction or manufacturing) is allowed between 10 at night and 7 in the morning, and between 1 and 3 in the afternoon. The same is true all day for Sundays and holidays.



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Even if this sounds peculiar: Laws can facilitate freedom. In Germany it is normal to obey the laws, even when nobody is looking. So, for example, both drivers and pedestrians wait at a red traffic light, and people throw their trash into trash bins. People who abide by the laws of the land are highly esteemed in Germany. Such citizens are well-respected and considered very trustworthy.



Trust and honesty

The topic of trust is really important. In Europe and in Germany people want to be able to trust each other, even outside their extended family or clan. It might take a long time for a person to earn this trust by his or her behaviour. The same is true among friends. Therefore it is extremely important to always be honest. People don't want to be deceived. It is better to politely tell the truth, even if you think that the other person won't like to hear it. Being honest is the way to create trust, which is the foundation for friendship, as well as for other types of relationships. By telling the truth you demonstrate your dependability in daily life, in personal commitments and in business affairs.

Openness as a sign of respect

Part of being honest is the German tendency to say „No“ directly, when, and only when, it is earnestly meant. For example, in reply to a social invitation, an answer of „no“ doesn't mean that the person wants to be more urgently pressed to accept. It also doesn't mean that he doesn't respect you or doesn't like you. It just demonstrates his individual freedom and his sincerity in your relationship. Maybe the invited person simply has a previous engagement—which in Germany is a very legitimate reason for saying „no“ to an invitation.



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In the same way, if you initially refuse a social invitation out of politeness, the host extending the invitation will probably simply accept what you say and not repeat the invitation. The best rule of thumb: Only say „No“ when that is what you really mean. And if you do not intend to keep an appointment, for whatever reason, by all means say so truthfully from the start.



Social equality and greeting customs

In Germany an individual is usually more important than a social group, something which many newcomers from other cultures have to learn to understand. Individual freedom and equal rights for all are highly prized. Though according to the Bible every person is not identical, each one has equal value. In Germany, as well as all across Europe, all people are viewed as having equal human rights, whether man or woman, light or dark skinned, regardless of their cultural or religious background. This belief is the reason for our openness to foreigners—our culture of political hospitality is based on the fact that in God's view, every foreigner is valued just as much as every local inhabitant.

Equal rights for men and women

Men and women are equal in legal terms. Fifty years ago this was not completely the case and even today hasn't been implemented in every aspect of society.

Individual freedom for a woman—as well as for a man—includes the freedom to dress as she desires. If some women wear clothes that expose more skin than others, that doesn't necessarily imply they are inviting sexual advances. Also, it is considered impolite to stare at a stranger, even at a woman attired in shorts and a midriff top, or wearing a mini-skirt.



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Men and women are greeted in the same manner. When greeting a mixed group, to be polite a man will extend a greeting to the woman first and then to the man, in order to honour the woman. You usually look briefly at the eyes of the person you are greeting, a gesture which does not signal a desire for more intimate relations between a man and a woman.



Punctuality and appointments

During your initial months in Germany you might have a number of appointments at various government offices. Punctuality—being on time—is thus an important topic. Your punctuality will demonstrate that you value and respect your conversation partner. Should you anticipate being 5 or 10 minutes later than planned, it is highly recommendable to ring up on the telephone to inform the other person about your delay. If you arrive late, others easily perceive that gesture as impolite, since no one likes to have to wait.

If you arrive too late for a job interview, you might not be received at all. At any rate, your tardiness will not be viewed positively. Lack of punctuality to appointments at work will probably diminish your chances of professional advancement. Arriving too late too often might even lead to your dismissal.

Being punctual especially for public appointments

This applies not only to your public and professional life, but also to social invitations. It shows great respect to your hosts when you arrive on time. Indeed in public life, a time schedule is often viewed as more important than the person involved. So a conversation you are having might be cut short, because the person you are talking with has another appointment on his schedule. If this happens, it is neither impolite nor a sign that he doesn't like you. It is just so that the next person on the schedule can be given the same chance you were given.

For this reason, any forms for an appointment should be accurately filled out in advance. It is also a good idea to inform the other person what you would like to discuss at the beginning of your conversation. That way you can directly approach the issue in question together, a method that will be mutually satisfactory to both of you.



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Separating rubbish in Germany

You will probably have noticed the different coloured rubbish bins in Germany—at railway stations, in front of houses, and even on paths in the woods. Germans think it's important that rubbish isn't simply thrown away in the countryside, in public places, in the street or in front gardens.

That's why people put a lot of effort into disposing of waste properly or recycling some of it. Recycled waste—paper, plastic, glass, etc.—is used to produce new products such as newsprint, flower pots or bottles. Recycling reduces the number of waste dumps, saves raw materials and means that less waste is burned. Put simply, separating different kinds of waste and recycling are good for the environment.



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Different waste bins

In Germany waste is collected in different kinds of bins. Every house has its own bins. The paper bins mostly have a blue lid and packaging is put into a yellow bag or a bin with a yellow lid. Bio-degradable rubbish like kitchen waste or flowers are disposed of in the bio bin, which mostly has a brown or green lid.

You have to pay a deposit on most glass or plastic bottles you buy in Germany. You get back the deposit when you take the bottle back to a shop, the idea being to stop people from simply throwing them away. In supermarkets there's often a machine for returning these bottles. Germans collect other kinds of glass at home before taking the empties to glass recycling containers. Throwing glass into these containers makes a lot of noise so you should only do that during the daytime or in the early evening.

Other kinds of waste for which there is no special bin end up in the bin with the black lid. But since the lid colours sometimes vary from region to region, even native Germans sometimes have to ask in cases of doubt.



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Separating rubbish saves money

Initially, it takes a bit of effort to remember which kind of rubbish goes into which bin. But if you separate your rubbish and protect the environment in this way, you will definitely gain the respect of native Germans! For this reason, the Deutschland-Begleiter.de team would recommend that you find out more about how to separate waste correctly in the place where you live. You can either contact your local waste disposal organisation (which might be a bit complicated) or simply ask one of your neighbours. Alternatively, you could ask the person who told you about Deutschland-Begleiter.de. Separating the different kinds of waste may well save you money as well. In some parts of Germany residual rubbish in the black bin is weighed, and the heavier the rubbish, the higher the rubbish collection fee. Waste paper and packaging are normally collected free of charge.

