

TRAVEL

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Five reasons why you should forget your preconceptions about Germany

There's more to the country than industrial cities and dense cuisine – a one-time Germany sceptic reveals where to go this year



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Paul Sullivan

Destination expert

12 June 2024 1:00pm BST



The picturesque skyline of Cologne from the Rhine Credit: Getty

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I, too, was once a Germany sceptic. Who, after all, would want to travel to a country just as rainy as Britain, dotted with bleak, industrial cities, apparently possessing no mountains or beaches *à la* France or Italy, and with a cuisine full of sauerkraut and sausages that sounded heavier than a Second World War documentary?

Then there were the people. Quite aside from what we learnt about at school and via war documentaries, the reputation for intimidating seriousness and inherent arrogance was frankly chilling. It's all very well being an economic powerhouse with a proud intellectual culture – but what about the great and valued holiday tradition of, well, *having fun*?



Brits are often surprised by how beautiful Germany can be: a steam train climbs the Brocken mountain in the Harz national park Credit: Alamy

It was quite ironic, then, a few decades later, to find myself – significantly pre-empting the advice of *Grand Designs* presenter Kevin McCloud – living in Germany with a German partner and our German-born son. We spent our first couple of years living in Cologne and these were spent in a state of mild shock as I kept meeting Germans who were pleasant, well-mannered and, well, nice. Where were all the barking, angry, aggressive types from the movies? Even more perplexing was why were they always so complimentary towards the UK when certain parts of our population had evidently spent an inordinate amount of time hating on them?

Fifteen years and a lot of travel around Germany later and these old, culturally skewed perceptions are thankfully long gone. I now feel pleased and proud to live in a country that has so much to offer travellers, ranging from incredibly varied landscapes – including manifold beaches, magnificent mountains and fairytale forests – to historic towns and hip cities (many impressively regenerated from their former post-industrial slumber) and a vibrant culinary culture that easily rivals Britain's.

Furthermore, it feels obvious to me that the similarities between us Britons and the Germans more than outweigh our differences. Perhaps this should be no surprise given studies have shown that up to 30 per cent of white British DNA has German ancestry, thanks to the Angles, Saxons and Jutes that invaded England in the fifth century. English is a West Germanic language; the two countries – or Britain and Prussia, at least – fought side-by-side against Louis XIV and Napoleon; and the royal families intermarried to the point where Kaiser Wilhelm II's grandmother was our very own Queen Victoria. Even now, Brexit-related antipathies aside, we work together as members of Nato, the UN, the G7, G20 and more.



The medieval town of Quedlinburg in the Harz Mountains Credit: Getty

True, there are differences on a day-to-day level. Germans still take things more seriously than we do and tend to frown on our binge-drinking, loudness and lack of traffic-light etiquette. But they also adore our surreal sense of humour and tendency to be self-deprecating, just as we tend to be secretly impressed at their brutal honesty in dealing with awkward situations that we would simply die in. They may have no idea about making a decent cuppa but they can teach us a thing or two about baking bread and making beer.

From June 14, the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship will be held across the country, representing a golden opportunity to bury the hatchet a little more thoroughly and explore some German destinations beyond Berlin. What better way to ditch any remaining animosity and renew our ancient bonds than to watch some football and drink some beers together? Who knows, maybe our teams will even meet once more? Perhaps the Germans can accept our boisterous silliness if we can forgive their brow-furrowing seriousness?

Explore our guide on where to go in Germany below.

Discover Germany's top destinations:

The Black Forest

Beaches and islands

The Rhine

The Harz Mountains

The Bavarian Alps

Berlin

Munich

Dortmund

Stuttgart

Gelsenkirchen

Frankfurt

Hamburg

Düsseldorf

Cologne

Leipzig

Five corners of Germany to discover in 2024

The Black Forest



Leaping into Lake Titisee in the Black Forest Credit: Getty

Famed the world over for its fairytale forests (associated with the Brothers Grimm) and picturesque villages and towns (Freiburg, Baden-Baden, Triberg), Germany's Black Forest or *Schwarzwald* is one of the country's premier outdoor destinations. Popular since the 19th century, especially among the European nobility, it offers 18,000 miles of hiking trails – many of which can also be used for cycling and, during winter, cross-country skiing – as well as lakes such as the sparkling Titisee for boating, kayaking and windsurfing.

