

## A Rosbif in Bavaria

© Phil Woodford, 2004 – first published on [www.travelmag.co.uk](http://www.travelmag.co.uk)

If you have a stereotypical view of the average Southern German, don't worry. The chances are that they have pretty firm ideas about you too. As an Englishman spending a few days in Bavaria and Baden-Wurttemberg, it was clearly expected that I'd drink tea rather than coffee and would carry an umbrella permanently under my arm. I didn't really have the heart to tell my German hosts that I've always preferred Segafredo to PG Tips. And I'd foolishly travelled to Munich minus mein regenschirm. So when it rained non-stop for twelve hours on the first full day of the trip, an emergency purchase was required at a supermarket in Prien – a easygoing town that sprawls its way down to the picturesque Bavarian lake known as the Chiemsee.

My good lady wife and tireless companion on this jaunt is pretty fluent in German, but she unfortunately decided to stay outside the shop. My own conversational German runs to 'good morning', 'please', 'thank you', 'I don't speak German' and the phrase 'it's out of the question' – the one striking piece of idiom that has stuck with me from school. Es kommt nicht in die Frage. Es kommt nicht in die Frage. I've visualised many times the occasions on which this colloquial turn might come in useful (the request, for instance, from the manager of German circus troupe that I join the trapeze team for a forthcoming performance in Hamburg), but I felt pretty certain my trump card wouldn't be needed for a gent's broly costing a princely four euros.

I approached the checkout and attempted my "Gruss Gott", the customary Southern alternative to the schoolbook "Guten Morgen". Immediately and rather disconcertingly, I was confronted with an incomprehensible question from the middle-aged lady scanning the goods. With my trusty translator out of communication range, I went into panic mode. Could I really tell the shopkeeper, at this very early stage in our relationship, that her question was out of the question? Not wishing to appear rude, I reverted to my fallback position of telling her that I didn't speak German.

Suddenly, she produced a pair of scissors from under her desk and started waving them at me. In a supermarket in London, this would be a 999 call. In Bavaria, it's a sign that someone wants to cut the label off your umbrella. You wouldn't, after all, wish to wander the streets of Prien with a 3.95 euro price tag visible for all the world to see. Thankfully, my pleases and thankyou's were enough to get me to the automatic doors and down to the banks of the lake – the largest in the region.

The jewel of the Chiemsee is an island on which Ludwig II built a replica of the Palace of Versailles. Although this is a must-visit attraction, weather conditions didn't lend themselves to boating excursions. I can confirm, however, that there's a very impressive swimming complex in Prien with a large hot-water spa pool extending out into the lake. You can also enjoy an extremely tasty meal at the Westernacher Hotel and Restaurant on the Seestraße.

With the barometer eventually nudging itself from wet to fair, a more adventurous trip was possible the next day. Lake Konstanz is almost three hours from Munich on an affordable train, but is well worth the effort. Even the journey itself provides you with some spectacular views. Leave at breakfast time from the Hauptbahnhof, arrive late in the morning and just savour what must surely be one of the most beautiful places in Europe. The 'Bodensee' is highly unusual in that it borders three different countries: Germany, Austria and Switzerland. People hop from one territory to another on pleasure boats and paddle steamers, some armed with bikes and others with sausages. Grab yourself some sunshine and a large expanse of water, mix it with cold beer, sauerkraut, coffee and cakes and throw in the Alps as a backdrop for good measure. The only thing to spoil your day is the realisation that some people are actually lucky enough to live here. Indeed, it's hard to understand why

every second building in Southern Germany houses a doctor or a therapist. There's certainly no need to take anyone's blood pressure.

Lindau is a glorious town that juts out into the lake on an extended arm. People sunbathe around the harbour area and tourists have a chance to climb the landmark lighthouse. Just up the coast is an old spa town called Bad Schachen, with the kind of five-star hotel that would happily host a G8 summit. If you don't have a Presidential budget, they'll let you sip coffee on the terrace and gaze at the lake.

After this kind of experience, I suppose there's a danger of Munich itself seeming ordinary, but I'd rate the threat as pretty low. Whether it's the baroque palace at Schloss Nymphenburg, the BMW Museum or the stadium that was built for 1972 Olympic Games, there's almost certainly something for all tastes. We didn't have time for too much of the tourist trail, to be honest, but certainly managed some al-fresco eating and drinking near the Karlsplatz, where a slightly seedier side of the city emerged. Businessmen seemed quite happy to dine with female companions half their age and, yes, it did cross my mind, that they weren't with their wives. Or their girlfriends. Or that nice girl from accounts. (The only other time I'd encountered the world's oldest profession plying its trade so openly with 'professional' men, was when I stayed in a hotel in central Vienna. Leaflets advertised companions for business travellers who'd been stood up for their trip to the opera. My wife and I had to deal with phone calls in our room at 6.45 in the morning from a man who mistakenly believed we were the escort service.)

But maybe I'm misjudging the Bavarian male. Perhaps these young ladies are simply there to guide him through the bewildering world of Munich's public transportation system. Having lived in London all my life, I thought I was pretty hardened to complicated and bizarre ticketing regimes. This one, however, took me by surprise. Einzelfahrts and Kurzstreckes and various Zonen and strange tickets that you need to fold before stamping in an unmarked machine. Do me a favour. There must be a simpler way of getting around the town than this. Germans from other cities seemed just as bemused as the American tourists, which is a pretty clear sign the authorities need to do something quickly. Having said that, we British can be a bit slow on the uptake sometimes. A group of travellers from Birmingham did once accost me at Park Royal underground station in London, demanding to know how they should buy a ticket. I politely suggested they walk into the ticket office and ask for one.

Security in Munich's stations is remarkably laid back when compared with the UK, which I suppose can be seen in both a positive and negative light. You can still hire lockers for a few euros a day, in which you can store anything you like. Advantage: you're free to wander around the town without hindrance. Disadvantage: someone else could blow your luggage (and anything else within a half-mile radius) sky high. On balance, I say yes to limbs and no to lockers, but I've probably lived in London too long. I'm also a hypocrite, because I dumped my bags at the first opportunity.

Most of the rucksacks and suitcases are probably stuffed full of lederhosen, which I can assure you is now officially cool in some weird retro kind of way. Looking in the window of an Angermaier store in central Munich, it was obvious from the promotional posters that no self-respecting young person would be seen without their leather or dirndl. Traditional Alpine gear is all the rage with the twenty-something Bavarian. There are even websites devoted to it (see <http://www.trachten-angermaier.de/index.php>.)

OK, so I didn't see anyone actually wearing it. But then I didn't make it to any of Munich's hottest nightclubs.