Responsibility for our planet

By the way, Germany's waste separation habits are linked to the country's Christian roots. Christians are commissioned to "preserve creation" because it is a gift from God. This divine command has certainly left its mark on our society.

Even though many people in Germany try to protect the environment without referring to God and the Bible, the roots of these actions can be seen in our responsibility towards God.

After all, as the Bible says (in Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 115:16), the Earth belongs to God. We human beings should value, look after and preserve it. We should pass on to coming generations the good things we have received from God.



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Incidentally, there are some useful websites that explain in many languages what kind of waste goes into which bin:

www.abfallwirtschaft-heidenheim.de/internet/inhalt/inhalt.php?seite=184

www.mettmann.de/abfallberatung/infoshop.php



Saving resources

Maybe you've already noticed that Germans invest a lot of time and money in protecting the environment. That has now become an integral part of their everyday life, and indeed part of German culture. And that's why it's important to us at Deutschland-Begleiter.de to tell you about a few key aspects of this whole topic.

The resources we are talking about are mainly raw materials such as coal, gas, water, etc. On the one hand, these resources are finite; on the other hand, you can save a lot of money by using these resources as responsibly and sparingly as possible.

People who use resources sparingly are acting in the interest of their children and grandchildren, who have the right to live on a planet that's still worth living on. This aspect ties in with Germany's and Europe's Christian roots: God has entrusted this planet to us humans, and we should act responsibly towards it. Besides, the Bible says that we should share things with those who have less than we do. And you can only share things if you look after what you own carefully and responsibly. That's why we recommend that you save resources wherever possible. If you do that, you will gain the respect of people here in Germany.



Saving resources: electricity and heating

Lots of ideas for saving electricity are simple, logical and probably what you're doing already. For example, it is always a good idea to turn off a light when you don't need it.

Using a kettle to boil water instead of boiling it in a pan on the stove consumes less electricity. And when cooking on an electric stove, it's good to choose a ring that's the same size as the pot or pan. Cooking with the lid on also saves energy. With most electric stoves you can turn off the ring at least three minutes before the end of the prescribed cooking time and the residual heat from the ring will complete the cooking process. Another way of saving electricity is to remove your charger from the socket when you're not charging your smartphone, and to turn off your TV set at night rather than leaving it in standby mode.



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We also recommend saving on heating. Of course you shouldn't feel cold in your flat or room but sometimes it makes more sense to put on a warm pullover and slippers rather than turning up the heating. Why not ask somebody how your heating system works? Some radiators regulate the temperature automatically. And you can always turn down the radiator when you leave the house for a few hours.



Especially in winter, the air in your room can get stuffy and damp if you don't open the windows from time to time. But it's better to open the window(s) properly a few times a day for a couple of minutes than to have them slightly open all the time. But don't forget to turn off the radiator when you open the windows wide and turn it on again when you've closed them.

Saving resources: water and chemicals

If possible, it's better to wait until you have a full washing machine load before doing your washing. The same is true of the dishwasher. Try to avoid running the tap for any length of time; wash the dishes by filling the sink with hot water. When you're cleaning your teeth or taking a shower, you can save water by only letting the water run for as long as you really need it. Detergents, washing powder, washing-up liquid, shower gel and the like can be used sparingly. That is not only good for the environment but saves you money as well.



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Food and other tips

Food is also a finite resource. Here, there's no need to be unnecessarily frugal because in Germany everybody can have enough to eat—something we are very thankful for! But may we suggest that you only buy as much as you really need. Your local supermarket will be selling everything you need next week as well. And if possible, try not to throw away food.

If you want to learn more about saving resources, why not call in at one of Germany's many Consumer Advice Centres: it's known as a Verbraucherzentrale in German. Or talk to the person who told you about Deutschland-Begleiter.de.



The family as a pillar of society

Wherever people live together, there are families. In all countries and cultures the family is the most important pillar of society. Members of a family are there to help each other. Parents look after their children, siblings grow up together, and there are other relations like grandparents, uncles, aunts or cousins.

The family in Germany

When people talk about the family in Germany, they usually mean the core family consisting of a father, mother and children. Even if there is a good relationship with grandparents, they don't normally live in the same household. The strength of the relationships to other relations is dependent on the family in question. The trend to smaller and smaller families began in Germany in the 19th century with the onset of the industrial revolution. More and more families now live in small flats in towns and cities, being financially independent from their relatives.



In Germany the family is given particular protection, for example through Section 6 of the Basic Law. The particular status awarded to the family has its roots in the biblical view of marriage and the family. According to the Bible, marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and God himself "invented" marriage.

Families are changing

Besides the traditional view of family as a group composed of mother, father and children, 'family' is increasingly being defined in Germany as a cohabiting union in which various generations are responsible for one another, i.e. so-called patchwork families, single parents or same-sex couples who bring in children from previous relationships.

Many of these modern forms of cohabitation are not in line with what the Bible says about how people should live together. But even if we feel that certain forms of 'family' are unusual or not good, it is important to respect people with different convictions. That is a key aspect of the freedom democracy in Germany offers.



Challenges for the family

Even though most people in Germany long for a happy marriage and a family, it is by no means certain that this will always happen. Many marriages unfortunately fail and people live together without being married. You often hear Germans talking about “partners for a specific period in life”, i.e. temporary relationships. As a result of this lack of commitment, there are children who suffer from their parents’ divorce and single parents who find life hard too.

The family should be a place of comfort and security. But for this to happen, there must be mutual respect and regard for the needs of other family members. Where this is not the case, conflicts can emerge that endanger a family. If such conflicts become violent, those responsible will feel the weight of the law in Germany where violence between man and wife and within a family is forbidden and punishable by law. In some cases, friends or neighbours inform the authorities about such violence.



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How do families live in Germany?

Most people in Germany live in a small family or single household. Many Germans dream of owning their own house. In rural areas it is not uncommon for several generations of the same family to live under one roof.

In many families both parents work. That is partly due to the fact that a higher joint income improves the standard of living. But in many cases families need that second income to make ends meet. In Germany it is not only common but actually prescribed by law that a man has to help out in the household, e.g in washing the dishes, vacuum-cleaning, taking out the waste or doing other jobs.



