



011104 Is it actually possible to have too much Lebkuchen?

Wow, it has been almost three weeks since I was in Germany and here I am finally writing about it. This issue of the weekly email is a little unusual in that the travel that I am about to describe involved visiting someone who is on this distribution list and who therefore can read what I write about my visit. My companions in Norway knew that I write these emails since they saw me scribbling down notes on route, but they probably will never read them. Michele on the other hand was eager to read what I thought of her home and so I felt under a bit of pressure. This email has taken so long because it became a sort of collaboration with Michele as we pieced together my impression of Germany with her experiences into a brief description. Who am I kidding, when am I ever brief? Anyway, here it is.

I left from Bergen, Norway on Thursday via plane to Frankfurt, Germany where I traveled to visit my friend, Michele. I arrived at the Bergen airport 2 hours early, expecting a lot of airport security, but the airport is so small that I had no problems at all. If you ever get the chance to fly Braathens Airlines (the Norwegian Airline), I highly recommend it. The flight to Amsterdam where I would change planes was only 1 ½ hours long, but we had a huge meal during which they gave us wine with our meal, more drinks before hand and cognac for our coffee. The Norwegians know how to do things. But, I was surprised that we had knives with our meals.

I was looking forward to my layover in Amsterdam because of brie sandwiches and tomato soup. I had a layover during my trip to India a few years ago and my mouth still waters at the memory of how good the sandwiches and soup were at restaurant at the airport. I looked for the restaurant during my layover, but alas, it was no more. Instead there was a small casino and a brothel (I am actually not joking.)

Michele is a friend of mine from back in the days when I lived in St. Louis. We met at the Catholic Student Center a few months before I left for India, back in 1997. Michele moved to Germany a few years ago and she is now a manager in the Frankfurt office of Arthur Andersen. She was very supportive during the difficult months of reverse culture shock after I returned from China as well as during my move to Denmark, so it was great to finally get see her after such a long time.

Being a manager, the first time that I saw her in the Frankfurt airport, she was wandering through the terminal, apparently talking to herself. No, it was one of those hands free earpieces / microphones that people have for the mobiles. I have seen them in use quite often, but I have not quite gotten used to seeing a person standing or walking and apparently having a lively conversation with themselves. The microphone would be Michele's constant friend since it is illegal to use your mobile without one while driving.

The whole nature of my visit with Michele was different from that during my stay in Norway. In Norway, I was eager to see the country and to be a tourist, but in Germany, I was content just to hang out and talk with Michele. So this email wont be as descriptive

about Germany, but more about my experiences. Besides, I had been in Germany and did the tourist thing back in 1988 during the cold war as an exchange from high school when I spent a week in the former West Berlin and a couple of other weeks in Bocholt during which time I traveled around the country. Besides, how much can one country have changed in only 13 years? :)

Michele lives on the top floor of an apartment building in a trendy part of Frankfurt. The street is lined with older buildings in a setting that Michele called "rustic". City rustic that is. But other than Michele's street, Frankfurt itself does not have a big tourist draw. It is a financial center and the skyline appeared to me as disjointed. (The old and the new. For the most part, where the bombs hit now stand the new buildings.) I was also struck by how untidy the streets were. Where was the typical German fastidiousness? But compared to the cities in Scandinavia which are immaculate, the clean German city paled. However, during my stay Michele and I would visit smaller cities outside of Frankfurt such as Wiesbaden (capital of Hessen) which is a beautiful little city with typical German architecture and attention to details.

I asked Michele to describe Frankfurt and after a moment she responded that it had a lot of foreigners. Frankfurt has the highest percentage of foreigners of any other city in Germany and so it is a big hodgepodge of people in transition rather than only a German city.

I also asked Michele to describe a bit more what it is like to work in Germany. Most people in Germany work 35 to 37 hours per week, or roughly 7 ½ hours per day. Some work more and some work less and there are different schedules all depending on the contract that the person is working under. In her role, Michele works more than 40 hours, but she is managing projects for the company. To make up for the long work day that the Germans must suffer under, they get 6 weeks of vacation. Kind of makes you want to move to Germany, doesn't it?

What will cause you to rethink the move to Germany is the taxes. Michele writes:

"Oh my gosh! Taxes are outrageous here! We are on a graduate scale - so the more you earn the more you pay - seems fair, huh? Well, I pay about 50% of my income to the German system - part is income tax, part social security, part pension (which I get back when I leave the country, provided I fill out all the proper forms, etc.), part goes to help rebuild former East Germany (this was only suppose to last a year or two - when did the Wall come down - I think it has been more than a few years - but more rebuilding is still needed, but what they are building in Berlin, I have to question some of their judgments in the use of my money!).

