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GERMANY – TOURISM IN AN AGEING SOCIETY

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Destination Germany

To start an article on German tourism with some short ideas about the country as a place of interest for readers from other countries is quite unusual and strange, even for someone working in German social tourism. Normally we just don't see Germany as a travel destination. "Tourism" that is to travel around yourself. Germans normally don't think about offering services for guests when they hear that word. Unemployment is high, 12% on average, many areas with more than 20%. But it is nevertheless difficult to find enough staff for hotels and restaurants.

"The romantic heart of Europe" was one of the slogans used by our national tourist board some years ago. Yes, there are a lot of old castles and churches and even complete villages and towns, well preserved for some centuries. Yes, museums, art exhibitions, theatres of all kind, very often even in smaller towns, are worth visiting. But can that compensate the cold and rainy weather?

For most Germans the answer is a clear "no". So they leave their own country for holidays and head for the beaches around the Mediterranean Sea.

Even for many other Europeans, Germany is the country they have to pass on the way to their final destination if they travel by car, coach or train. Consequently, marketing places of interest for tourist often starts with the problem: "How to get them to stop and leave the main road?"

But incoming tourism has a growing importance even for youth hostels, family holiday centres and other parts of the social tourism infrastructure. Their traditional national target groups are shrinking. The number of potential guests is falling and at the same time one part of them has gained the means to use other tourism offers, while others can't even pay their small share of the total costs. The organisations running the places have to find new guests, from other EU-countries or even Non-Europeans. The only alternative would be to close down. Language problems, different mentality, unknown expectations of the new guests as far as food and services are concerned, create completely new tasks in staff training. And the difficulties are increased as many of these organisations get a growing part of their staff from the second labour market.

A travelling people

As a result of the German habit to spend holidays outside Germany, you will meet German tourists nearly everywhere. They are not always very popular. But for many countries their visits are economically vital. Germany has a lot of inhabitants; more than 64 million of them are at least 14 years old. Out of this great number, the percentage of people travelling is high.

Travel intensity, the statistical figure for people making at least one trip of 5 days or longer, is constantly higher than 75%. About 70% of all travellers spend their main holidays outside Germany. This of course leads to repeated debates, many politicians want more domestic tourism, but on the other hand they know that outbound German travel is an important source of income for many countries and somehow a necessary basis for the booming German export. As a result, the growth of domestic travel is slow.

Within Germany, Bavaria and the Baltic Sea coast are the most popular destinations for German tourists. Outside Germany, Spain is the leading destination. Average spending for a holiday trip is more than 800 €.

Travel as a means to overcome borders

Modern tourism can not be analysed without a look into its history. German travelling has very long traditions. Many dominant attitudes and political judgments can only be understood against the background of that history.

“Reisefreiheit” – the right to travel outside GDR, even to western countries, was one of the main demands raised by many East Germans in the 1980s. The constant denial of this right was an important motivation for numerous individuals to become part of the movement finally leading to the end of GDR.

But this travel motive, i.e. to overcome borders, is older and it is independent of the political system. To overcome borders as a travel motivation caused also the fast increase in outbound travel after World War II. Everywhere in post war Germany it was seen as an excellent road to peace to visit neighbouring countries, learn about their way of life, meet the people, and establish a personal friendship. This kind of educational group travel led to the founding of most social tourism structures. And the history of these structures makes it very hard for them to see themselves as a part of today’s differentiated tourism industry. When they got started in the 1950s or 1960s, tourism was often seen as a kind of travel without educational content and value. It seems to be very difficult to give up an inner picture with “non-profit, valuable, good” as a kind of natural contrast to “commercial, just fun oriented, bad”.

Especially youth tourism is very often treated as a political tool to reach a new quality of bilateral relations. The Franco-German Youth Office is the oldest example of that kind. But similar instruments for youth exchange and youth travel have been formed with Poland, Czech Republic, Russia and Israel.

At the same time it is just this experience of teaching values and political orientations in group travel which leads to a strong tendency in political decisions today, to see tourism as a completely private activity. To reduce public help for holiday systems is not only a way to cut public spending. It is not only a reaction to the high travel intensity. It is often a way to reduce the influence of value teaching organisations.

It seems to be one of the greatest tasks in German social tourism today, to combine freedom of choice with public help.

The consequences of ageing in tourism

Germany, without any doubt, is part of the Old Europe. This does not refer in this case to a recent political controversy. But to connect German tourism with the word “old” names one of today’s central problems. The German society is rapidly getting older. The fertility rate is very low, the generation working now can hardly carry the costs of the social systems for their parents and grandparents and everybody can see that the next generation, their own avoided children, will not be able to care for them in the future.

This development has a lot of consequences for tourism. People tend to keep the travel habits of their youth during the rest of their lifetime. In Germany today the generation 50+ is the most active group when it comes to travelling. More than 80% of that age group travel each year. It is this group which suffered most from being excluded from travel. They caused the ever increasing numbers of German travellers after World War II. They can afford to keep these travelling habits.

For today’s youngsters, travelling does not have the same importance. They grew up with it. For them travel was not impossible due to war and post war borders. When they decide what to do with their money, the result will sometimes be travel. But sometimes a new computer, the newest mobile phone with camera or other attractive items will get priority.

If you ask them, why they didn’t travel, they will probably answer, that they couldn’t afford it. But this reason is only part of the truth. In addition, the chance to travel has a lower ranking among their priorities.

The ever increasing number of elder travellers has a lot of consequences for German tourism. Many attractive areas concentrate on an infrastructure optimized for elder guests. They will not invest in the needs of young people or young families. Why spend money on minorities? Sometimes they will even try to avoid their noise and other disturbances as a protection for their main target group, their elder guests.

But the same tendency can turn out to be counterproductive. Elder people today feel much younger (and behave much younger) than 20 years ago. This phenomenon is called “down ageing” and it belongs to the most relevant trends in tourism. If a destination gets the image of being “old”, they tend to see themselves as too young for it.