©Volodymyr Vorona, 123rf.de

As most spouses in Germany have a very close and intimate relationship, they most want to talk to each other about all kinds of things. A spouse is more important than one’s own siblings or parents. This perspective on marriage is based on the Bible, in which it says that a man will leave his father and mother to become one with a woman and to create a new family that is not dependent on the respective parents. However, the latter should still be honoured and respected.



Life expectancy in Germany has risen in recent decades, i.e. people are getting older and older. The outcome is more and more elderly people needing care. Many children or other relatives take on the task of caring for parents at home. Other elderly people are looked after in old people's homes.

This is an important alternative if no close relations exist or a person cannot be cared for at home. From a legal and biblical perspective, parents are responsible for their children and children for their parents. At different stages in life they take on responsibility for each other.

How do people bring up children in Germany?

One important goal of parents in Germany is to bring up their children to be independent. Girls and boys are equally valuable in Germany. Parents look for the best possible educational opportunities for their children of either sex, and both girls and boys enjoy the same rights and opportunities.

Parents in Germany mostly treat their children with love and respect. In this country the physical or psychological punishment of children is forbidden by law.

Parents often support the school's teachings by committing time and energy to help their children with their homework, for example. And they allow their children to take part in activities offered by sports clubs, music societies or Christian churches. This is where children are not only supported in their development in specific fields; they also enjoy playing or doing other things with children of similar age and in this way expand their social skills. All the above-mentioned groups are glad to accept children from other countries, irrespective of their religious affiliations.





Sport as a leisure activity

If you play a team sport, you'll have fun without having to talk much. Some just kick a ball around on a field, others sit there and cheer. Sport connects people of all ages, sexes and backgrounds. But one thing unites them all: striving for a common goal and celebrating success. That's how friendships develop. You share life, get to know other people, support, show consideration and encourage each other.



If you play sports, you make friends

Sport is an easy way to get to know people from the area you live in. You learn how they live, what they think and gradually learn their language. In addition, playing sport with other people is good for your body, mind and soul. This gives you the chance to do something meaningful in your everyday life, and the regular training sessions and games help you structure your week.



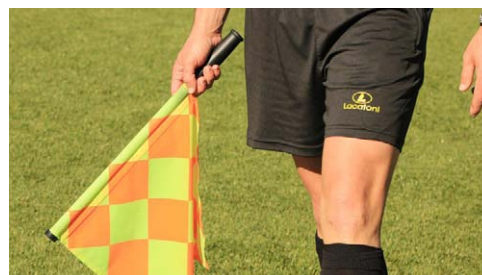
But at sport you also learn things about yourself. You inevitably experience your own limits, both physically and as a team, and grow beyond yourself. Once you've overcome such hurdles, you'll enjoy more self-esteem and greater satisfaction.

Sport gets you on in life

Regular sport can be helpful in finding a job. Employers are mostly looking for people who are determined and persistent in their work. If an employer hears that you have been spending your time regularly keeping fit and doing something sensible, this may positively influence your job chances.

Contact with locals at sports clubs may also prove helpful in finding a job, as they may know which company has vacancies, or may be able to refer you to other contacts.

By the way: In sport, as in life in general, certain rules apply. We recommend you get to know and respect them because they are important for the cohesion of the sporting community. Fairness, good cooperation and respect are fundamental. In addition to the rules for a particular sport, there are also general rules, e.g. indoor shoes must be worn in a gym.





Assuming responsibility in society

In sport you have the chance to improve both your physical and interpersonal skills. If you want to get more involved, you can work to obtain a trainer's certificate, which entitles you to train children and adults in your sports club. In this way, you can positively influence your surroundings and give something back to society.



Sport naturally also helps locals to make contact with you. Some locals will be unsure how to meet foreigners in a relaxed manner and communicate with them. Sporting activities therefore offer opportunities for both sides. Cultural exchange can take place if both sides bring in their background and culture in good faith and treat the other's way of life with curiosity and respect.

Sport in Germany

Almost every kind of sport is possible in Germany, with men and women, young and old, fit and less fit people all involved. The health aspect often plays a key role for adults, whereas children mainly want to have fun.

here are countless sporting opportunities. Many people in Germany go cycling or jogging or go to the gym on their own. Once a contract has been concluded, you can take advantage of various options there. There are relatively cheap possibilities (approx. €20/month), but also very expensive, specialist programs, e.g. for bodybuilding or health training.



Football, gymnastics and tennis are among the most popular club sports. But swimming, judo and badminton are also popular. Some sports clubs, especially in smaller towns, have only limited capacities for top athletes. That is why they often only accept people who are already experienced in the respective sport.

For most people the best thing in these clubs is one of the "sports for everyone". There you can have fun and enjoy physical exercise without committing yourself to sport at the highest level.

In many places in Germany churches offer sports where everyone who wants to take part is welcome. These sports groups are usually free of charge and often offer additional opportunities for joint activities.



Recognising trauma and seeking help

Anyone who has to flee their home country for fear of their life has experienced terrible things. Often they have seen things of unbelievable cruelty. It's hard or even impossible to talk about such things – especially when you've lost friends or relatives and fled to a foreign country with a foreign culture. But it is important to come to terms with the experience of fleeing and to recognize if you are traumatized and how to deal with such traumas.



A trauma is a real injury, like a broken leg or a gaping wound. You just can't see this injury, even if it was caused by violence. Our body tries to deal with the injury and has various ways and means of doing so. Thus, a trauma often affects every part of us: our body, thinking, feelings and social behaviour.

Could I be traumatised or somebody I know is?

After a traumatic experience, the characteristics and symptoms can be very varied. Lack of concentration is one indication. This can get so bad that you can no longer cope with your everyday life. Some trauma sufferers can no longer perceive things properly, feel numb or are very anxious. Often your perception of things changes and you feel things differently than before. Other symptoms include fatigue, disturbed sleep, nightmares, panic attacks or hyperactivity.



This is often accompanied by physical discomfort: Trauma sufferers complain of tensed-up muscles, headaches, abdominal pain or nausea. Yet in many cases no doctor can detect a disease. There may also be changes in behaviour. Adults, for example, may start drinking alcohol or taking drugs in excessive quantities. Children may suffer from attention deficit syndrome or refuse to talk. Another important indication is indicating that you want to commit suicide. In this case, help can only come from hospital treatment.