Another fun tax is church tax. When you first complete the tax form, you fill in your "konfession" - I thought this meant my confession, but it meant religious affiliation. This is 10% of the income tax (which is 30% of your gross salary) - GONE - no questions asked. In order to have them stop this, you have to go to the courthouse, fill out more forms, pay money and then wait until the next pay period for them to stop withholding -

they also send a letter to the church and you get excommunicated! Most people start paying church tax just prior to having children if they want their children in the private schools. Most people just get married at the courthouse - some in the church - but then they have to be paying church tax. When asked about this, they responded, "if we don't pay church tax, how will the church survive?" I responded, "with weekly donations from those attending - free will offering." “

According to Michele, the work environment in Germany is very different from that in the US. She told me a story about a German woman from Arthur Andersen who was going to be transferred to a US office. Michele sat her down to explain to her about the sexual harassment rules in the US because there are very few in Germany. Michele had to explain to her that in the US, the woman would have to stop her practice of giving male coworkers backrubs when they got stressed with work. The woman was dumfounded by this news. Different cultures.

One of the first things that we did after buying my return ticket home was to go to the grocery store. Little did I know that Michele had a proverbial feast in mind when we grabbed her little cart for groceries. The grocery store was exciting to go to for a variety of reasons. First of all, everything was so inexpensive after Norway! Plus, there were just rows of chocolate, candy and Lebkuchen! I love lebkuchen which is basically gingerbread with a frosting on it. I bought just a lot of Marks worth of lebkuchen. Michele bought all sorts of cheeses, wine, olives, bratwurst and sauerkraut for what would be the best meals that I have had in a long time. As I went up and down the rows and as our carts grew in weight, I became under the impression that so many of the German foods were regular foods made to be like candy. There were candy flavored yogurt, candy this and candy that. We would finish our shopping under the realization that we had bought so much that we would have to steal a shopping cart to get it all home. Fortunately, the store was close to Michele's apartment. Unfortunately, I was the one who was responsible for stealing the cart and trying to navigate it along the cobblestone street and back.

I ate a lot of sausage in Germany, which I guess is of little surprise. We would go out to restaurants with friends of Michele on Friday and feast on German foods such as the sausage and beer. Michele showed me a lot of Frankfurt by wandering all over the underground stations as she searched for our train or wandering up little streets as she searched for our destination. One of the highlights of the trip was when Michele picked up her boyfriend's 12 cylinder BMW 750 from the dealer so that she could put it in its garage. I got to follow her along the Autobahn while driving Michele's Mercedes thought the parts with no speed limits. But, one of the more nerve-wracking parts of the trip was when I lost sight of Michele in traffic after having stalled said Mercedes at a traffic light. Oops. We eventually were led back together and everything turned out. Whew.

I really enjoyed just getting to spend hours talking with Michele about all sorts of things. My new friends in Copenhagen are awesome and I enjoy talking with them, but being able to talk with an old friend with whom I have many shared experiences and beliefs

was really nice. For example, in Copenhagen, I have no real faith community. I even had an awesome church in Yantai, but not one in Copenhagen, which is something that I miss. We spent hours in conversation while walking along the streets of Wiesbaden or in coffee shops or while I ate lebkuchen.

Sunday, the date of my departure came very quickly and Michele took me to the airport early in the morning so that I could catch my plane back to Copenhagen. Security was a bit tighter at Frankfurt which is Europe's busiest airport. But, soon I was on an SAS flight back to home.

I needed to leave early so that I could have the day to wash clothes and get my affairs in order after having been gone for a week. Especially so since on Monday I caught an EARLY train to visit Grundfos which is the company which is sponsoring me here at DTU. I had to be up at 4AM to have time to get cleaned up before catching the subway to the central train station where I would catch a train to Bjerringbro on Jutland, about 4 hours from Copenhagen. If you look at a map of Denmark, it is mostly islands. Copenhagen is on the island of Zealand and is connected to Jutland by a series of bridges. My school had bought me the first class ticket (psyche!) and so I settled back and slept most of the way. But think about it this way; in four hours in a train, I had just about crossed the entire country (not including Greenland, of course).

The Grundfos makes electric pumps for a variety of applications. It is located in a small town where it was founded after World War 2 when the founder recognized a shortage of pumps. People began to buy his pumps in volume and the company began to mass produce. The company is really interesting in that it has a neat mission and outlook on its employees. The man who I first met with took me through their company museum and through the new training center that they have created. The company is really into their employees and apparently does a lot for them whether it be the recreations facilities, setting up workshops so that people can pursue hobbies such as wood work or working on their cars or hiring kids from prison so that they can have a 2nd chance at a productive life.

Grundfos is currently providing me with a stipend to live on which is tripled by the Danish government. In exchange, I agree to conduct my thesis research in an area that will be helpful to the company. The purpose of this meeting was just to get to know each other and to get a feel for what I want to work on and what projects they have in mind. The final decision will be a project that we both agree on. They seem to be very flexible in that I can work on pretty much anything that I want as long as it is helpful to their research into electric motor noise.

What was really weird was that one of the first things that they asked was if I knew Pete Wung who is a friend of mine from Emerson in St. Louis. They had met Pete at conferences in the past. Small world.

Anyway, the meeting went well and I managed to return back to Copenhagen in time to start a stressful week.

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