The many natural highlights include the Triberg waterfalls, the romantic Murg Valley inside the Black Forest National Park, and the scenic Wutach gorge, but the region also boasts first-class spas, top-notch museums and cultural treats throughout. The Festspielhaus concert hall in Baden-Baden is a must-visit for opera and ballet fans, Karlsruhe's Kunsthalle hosts masterpieces by Rubens and Rembrandt alongside German artists, and the Maulbronn Abbey – located close to the forest near Pforzheim – dates back to the 12th-century and enjoys Unesco World Heritage Site status. Designated trails include the Baden Wine Route, which celebrates its 70th birthday in 2024, and the Black Forest Scenic Route (*Schwarzwaldhochstrasse*), which runs from Freudenstadt to Baden-Baden, taking in the Vosges mountains along the way.

Black Forest Tours offers three-day/four-night hiking packages that start at €799pp and include stays in Black Forest towns, a driver and car, and an itinerary with off-the-beaten-path experiences to do on your own

Beaches and islands



Germany's many beaches include the upscale island of Sylt, off the Wadden Sea National Park in the North Sea Credit: Getty

Many visitors to Germany are surprised to discover that the country has an impressive 2,400-kilometre coastline that offers a vast array of beaches, rugged cliffs and a diverse range of islands. True, you'll have to make do with pine trees rather than palms but, with temperatures around 25°C during summer, you can certainly pack your sunscreen and swimwear. The coast spans both the Baltic and the North Sea and is studded all the way along with hotspots that seem mostly only known to Germans.

The upscale island of Sylt and the Baltic islands of Rügen and Usedom are especially popular with locals in summer but there are plenty of spots to also get away from it all, such as Hiddensee and Poel. The North Sea stretch is quieter and wilder and contains the Wadden Sea National Park and the East Frisian islands, several of which (such as Langeoog) are wonderfully secluded and car-free. If you want to retain some urban comforts, base yourself in one of the historic Hanseatic cities – Lübeck, Hamburg, Rostock, Wismar – all of which offer convenient access to the coast.

Several key UK airports fly to Hamburg (London, Manchester, Glasgow), from where you can catch a train to Westerland/Sylt in around four hours. Stay at Budersand; doubles from £420

The Rhine





Katz Castle on the Rhine Credit: Viking River Cruises

Around 800 miles long, the Rhine river is the second longest in western and central Europe (after the Danube) and a cruise along it is the best way to reveal its highlights. As well as passing by the medieval castles and fortresses,

tumbling vineyards and picturesque towns along the Rhine Gorge, ships usually stop at major cities such as Koblenz, Cologne and Mainz. All three are well worth visiting.

Cologne, of course, is famous for its soaring gothic cathedral, *kölsch* beer, museums, galleries and buzzy nightlife. Koblenz, one of the oldest cities in Germany, has an attractive Altstadt replete with cobbled streets, pretty squares and handsome landmarks such as the Münzplatz, the onion-domed fifth-century Liebfrauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) and the interactive Romanticum Museum. Mainz, established as a Roman military camp in 39 BC, serves today as the main trading centre for Rhine wines; it's also home to the splendid St. Martin's Cathedral, the beautifully baroque Electoral Palace and the Gutenberg Museum, where you can view an original 15th-century Gutenberg bible.

Saga Travel has a five-night river cruise through some of the key attractions along the Rhine, including a tour of Düsseldorf and the historic city of Koblenz. From £1,376 per person. Find more of the best Rhine cruises for 2024 in our guide.

The Harz Mountains



Sunrise at the Harz National Park Credit: Getty

Often referred to as “the heart of Germany”, the Harz region straddles several federal states: Lower Saxony to the north, Sachsen-Anhalt to the east, Thuringia to the south. As Germany’s northernmost highland area, it’s a popular hiking destination thanks to its mix of nature reserves – including the Harz National Park – and forested hills being threaded with almost 5,000 miles of well-signposted trails. Some of these are named after literary luminaries such as Goethe and Heinrich Heine, who loved the region, and range in distance and difficulty from short, scenic loops to the more intensive 60-mile Harz Witches’ Trail.

As well as walking, there’s downhill and cross-country pistes, sledding in winter, rock-climbing, and over 1,000 miles of mountain biking routes from cross-country to free-ride. Best of all, many of the mediaeval towns around the area that serve as bases – Goslar, Quedlinburg, Wernigerode – are as ridiculously quaint as they sound.

Rail Trail offers a train-powered seven-day tour through the jewels of the Harz region from £1,475pp

Bavarian Alps



View across the Bavarian Alps Credit: Marc Walter/Photovintage France

The Bavarian Alps – *Bayerische Alpen* in German – is actually a term for the collection of mountains, towns and lakes that form a natural border with Austria. Running west from Bavaria's southeastern corner to the Allgäu region near Lake Constance, the area offers a wealth of recreational possibilities, from skiing and snowboarding in winter to hiking and paragliding in summer, as well as spas and health retreats.