What you notice about yourself is that you're hardly enjoying life any more, that you have self-doubts, and perhaps even think you're going crazy. If this is the case, you should be aware that it's not you who are crazy but what has happened to you. As a result of these symptoms, some people withdraw and have less contact with other people, even friends or family.



If you notice that you or anybody else is suffering from some of these symptoms, you should definitely go and talk to somebody. Trauma symptoms may first appear after several weeks or months. That often happens when you calm down. Traumatized people typically experience the event being relived suddenly and without warning. This is uncontrollable.

The sudden reoccurrence of the traumatic experience may be triggered by smells, colours, images or feelings associated with the traumatic event – so-called triggers, re-living the event through flashbacks. You feel you're really back in the traumatic situation and your response is again fear and panic.

Can a traumatised person be healed?

If you notice any symptoms of trauma in yourself or other people, you should always seek professional help. This is especially true if the symptoms do not go away, even after some time. Our body has great self-healing powers and many traumatized people become healthy again over time. In many cases the reactions or their severity and the problems themselves subside in the first days and weeks.



However, if this is not the case or the symptoms get more severe, a doctor should be consulted. It is important that nobody needs to be ashamed that the body has reacted so violently to such bad things. That is not a sign of weakness! But you should certainly talk to someone you trust.

No matter what has happened to a traumatized person, he or she is not to blame. A traumatic experience will probably never be completely forgotten and it will always leave a scar, but a trauma or a post-traumatic stress disorder can be properly treated today. There is every reason to be hopeful of recovery.



What does help?

As mentioned above, it does help, as an initial step, to confide in somebody. But traumatised people can also do something themselves. For example, it helps to keep stress levels low and practice self-soothing techniques. And even if it is difficult, it makes sense to avoid the smells, colours, images or feelings that trigger memories of the trauma.



Instead, a traumatised person should do things they enjoy and do well. It helps to develop the skills you enjoy, e.g. at school or during your vocational training course. Other factors can also counteract the trauma, including fellowship and time spent in the company of friends, relatives and parents, optimistic future prospects and routines – all things you can plan and look forward to in your daily life.

It is also good to have someone who listens to and stands up for a traumatised person. There is also evidence that faith in God can help overcome a trauma. If you would like more information, please contact a church in your area or the person who gave you the reference to Deutschland-Begleiter.de.

Culture shock and interaction with others

It is important to take the signs of trauma seriously, talk about them and seek help. But having one or two of the symptoms mentioned here is not always a sign of trauma. Sometimes it can also be a so-called culture shock, i.e. the stress of getting along with foreign people in a foreign country. This culture shock often occurs in the first months of being abroad.





Opportunities opening up in the corona crisis

Corona – a virus rules the world. Nobody is safe from a virus that is dominating the world of politics and business, thoughts and conversations – and indeed all our dealings with one another. How can we think and act in the corona crisis? Is this crisis opening up some new opportunities? We would like to pass on some thoughts based on the Christian faith and the Christian view of humanity. Both have shaped German culture for centuries. And to a significant extent, they still form the foundations of how we interact with one another in Germany – even though a great many people no longer share this faith.



Christian answers to the corona crisis

The Christian belief that every life is of equal value is shared by almost everybody in Germany. This is actually reflected in the current corona crisis, e.g. in the frequently seen solidarity shown to the old and weak, but also to small firms and the like.

For people who know and trust the God of the Bible and try to live their lives by His will, the results may be as described below:



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First, they don't get into a panic about the virus because they know their lives are in God's hands. Even if they die of Covid-19, they know they are safe in Jesus Christ – for all eternity. Because that is what He promised. A Christian's faith in God is a sure foundation – in life, death, and beyond.

Second, they take due care and avoid endangering other people by keeping to the government's corona rules and guidelines. In other words, they do not meet or celebrate in groups or risk unnecessary physical contact to non-family members just because they think nothing can happen to them. But so as not to completely do without (virtual) fellowship with other Christians many Christian churches are holding online services.

Third, Christians do not just look after themselves, panic-buying food or toilet rolls, with the result that other people face empty shelves. On the contrary, they look to see if they can do the shopping for old or infirm neighbours or help them in other everyday matters.



How valuable are human beings in the time of corona?

In Germany every human being is of equal value – whether man or woman, child or adult, poor or rich. What they are worth cannot be measured in money terms. Everybody is to receive the same care and medical treatment. That is why politicians in Germany consider medical necessities to be more significant than economic ones.



How powerful will we let the virus be?

Corona is the Latin word for a victor's crown. The German word Krone is derived from it. As Christians, we will never allow a virus to rule over our thoughts and lives. This rule is God's alone. Only He deserves the crown as the symbol of His rule.

Opportunities in the crisis

In the final analysis, the corona crisis opens up opportunities for all of us – a chance to refocus on our dealings with one another (despite 2 m social distancing), to help one another, and to talk and pray together. After all, that's possible by phone or social media. You can use the time you may have to spend at home to slow down and ask yourself the important questions in life: Where have I really come from, and what am I living for?

The corona virus as a life-giving impulse

Why not see this crisis as God knocking on your door and giving you a chance for a radical change of direction in your life. Corona can be the impulse you need you to turn to the living God and bring your life in order with God. That way, the corona virus will prove be a life-giving impulse for you, because you will then enjoy eternal life – with precisely this God in heaven. This is our heart-felt wish for you. We will be glad to answer any questions you may have: Deutschland-Begleiter.de/questions



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If you have any questions about how to stop this virus spreading further and protect yourself and others from infection, this video may prove helpful: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8e_KEWgPM

God bless!



Christmas in Germany

The celebration of Christmas is deeply rooted in German society. For many people, it is the most important time of year, full of traditions and cultural history. Starting in the fall, shops sell special baked goods like gingerbread, cookies and “stollen” in preparation for the Christmas season. Many towns organize a Christmas market. Lights, special figures, and Christmas trees help create a festive spirit in people’s homes. Friends and colleagues get together for Christmas parties at work and in their clubs, as well as privately.



Presents and a perfect mood

Christmas reminds us that God reached out to humanity in the person of Jesus in an absolutely unique way. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, God’s greatest gift to the world.

That is the reason Christians exchange gifts with each other at Christmas. Sadly, for many in Germany, the exchange of gifts has become more important than the celebration of Jesus’ birth. During Advent, which is what the weeks leading up to Christmas are called, people can get caught up in a shopping frenzy. They search for the perfect present, trying to create the perfect atmosphere for the perfect celebration. Many Germans see Christmas as an annual festival of love, of family and of peace in the world, sometimes forgetting its Christian roots.

