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German Culture and Customs — What Newcomers Should Know

A practical overview of German cultural peculiarities, holidays, everyday rules, and social conventions for new arrivals.

Deutsche Begriffe: Feiertage | Bräuche | Karneval | Weihnachten | Ostern | Sonntagsruhe | Pünktlichkeit

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Understanding Germany — More than Just Bureaucracy

When you move to Germany, you'll quickly discover: Beyond language and bureaucracy, there are many **cultural peculiarities** that shape daily life. Some are legally regulated (like Sonntagsruhe), others are unwritten rules (like punctuality). This article gives you a practical overview.

Feiertage in Germany

Germany has **9 national holidays** and depending on the federal state, **additional regional holidays**. On Feiertage, shops, offices, and most businesses are **closed**.

National Feiertage (2026)

Date	Feiertag	Explanation
January 1	Neujahr	New Year's Day
Movable (March/April)	Karfreitag	Good Friday — solemn holiday
Movable	Ostermontag	Easter Monday
May 1	Tag der Arbeit	Labor Day

Date	Feiertag	Explanation
Movable (May/June)	Christi Himmelfahrt	Ascension Day (40 days after Easter) — also "Father's Day"
Movable	Pfingstmontag	Whit Monday (50 days after Easter)
October 3	Tag der Deutschen Einheit	German Unity Day (reunification 1990)
December 25	1. Weihnachtsfeiertag	Christmas Day
December 26	2. Weihnachtsfeiertag	Second Day of Christmas

Important Regional Feiertage

Feiertag	Federal States	Date
Heilige Drei Könige	Bavaria, BW, Saxony-Anhalt	January 6
Fronleichnam	Bavaria, BW, Hesse, NRW, etc.	Movable (May/June)
Mariä Himmelfahrt	Bavaria (partly), Saarland	August 15
Reformationstag	Brandenburg, Saxony, SH, etc.	October 31
Allerheiligen	Bavaria, BW, NRW, Saarland, etc.	November 1
Buß- und Bettag	Saxony only	Movable (November)

Tip: Check the Feiertage for **your state** before planning vacation or scheduling appointments. Bavaria has up to **13 holidays**, Berlin only **10**.

Brückentage — The German Trick

When a Feiertag falls on a **Thursday** or **Tuesday**, many Germans take the Friday or Monday as a **Brückentag** (bridge day) off. This turns a single holiday into a **long weekend**. Plan ahead, as Brückentage are **highly sought after** by employers and quickly claimed.

Sonntagsruhe — The Quiet Day

Sonntagsruhe (Sunday rest) is legally anchored in Germany and deeply rooted in the culture. On Sunday, special rules apply:

What Is Forbidden on Sunday?

- **Shops** are closed (exceptions: gas stations, train stations, bakeries in the morning)
- **Loud work** like lawn mowing, drilling, hammering is prohibited
- **Loud music** and parties should be avoided
- **Glass recycling containers** cannot be used (noise)
- **Moving** and renovations are not allowed

What Can You Do on Sunday?

- **Take walks**, exercise, ride a bike
- **Eat out** at restaurants (gastronomy is open)
- **Shop** at gas stations and train station shops (limited selection)
- **Order online** (delivery starts Monday)

Important for neighbors: If you're too loud on Sunday, your neighbor can call the **police** or **municipal office**. Repeated violations can result in **fines**.

Verkaufsoffene Sonntage

On a few Sundays each year (usually 4–6), shops may **exceptionally open** — so-called **verkaufsoffene Sonntage** (open Sundays). These are set by municipalities and often combined with city festivals. Check your city's calendar.