Fairytale architecture in Fischen, Bavaria Credit: 4Corners Images/Reinhard Schmid

Germany's tallest mountain, the Zugspitze, is here and accessible via a special railway line as well as by cable car if you're not keen on walking up it. The Berchtesgaden National Park is well worth exploring, as is the sparkling Königsee, Germany's highest (and third deepest) lake. Drivers and cyclists may want to consider the German Alpine Highway, which winds 450 kilometres through the mountains from Lindau to Schönau, passing many of the area's historic towns and magnificent castles.

Inntravel organises six-day walking holidays in the Bavarian Mountains from £1,515pp, excluding flights

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At a glance: The 10 host cities for Euro 2024

Berlin: best for hipsters



View of Berlin Cathedral from the Spree River in Berlin Credit: Sylvain Sonnet

The German capital is well known as the coolest city in Germany as well as for its endearing, world-weary “Schnauze”. There’s plenty to explore between games here, not least the endless array of cultural museums and art galleries, which span everything from the Unesco-heritage Museum Island to a Georg Grosz exhibition in a semi-hidden converted modernist petrol station in Schöneberg. Traces of the turbulent 20th century can be found at the Holocaust Memorial, the Topography of Terror and the former Stasi Prison Headquarters – or just hop breezily between all the fabulous beer gardens, cafés and bars, bearing in mind that famous Berlin nightlife mantra: “Don’t forget to go home”.

[See our guide to the perfect weekend in Berlin here.](#)

Munich: best for a warm welcome



There's a surprisingly Mediterranean air to Munich, even the area around the Frauenkirche and Neues Rathaus Credit: Getty

Munich gets a hard time from other German cities (especially Berlin) for being wealthy and conservative, as well as for its penchant for lederhosen and “oompah” folk music. While there’s certainly some truth in all those things, the Bavarian capital is striking to look at and capable of exuding a laid-back warmth and friendliness that’s lacking in other metropolises – especially Berlin. Its Mediterranean-esque flair is most apparent during summer, in its street-side cafés and bars as well as the sprawling and charming parks like the English Garden. It’s no slacker culturally either, thanks to world-class venues such as the Pinakothek der Moderne, the Alte Pinakothek and Kunsthalle Munich.

[See our guide to the perfect weekend in Munich here.](#)

Dortmund: best for industrial heritage



Including a cobbled old town and attractive arts and culture scene, Dortmund also hosts the country's largest football stadium Credit: Getty

Dortmund is known for its football team (Borussia Dortmund), top-notch beer (Dortmunder lager), and its industrial heritage – it's not called Steel City for nothing. Less famous is that its history harks back over 1,000 years and includes membership of the prestigious Hanseatic League. The city's attractive old town offers traditional cobbled streets and quaint houses but also some great spots to visit, including the Museum for Art and Cultural History and the gothic Petrikirche whose high altar dates back to the early 16th century. The city also serves as a stop-off on the region's Industrial Heritage Trail and hosts the country's largest football stadium (Signal-Iduna-Park).

Stuttgart: best for petrolheads



Aerial view of Stuttgart, including the Stifskirche Credit: Getty

Swabians have a reputation for being uptight, parsimonious and boring – but don't let that put you off. In fact, Stuttgart is a good place to subvert those slightly unfair stereotypes. Its grand history is associated with the House of Württemberg and with scientific and cultural luminaries such as Johannes Kepler, Friedrich Schiller and George Friedrich Hegel. Sights include the Residenzschloss Ludwigsburg, which has a magnificent theatre, the State Museum and the State Opera. And if you're a fan of fast cars, you're in luck: both Porsche and Mercedes-Benz have museums here.

Gelsenkirchen: best for castles and concerts



This post-industrial city has undergone a cultural renaissance in recent decades Credit: Getty

Another of Germany's post-industrial cities, Gelsenkirchen was previously known for its focus on coal. It has undergone something of a renaissance in recent decades, like much of the Ruhr area, with old plants and factories transformed into concert halls and recreational venues, and the former railroad turned into a cycle lane. Home to Schalke 04 FC, it also offers historic sights such as the baroque Berge Castle, with its lovely French-style gardens and occasional concerts, and the Northern Star Park, which was built on top of a former coal mine and now forms part of the region's Industrial Culture Route.