Church services and the Christmas story

On Christmas Eve, the 24th of December, church services are well attended. Even many who may not have a deeply personal belief in God traditionally go to church on Christmas Eve. These church services are open to the public, and everyone can come. Guests from other cultures and religions are welcome, too. In many of the services on Christmas Eve the children act out the story of Jesus’ birth in a short theatrical sketch, called a Nativity Play:

The parents of Jesus had to travel a long way from their home to take part in a census. In Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary only found a barn to stay in, so Jesus was born in the most humble circumstances. Simple shepherds were the first people to hear about the birth of the saviour, from the angels of God. Later, a star lead a group of wise men to the place where Jesus—the son of Mary—was staying.



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The figures of people and animals you may see in churches and some homes also display this story. They are called Nativity Scenes.

A special season

Christmas services are characterized by a special festive atmosphere, through music, liturgical texts and lighting. It's worth going to one of these Christmas Eve services just to get a sense of the Christmas spirit. Don't be surprised or offended, though, if people leave the service quickly without the usual after-service socializing. They are going home to celebrate with their families, as is customary.



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During the Christmas holiday, the 25th and 26th of December, Germany slows down. Almost all the shops are closed and people withdraw into their family circles. Christmas is usually celebrated with just the closest family members; grown children visit their parents and in-laws. Therefore it is neither impolite nor unusual, for friends and acquaintances not to be invited to such a family gathering. Christmas celebration just with the immediate family is a long-standing tradition.

Another holiday, New Year's Eve, is celebrated shortly after Christmas on the 31st of December, often with loud fireworks. It doesn't actually have anything to do with Christmas, but rather marks the transition into the next calendar year.

We hope that during the Christmas season you get a glimpse into the true meaning of Christmas, and that you might be able to celebrate as well. We wish all of you a very merry and blessed Christmas!



Easter—a major festival in Germany

In February, shops in Germany start selling chocolate eggs and bunnies. They are the first signs of the approach of Easter, a festival that is deeply rooted in Western culture. Easter is not on a specific date each year, but instead varies by several weeks from year to year. Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the spring full moon, which in many years will be at the end of March or in early April.



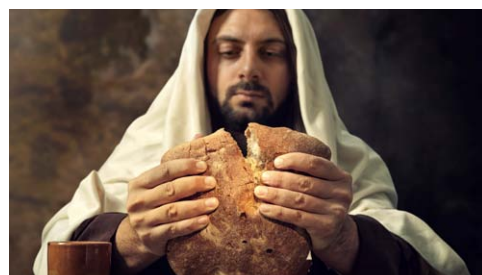
For Christians, the time from the Friday before Easter Sunday, to the Monday after it, is one of the most important festivals of the whole year. In Germany, “Good Friday” and “Easter Monday” are public holidays on which shops stay closed. Those chocolate Easter eggs and bunnies are symbols of new life and resurrection from the dead. Nature is waking up at the same time, and spring is coming—an ideal time for a resurrection festival!

Traditions in Germany

Many Easter traditions have Christian roots, but their Christian meaning has been lost for many people over the years. For example, the 50 days before Easter were originally a time of fasting, in which Christians prepared themselves to celebrate Easter. This period is known as Lent. Some Christians go without food completely, others just stop eating certain foods or consuming specific things in order to concentrate on what is most important for them—Jesus Christ. And even though sweets, chocolates, candies, and other tempting things are still on shops’ shelves during Lent, fasting is still common before Easter.

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday

On the Thursday before Easter, which is known as Maundy Thursday, Christians remember the last meal Jesus ate with his friends. The Bible gives us detailed accounts of the Last Supper, as it is generally known. During the Last Supper, Jesus spoke about the suffering he was about to go through and then shared bread and wine with them. He did this so that his friends and, later, all Christians, could remember him in the bread and wine and have fellowship with him. That same evening, Jesus was arrested.



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Jesus was interrogated, tortured and then sentenced to death. Christians remember Jesus’ horrific death on the cross, also known as the crucifixion, on what is called “Good Friday”. Guilt and sin separate all of us from God. That’s what the Bible, God’s Word, teaches. God is good, holy, and perfect. That’s why no one can stand before him – each person has sinned at some time in his or her life.



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Sin leads to death and to an eternal separation from God. We humans cannot change this situation by our own power. Even the ancient story of Abraham's son pointed ahead to the coming Saviour. Just as Abraham's son was about to die, God sent a sacrifice to be killed in his place—so that the son could live.

The Bible makes it clear that the blood of animals cannot save us from God's judgement and punishment. A pure and perfect sacrifice is needed. But the only completely sinless and pure being is God himself. So only God himself can remove our sin and save us. Many passages in the Bible announced the coming of a saviour.

This saviour, known as the messiah, is more than just a human being. God himself came into the world in the form of a messiah. 750 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote that the messiah would sacrifice himself for our guilt like a sacrificial lamb. When the prophet John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he shouted: "This is God's sacrificial lamb who will take away the sins of the world!"

Jesus clears the way to God

Through his death on the cross, Jesus took away the sins of those who believe in him; through his resurrection, he cleared the way to God the Father. The Bible reports that the curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem was torn in two when Jesus died. This represents the fact that, because of Jesus Christ, a person can now live in a personal relationship with God the Father. In Jesus, we are sure to be saved and one day live forever with God.



©Kevin Carden, 123rf.de

The events of Good Friday were no accident, nor were they a victory for the forces of evil. God had planned them a long time in advance, as you can see when you read Psalm 22 of the prophet David, Chapter 53 of the prophet Isaiah, or in Chapter 10 of the Gospel of John.

You might have heard that Judas was crucified, and not Jesus. That is not proven by any historical record, and it contradicts the statements of Jesus, who announced and predicted his death several times.

And if you've heard that Christians worship the cross, that's not true at all. Christians worship and pray to God and God alone.

Easter Sunday – the resurrection of the body

On Easter Sunday, Christians remember that Jesus rose from the dead. Christians believe that Jesus didn't remain dead, but rather that he defeated death, just as he had predicted many times. One example of that is in Chapter 12 of the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus compares his death and resurrection with Jonah, who spent three days in the stomach of a large fish.