Pünktlichkeit — The German Virtue

In Germany, **punctuality** is taken very seriously. This applies to both professional and private life:

In the Workplace

- Arrive **on time** or **5 minutes before** the scheduled time
- Delays are considered **unprofessional** and disrespectful
- If unavoidable delay occurs: **call immediately** and notify
- **Appointments** are binding — cancel in advance (at least 24 hours)

In Private Life

- If you're invited to dinner at **7 PM**, arrive at 7 PM — not 7:30 PM
- Arriving **too early** (more than 5 minutes) is also impolite — the host may not be ready yet

• **Doctor's appointments:** Arrive 10–15 minutes before your appointment (allow waiting time but be punctual)

Mülltrennung — Seriously

Germany has one of the **strictest waste separation systems** in the world. Garbage bins are color-coded:

Color	Contents
Yellow (Yellow bag/bin)	Packaging (plastic, cans, Tetra Pak)
Blue	Paper and cardboard
Brown/Green	Organic waste (food scraps, garden waste)
Black/Gray	Residual waste (everything that doesn't belong in other bins)
White/Green (Container)	Glass (sorted by color: white, green, brown)

Deposit System

For **disposable** and **reusable bottles** and cans, there is a **deposit system**:

• **Reusable bottles** (glass/plastic): 8–15 cents deposit

• **Disposable bottles** (plastic): 25 cents deposit

• **Cans:** 25 cents deposit

Bottles and cans with a deposit symbol can be returned at **deposit machines** in supermarkets.

Social Conventions

Greetings

• In **business context**: **Handshake** + "Guten Tag" + last name

• In **private context**: Handshake or hug (depending on acquaintance)

• **Duzen** (informal you) vs. **Siezen** (formal you): When in doubt, **use the formal you** until you're offered the informal "du"

• At work: **Higher-ranking** or **older** person offers the informal "du"

Neighborhood

• **Greet** your neighbors in the stairwell (a brief "hello" or "good day" suffices)

• Introduce yourself **in person** after moving in — it makes a good impression

• **Respect quiet hours**: 10 PM–6 AM (night quiet), 1–3 PM (afternoon quiet in many buildings)

• **Stairwell cleaning** (Kehrwoche): In many buildings, tenants take turns cleaning the stairwell

Invitations

• If invited to dinner, bring a **small gift** (wine, flowers, chocolate)

• **Remove shoes:** It's customary in most German households to remove shoes at the entrance

• **Punctuality:** See above — arrive at the agreed time

Important Festivals and Customs

Karneval (February/March)

• Celebrated especially large in **Cologne, Düsseldorf, Mainz** and surrounding areas

• **Weiberfastnacht** (Thursday): Women cut men's ties

• **Rosenmontag:** Large parades (carnival processions)

• In many companies, **no work** on Rosenmontag (depends on region)

• Costumes are welcome!

Ostern (March/April)

• **Karfreitag:** Solemn holiday — no loud music, no dance parties

• **Ostersonntag:** Easter egg hunts for children

• **Ostermontag:** Family visits and Easter brunch

• Many families travel during Easter — book vacation early

Weihnachten (December)

• From late November: **Christmas markets** in almost every city (mulled wine, gingerbread, crafts)

• **Nikolaustag** (December 6): Children put out boots and find small gifts in the morning

• **Heiligabend** (December 24): The most important day — gift-giving in the evening

• **December 25–26:** Family visits and festive meals

• Shops are closed from **noon on December 24** through **December 26**

Silvester / Neujahr

• **Fireworks** at midnight (private fireworks only allowed on Dec 31 and Jan 1)

• **"Dinner for One":** Short film shown on TV on New Year's Eve — a German tradition

• **Bleigießen** (today: Wachsgießen) — "predict" the future for fun

• Many cities organize **public celebrations** (e.g., at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin)

Everyday Etiquette — Dos and Don'ts

Do ✓

• **Greet** people in the elevator, stairwell, and when entering shops

• **Follow** traffic rules — even as a pedestrian (red light = stop!)

• **Reserve** a table at the restaurant, especially on weekends

• **Give a tip**: 5–10% at restaurants (round up or say "Stimmt so")

Don't ✗

• **Don't walk on the bike path** — cyclists take their right of way seriously

• **Don't show up to offices without an appointment** (almost everything requires a scheduled visit)

• **Don't make noise** at midday and after 10 PM

• **Don't talk about salary** — in Germany this is considered private and impolite