Frankfurt: best for unexpected culture



Visit Goethe's former home and admire architectural eye-candy Credit: Getty

Its skyscraper skyline and abundant banks might have given it a somewhat sterile reputation but Frankfurt am Main – sometimes called “Mainhattan” or even “Chicago am Main” – has way more to offer than corporate institutions. In fact, it’s delightfully green, surprisingly multicultural and impressively cultured. You can explore the life and work of the city’s most famous son, Goethe, at his former home, admire architectural eye-candy such as the St Nicholas Church and City Hall, and get lost in the string of top-notch venues that make up the Museumsufer (Museum Embankment). Be sure to visit a local tavern to try regional specialities like Handkäs mit Musik and Äppelwoi, a regional take on cider.

Hamburg: best for nightlife



Hamburg is a good-looking metropolis with plenty of upscale neighbourhoods to explore Credit: Getty

Hamburg is Germany's second biggest city and popular with Britons for its Hanseatic atmosphere, oodles of urban flair and a wealth of cultural and outdoor activities. (It also rains a lot so we feel at home). It's a good-looking metropolis and very well-heeled too, with plenty of upscale neighbourhoods to explore. Don't miss the pretty Alster lake, the beautifully restored brick warehouses of the Speicherstadt, nor the slick new Hafencity neighbourhood. And while the swanky, wave-shaped Elbphilharmonie concert hall is the latest cultural venue on the scene, the famous Reeperbahn (and associated St Pauli district) still offers plenty of edgy bars and evening entertainment.

Düsseldorf: best for shopping



The vibrant city holds a reputation as the German capital of fashion Credit: Getty

Cologne's long-standing rival, especially in the realm of producing and drinking beer, Düsseldorf might seem comparatively small but it packs a pretty big punch. Its reputation as the German capital of fashion can be confirmed with a stroll along the boutique-lined Königsallee, though it also has a pleasant Altstadt with a late-gothic Town Hall and the mediaeval Lambertuskirche. Modern art fans will be spoiled here: the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and K20 and K21 galleries display an envious selection of 20th-century works by heavyweights like Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian and Pablo Picasso, while the Museum Kunstpalast profiles the 19th-century Düsseldorf School.

Cologne: best for architecture



This breezy and friendly city was founded by the Romans Credit: Getty

Founded by the Romans and long-associated with Charlemagne, Cologne is one of the oldest cities in Germany. Known the world over for its soaring gothic cathedral (Dom), its kölsch beer (served in curiously undersized glasses) and annual carnival celebrations, it's a breezy and friendly city. Alongside its handsome Romanesque churches there are contemporary museums such as Museum Ludwig, the Römisch-Germanisches Museum, a riverside promenade which you can stroll or pick up a boat cruise, and the gorgeous Kolumba Museum, designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor.

Leipzig: best for art



Classical music buffs take note: Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Wagner, Mahler and Bach all lived here Credit: Getty

Whatever you do, don't call it "The New Berlin" – at least not in front of the locals. Yes, there's plenty of Berlin-esque East German architecture, buzzy nightlife and vibrant culture, Leipzig has a lot that Berlin doesn't have, namely a wealth of renaissance, art nouveau and neoclassical architecture, a rich history of music (Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Wagner, Mahler and Bach all lived here) and Auerbachs Keller, an historic wine bar formerly frequented by Goethe. Check out the Spinnerei, a former 19th-century cotton mill that now hosts the city's hippest galleries and artist studios.

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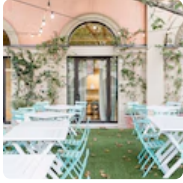
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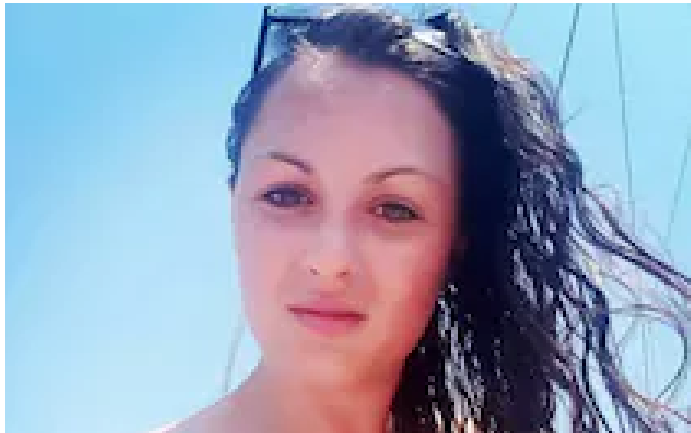


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