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Some people have doubt that Jesus really died and rose again from the dead. Yet, in the holy Bible, many of God's prophets announced the messiah's coming, suffering, death and resurrection. These prophecies were fulfilled in the life of Jesus. There are also many indications of these events outside of the Bible, for example in Roman historical records. In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection are historically proven facts.

A scholar by the name of Josh McDowell once wanted to disprove Christianity. But as a result of his own research, he became a Christian himself and wrote the results of his research in a book entitled "Evidence That Demands a Verdict".

The powerful people of Jesus' time were themselves afraid that he might rise from the dead. That is why they had his grave officially sealed and guarded. Since they could no longer produce his dead body, Jesus must really have risen physically from the dead. If that was not the case, it would be pointless to believe in Jesus.

Jesus was seen by many people after his resurrection, and he was even seen to eat some fish. Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve closest friends (or disciples), didn't believe at first that Jesus had risen from the dead. Only when he saw Jesus and could actually touch his wounds did he, too, believe.

On Easter Sunday, many Christians around the world testify to their firm belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection, and their joy over it, with a special greeting and response: "The Lord has risen." – "He has risen indeed."

Additional information

If you'd like to learn more about Easter, perhaps you could visit a special exhibit called an "Easter Garden". (www.sinnenpark.de/index.php/aktuelle-ausstellungen.html – website in German). There you can see the story of Jesus from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday presented in a way that you can see and experience for yourself. And you are certainly welcome to visit a nearby church service on Easter Sunday!



Many churches organise Easter walks or have breakfast together. Guests are always welcome at these events, even if they aren't Christians. So why not visit one of these services, perhaps with the person who told you about Deutschland-Begleiter.de? You can discover where to find people in your area who will help you understand more about the Christian faith in the Contacts section of the website Deutschland-Begleiter.de.

One more thing: if you notice children searching for candy in a yard or home, that too is part of the celebration of Easter. Hiding sweets or little presents so that children can look for them is simply one of the nicest Easter traditions in Germany!





Ascension Day —Jesus is Received Back into Heaven

Another celebration follows forty days after Easter, which Christians call “Ascension Day”. It commemorates that Jesus didn’t remain on the earth after his physical resurrection from the grave. Right in front of his disciples, he returned to his father, going directly to heaven. The apostle Luke describes this scene in the 24th chapter of his account of the gospel:

“When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” (Luke 24:50-51, NIV)



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From that point forward, Jesus is no longer visibly present among humans. He is now together with God the Father in heaven. From there, he will return to the earth at the end of time in a visible human form. Yet since his ascension, Jesus is accessible to every person through prayer.

Jesus has not left his followers on earth alone. He sends them the Holy Spirit, through whom he can be present with every believer. Christians celebrate the coming of and the presence of the Holy Spirit during another festival called “Pentecost”.

Ascension Day: A Forgotten Holiday

Today, many people don’t know what Ascension Day is or how it began. In Germany, it’s still an official holiday. However, many have changed it’s purpose to “Father’s Day”, a day on which some men make outings accompanied by a lot of heavy drinking.

In earlier times, there were various traditions kept on this day, especially among farmers. They especially prayed for a good harvest. On Ascension Day, most of the meals were prepared from some kind of poultry or fowl, such as stuffed dove—or “flying meat”, as it was called. Bread baked in the form of a bird reminded everyone that this day was somehow different.



Christians hold worship services on Ascension Day, quite often outside in public venues. Visitors are always welcome to attend such services, whether they are Christians or not.



Pentecost in Germany

Fifty days after Easter Sunday, on what is called “Pentecost”, Christians remember the day when the Holy Spirit came to the earth as Jesus had promised. Since Pentecost is so firmly rooted in Germany’s Christian traditions, the following Monday—or Whit Monday as it is known in Britain—is also a public holiday on which all shops are closed.

The biblical background

The origin of Pentecost comes from an event recorded in the New Testament. In Jerusalem, a cultural centre of the Roman Empire, lots of people had come together to celebrate a feast. Jesus’ friends were meeting in a house, when something strange and wonderful happened. The Bible reports it like this:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

(Acts 2:2-4, NIV)

The many people who had come to Jerusalem were extremely surprised and shouted: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” (Acts 2:6-8)



Jean II Restout: „Pentecost“

After Pentecost the good news about Jesus spread throughout the world

It was at Pentecost that Christians first received the Holy Spirit. That really meant this: God was now living in them. The small frightened group that had been Jesus’ disciples were now talking in different languages about God’s great deeds. From then on, everyone in the world was to hear about God’s great love for them.

The good news spread rapidly. Lots of people turned their backs on their old way of life. With God, they could let go of their guilt. Now they wanted to begin living a new life. They met regularly in order to learn more about Jesus. They celebrated together and were like one big family. In other words, Pentecost is like the ‘birthday’ of the worldwide Christian community, or Church. And, right from the beginning, it was made up of people of different nationalities.



Pentecost today

Pentecost has been celebrated in the Christian church since the third century, always on the 50th day after Easter Sunday. The Greek word for 50 is pentecoste, which is where the English name for the festival comes from. In Germany, Pentecost is a two-day holiday—Whit Sunday and Whit Monday, as they say in Britain. Churches often hold open-air services on these two days. People come together to celebrate outdoors, because summer is on its way.

In contrast to Christmas or Easter there are only few traditions at Pentecost. Churches are often decorated with young birch twigs and people like to go for a walk or hike. In some parts of Germany they light large bonfires. In rural areas, Pentecost was when the cattle were led out to the fields for the first time after the long winter. There would often be a specially decorated “Pentecost ox” leading the cattle herd into the hills. Some of these traditions have already died out or become rare. Yet as a celebration of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost is still a festival of hope and joy, and we need more of both in our world today!



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Public holidays in Germany

The idea behind public holidays in Germany is to remember special events. Some annual holidays are mainly of Christian origin, e.g. Easter, Ascension Day or Pentecost. These religious public holidays are explained in additional chapters of Deutschland-Begleiter.de. Germany also established other public holidays such as German Unity Day or May 1 to remember events of political or social significance.



Most shops are shut on public holidays and a great many people have the day off work. In this way, public holidays are an additional feature of the work-rest pattern predetermined by Sunday as a day of rest, a feature that has its roots in the Christian faith that has shaped Germany and indeed Europe as a whole.

