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Bahn voyage

Riding the rails made simple in Germany

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

McClatchy-Tribune News Service March 16, 2014



LUDWIGSLUST, Germany —

With my passport safely stuffed into a zipper pocket and the plane descending for an on-time arrival, there was nothing to be wound up about. But I couldn't help checking my watch as I climbed into a taxi headed for Berlin's train station, the Hauptbahnhof, literally "main railroad yard."

The driver wove in and out of the traffic for what seemed like hours — 38 minutes on the meter — until we pulled up at the entrance. Another minute and I was through the door and standing at the ticket counter, German rail pass in hand.

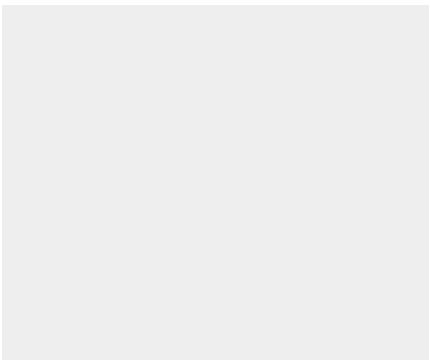
"American?" asked the ticket agent, with a smile, time-stamping my pass. "California," I answered, earning another, bigger smile. "Hollywood! Welcome to Berlin," he said, handing me a boarding ticket for the Dresden-bound train and pointing toward the upper level and the restaurants. "The train goes in 90 minutes. If you're hungry, there's time enough to eat."

It couldn't have been easier. No gas-swilling car, no rental agreement fine print, no overpriced parking lots. Just me, my DeutscheBahn rail pass, a carry-on bag and a suitcase. The man in the bookstore had been right. In less than 24 hours I was born again, as free as a hobo in an empty baggage car.

Three months earlier I'd been browsing through my neighborhood bookstore when a bearded stranger in his 30s stopped me. "Excuse me, ma'am. I see you're looking at the Germany guide book," he said, glancing at the cover. "Are you visiting Germany this summer? Have you thought about taking the train? It's a lot easier than driving," he told me with a knowing wink.

Had I been planning to drive? I hadn't given it much thought. Now I wondered if my rental-car habit was merely a minor aberration or the need to be in charge, the freedom to take the left fork instead of the right fork and to stop whenever and wherever. For me and most Americans, driving is second nature, a rite of passage especially true where I live, Los Angeles, infamous for its uber car culture.

For better or worse, Angelenos and cars have been twinned since the 1940s, when the Automobile Club and the oil companies saddled up to promote their favorite hobby horse: cars, the gas to fuel them and the highways they depended on. The campaign was so successful that it delivered a fatal smackdown to the network of electric-powered street cars, the city's first and last far-seeing public transportation.



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By that time, Americans were routinely traveling by train, criss-crossing Woody Guthrie's prairies from east to west in comfort. You could board the San Francisco-bound train in New York or Chicago and expect springy window seats, clean sheets, good food, an observation car and a world of scenery. When highways snaked out into every corner of North America, the passenger trains became collateral damage.

But not in Europe, where rail service grew, supplying essential transportation both between cities and in town. In Germany, where distances are shorter and cities and towns are close together, traveling by rail isn't just fast and convenient, but affordable, clean and nearly as comfortable — well, almost, but not quite — as the rear seat in a limousine.

If I'd been planning to explore Germany's hinterlands, wandering through farm fields and forests and over mountain passes, a car would have been a better choice. But I'd come to Germany for the sights and sounds of the city. I wanted to meet people, listen to music, tour urban neighborhoods and visit cathedrals. There were restaurants to be sampled, architecture to be evaluated and beer halls anxious to serve me a brew. I also wanted to linger unhurried in my favorite museums, without a tour guide telling me it was time to go.

The solution was to create a loop trip, with a stay in each city, a kind of connect-the-dots itinerary that included hotels in convenient locations, each one reasonably close to a rail station. There would be places and occasions where I had to take a taxi. But the cost and convenience far outweighed the cost of the rental, the fuel and the inevitable parking fees.

Just where do DeutscheBahn trains go? Everywhere. The system counts 76,473 kilometers (47,518 miles) of track, and where the train goes, there are stations. Nor will you be stranded if you're staying at a suburban hotel or rural inn. Unless you're headed to a mountain top, you'll find street cars and buses crossing routes nearby. With a map and your hotel address in hand, you'll never have to resort to the Hansel-and-Gretel cake-crumbs method of direction finding.

If your itinerary involves a train ride with more than one leg, say from Berlin to Leipzig, and then to Stuttgart, you'll have to change trains. To keep each leg as short as possible and to save on train fares, look at a map of railway routes (there's a good one at raileurope.com/europe-trains/deutsche-bahn), and plan a route that minimizes backtracking.

If you want to use a rail pass, you must buy it online before leaving home. The options vary immensely; allot time to sort through the myriad possibilities, prices, benefits and discounts. An array of tickets covers every situation: first or second class, local or express (the ICE trains), night or day, adult or youth, single traveler or family, or any combination thereof. Some passes attach other benefits handy for city touring, such as transportation on local street cars and buses. Prices also vary by the season.

With your rail pass in your wallet, you'll be set. Walk or take a taxi to the station and check your train and track on the departures screen. Your ticket will show your designated car. First-class cars are usually marked with a "1." Second class cars display a "2." If the cars are marked another way — it happens — show the conductor your ticket and he/she will direct you to the right car. If you're late and rushing up as the train is about to leave, jump in anywhere the conductor still holds the door open. You can walk to your car from anywhere inside the train.

Once you've climbed aboard, find your seat, stow your luggage in the rack and settle in to read that guidebook or to snack on a meal from the train's food service counter (coffee, drinks, and hot and cold sandwiches). Better yet, sit back to watch the scenery glide by and be thankful someone else is driving.

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