German Unity Day

After the Second World War new political divisions appeared in Europe, with the so-called "Cold War" between the communist countries of Eastern Europe, dominated by the Soviet Union, and those of Western Europe led by the USA. As a result of these divisions, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the western-oriented Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) were founded in 1949. The old capital city, Berlin, was divided as well.

The faster-growing prosperity and greater political freedoms enjoyed in democratically governed West Germany induced many East Germans to flee to the West. As a result, East Germany built a wall with barbed wire and a death strip to literally divide Germany and Berlin in two. This made the division of Germany a seemingly permanent feature.

For decades this looked like a permanent division. In East Germany the communist ideology claimed the place previously taken by religion. It was mainly Christians who were oppressed, even though the Christian faith was firmly anchored in Germany's cultural traditions. Nevertheless, Christians in East Germany stayed true to their faith, even in times of oppression by the state. That was one reason why the main places where resistance emerged were churches. The peace prayers in St. Nicolas church in Leipzig and many other towns and cities of East Germany became a key feature of the resistance, which ultimately led to the fall of the Wall in 1989.

Horst Sindermann, an East German politician, had this to say later: "We were prepared for everything – except candles and prayers." After the fall of the Wall, people soon began calling for Germany to be reunited, which then took place on 3 October 1990. Each year on this day, German Unity Day recalls this special event and Christian thanksgiving services are held.



©Berliner Senat, Fotograf unbekannt



1 May

1 May is celebrated as Labour Day in many countries. Its origins go back to 1886 and the general strike by workers in the USA who were protesting against their bad working conditions. They had to work 12-hour shifts for little money and were demanding an 8-hour day. This general strike lasted several days and was accompanied by violent riots. A bomb went off and several workers and policemen lost their lives.

Since 1890 this event has also been remembered in Europe, with strikes and demonstrations in many big cities as workers fought for better working conditions – in many cases against the concerted efforts of the bosses and governments. A powerful labour movement grew up in Germany, too, and with the support of trade unions demonstrations against exploitation and oppression took place on 1 May. That is why since the early 20th century, Mayday has been an official public holiday where most people have the day off work.

Nowadays, not so many people join in these Mayday demonstrations because, for most people, the working conditions have improved dramatically. This public holiday is more likely to be an occasion for a day out with the family.

In rural areas of Germany there is still a tradition on 1 May of erecting a maypole, usually the long trunk of a birch or pine tree decorated with colourful ribbons and often accompanied in the villages by festivities with brass bands and “dancing into May”.



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New Year's Eve and New Year's Day

Even though New Year's Eve and New Year's Day come soon after Christmas Day, they are not Christian holidays. In earlier times, people thought they had to drive away the evil spirits at the beginning of a new year. This is one German tradition that has nothing to do with the Christian faith. Fireworks and bangers are set off to drive away these evil spirits in a custom still practised today.

Nowadays, New Year's Eve is usually celebrated with family or friends to welcome in the new year. People have meals together, play games or just have a nice relaxing time. Some people prefer wild parties, often with too much alcohol. Lots of people formulate new year's resolutions, celebrate with a glass of sparkling wine at midnight and wish each other all the best for the coming year. Christians often wish each other God's blessings too.



Fireworks and bangers are only allowed to be set off on New Year's Eve amongst family or friends, i.e. as a private celebration. The afternoon of New Year's Eve and the whole of New Year's Day are public holidays where most people don't have to work and shops stay shut.



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.



Carnival in Germany

“Helau” and “Alaaf!” – these strange shouts are typically heard during Germany’s carnival season, which usually occurs in February. It’s the time when Germans dress up in colourful costumes and process through the streets. In some cities like Cologne, Düsseldorf or Mainz these processions are massive affairs.



Where does carnival come from?

Even if carnival has church connections in some parts of Germany, it is not a Christian festival and has some roots in ancient heathen customs. There are big regional differences, not just in the names given to carnival (Fasching, Fastnacht or Karneval) but also in the traditions it is based on.

How do Germans celebrate carnival?

In Germany they celebrate carnival in nurseries and schools as well. The children dress up as princesses, pirates or Superman, with their personal hero often the role model. Whereas carnival for children is just a harmless dressing-up spectacle, adults’ carnival parties and the goings-on in pubs can often be rather debauched.



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Lots of people think that during the carnival season they can do things they would never normally do. This is encouraged by the anonymity provided by the costumes and the quantities of alcohol that are drunk. The consequences can be immoral behaviour that may wreck relationships or even marriages. Such behaviour is clearly the opposite of what Christian values stand for.

In some regions such as the Rhineland or southwest Germany you see street processions featuring carnival societies. Everybody is welcome to watch these processions from the side of the street, but here too, you may well see wild behaviour fuelled by excessive alcohol. But frequently carnival is nothing but a colourful spectacle and a festival for the whole town with confetti and sweets for the children.



How should you behave in the carnival season?

The costume parties in nurseries and schools are mostly harmless. You can generally let your children take part without any misgivings. But at Deutschland-Begleiter.de we would advise caution at carnival parties – don’t feel you have to go beyond your normal limits just for politeness sake. For example, there is no need to drink any more than you want, or even drink at all. Under normal circumstances a “no” will be accepted and respected.

For more information (in German): <https://www.derweg.org/feste/kultur/karneval2-2/>



Integration—a key component of a successful life in Germany

In Germany integration is an important but controversial issue. Deutschland-Begleiter.de can only provide you with some advice, because there is no simple set of instructions on how to become successfully integrated in German society. Whether or not you end up feeling at home in Germany depends to a large degree on how curious you are about this country and the people who live here. It is important to get to know Germany and its culture.

What integration means cannot be explained in a few words. Basically integration is about people coming to a new and (for them) strange country with the clear intention of living there permanently. It's about feeling you belong in a country and becoming an accepted part of society. But it also involves the people in a country accepting and appreciating newcomers as an integral part of their culture.



Whether or not integration succeeds depends on many factors, some of which you can influence yourself. For a start, you must want to become part of German society with its specific lifestyle, language and culture. But that's not all. People living in Germany have to be ready to welcome you as refugees or immigrants, and invite you to become an integral part of society. It isn't easy for either side; both have to work together to achieve successful integration.

So how can integration succeed?

For all these reasons it is important for you to try and understand Germany better. If you make a real effort to become integrated, people here will respond positively and respect your efforts. But the theoretical side of integration, for example taking an integration course, is only one side of the coin. The other side is what happens in practice. We recommend you try to engage with Germans in conversation. Maybe there's an initiative or a Christian church in your area that offers specific activities for refugees. Or you could ask the person who told you about Deutschland-Begleiter.de.



Our most important recommendation is that you and your whole family learn German as quickly as possible. So why not join a football club, or another type of club, to get to know the people in your neighbourhood better?

You could also try to get some work experience at a firm in your area. But don't wait until somebody makes you an offer. The best idea is to look for opportunities yourself to get to know the area you live in better. Immigrants who've already lived for a while in Germany say the same.



Why is integration so important?

Integration has become an increasingly important issue in recent months because Germany is taking in so many refugees, and doesn't just see them as guests. After all, quite a lot of the refugees will end up living in Germany for a long time, and maybe even permanently. That's why major social and financial efforts are needed to find a good common path to integration.



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People in Germany are glad to help, as has been evident in the heartfelt welcome given to most refugees. But if people get the feeling they are being exploited, their willingness to help can easily change to rejection. There are people in Germany who don't want any refugees in this country. Some are afraid that there may be dishonest people or even criminals among the refugees who have arrived—people who only want to exploit German hospitality and don't want to become integrated here.

Integration and Germany's Christian roots

If you gradually become part of German society, if you stay curious and find out how people live in Germany, you will be able to find a job, become independent and see your living standards rise. That won't happen within a few days, weeks or even months, but people in Germany will respect and support your efforts.



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One aspect of Germany's Christian roots is the desire to play an active role in society and to help the weak. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city" is the kind of advice you find in the Bible (in the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 7). Germany is well known all over the world for the quality of the products it manufactures, its strong economy and its innovative people. One of the reasons is that for many centuries, German society was shaped by Christian values such as honesty, commitment and reliability. These can be a special blessing for you!

But you, too, can become a blessing for this country. After all, you will enrich Germany with your culture. But integration can only succeed if you do not insist on maintaining all of your traditions. That's why we recommend that you find out how German society works, so you can more easily become part of it.



Education and schooling

Education is very important in Germany because good qualifications increase a person's chances of living a good life. That is why schooling is mostly free of charge in Germany. The government wants all girls and boys to be given a good start in life. To make this possible schooling is compulsory up to the age of 16.

This idea of compulsory schooling may sound negative to some. But it is actually a very positive thing because it enables every child – irrespective of how much the parents earn – to complete schooling. In Germany education is the responsibility of the federal states and although each state has its own peculiarities, the school systems are quite similar throughout the country. That enables us to explain the most important features here.

Nursery

From the age of three lots of children attend nursery until they are six. However, attendance is not compulsory. It is good if a child can stay for a long time in the familiar environment of the family. But nursery attendance can also be important, e.g. to get to know friends of similar age or learn German.

That is why we recommend you think about registering your child at a nursery if little or no German is spoken in your home.

When children start school and cannot speak much German, they are at a disadvantage because they cannot properly understand the lessons. At nursery children learn in a playful way the initial skills they need for school. For the under-threes there are crèches in many places.



Primary and secondary schools

In Germany all children from the age of six attend school. For the first four years they go to primary school, where they learn to read, write and do basic maths. Towards the end of their time at primary school the teachers and the parents jointly decide which secondary school the child should attend. Depending on their interests and school achievement up to then, a child can attend a grammar school or some form of middle school. In some federal states the secondary school may be a comprehensive school that mixes the traditional forms of German schooling.

The various schools differ in the number of years the pupils take to reach a leaving certificate and in the subsequent job prospects. Some pupils leave school after nine years (i.e. five years at secondary school) with a so-called Hauptschule qualification, others after ten (i.e. six years at secondary school) with a Realschule qualification. Both these school-leaving certificates qualify pupils to apply for an apprenticeship, but the more demanding apprenticeships mainly expect ten years of schooling.



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At Germany's grammar schools pupils can take their A-levels/baccalaureat (Abitur) after 12 or 13 years. At tertiary colleges the school-leaving qualification is known as a vocational baccalaureate (Fachabitur). With an Abitur school-leaving certificate a pupil can apply to study at a university and with a Fachabitur qualification for a place at a polytechnic.



The German educational system is extremely diverse, with the result that for each and every child the right educational pathway can be found, i.e. one that suits his or her interests and capabilities.

Upbringing and behaviour at school

It is important to differentiate between education and upbringing. In Germany it is the parents who are basically responsible for the upbringing of their children. Parents play a key role in a child's development, whereas a school is only responsible for a child's education.

Every pupil in Germany goes to school with some basic 'equipment': pens/pencils and paper/notebooks in a satchel. At school the pupils are provided with learning materials, e.g. books or printouts. If the children are given homework, they are expected to do it in the afternoon or evening and bring their completed homework back to school, often the next day. With younger children an adult will normally help with the homework, whereas older children normally do it on their own.



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In Germany teachers are not allowed to hit children – corporal punishment is absolutely forbidden! If a child misbehaves, they will be warned about their behaviour. If it is a case of serious or repeated misbehaviour, the pupil may well be told to do additional tasks or a letter will be sent to the parents. If all this does not help, a pupil may well be expelled from the school. In such cases, the parents have to look for another school that will accept the child.

Vocational training

Any pupil who has at least achieved a Hauptschule certificate after nine years of schooling can apply for a vocational training course (aka apprenticeship). This normally involves working several days a week at a firm and attending a vocational training college on one or two days. Anybody who has obtained a German vocational training qualification will have a very high standing in other countries, as these courses give students a lot of vocationally relevant know-how combined with on-the-job work experience.

There are many different kinds of university courses in Germany. One interesting option are the so-called dual courses where work experience at a firm is combined with university studies. Professions such as doctors or teachers can only be studied at university. An excellent knowledge of German and a good or very good baccalaureate (Abitur) are the prerequisites for studying at a university in Germany.



Lifelong learning is very important in Germany. Even people who have a job are expected to attend further training courses to increase their skills and stay up to date. In many occupations it is also possible to attend courses to become a master craftsman or evening classes to study for the baccalaureate. In addition, open universities offer correspondence courses so people can improve their career chances.