

Unverkäufliche Leseprobe



Adam Fletcher
How to be German – Part 2: in 50 new steps

A guide from Adventskranz to Tja

192 Seiten mit 44 farbigen Abbildungen. Broschiert
ISBN: 978-3-406-69869-9

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ADAM FLETCHER

HOW TO BE GERMAN

IN 50 NEW STEPS

**A GUIDE FROM
ADVENTSKRANZ
TO TJA**

With illustrations
by Robert M. Schöne

C.H.BECK

INTRODUCTION

Welcome back, my little *Ausländer*.

I've been watching you these past few years. You've integrated very well, indeed. You're a credit to this fine nation, blending inconspicuously amongst its *Dichter, Denker, and Döner*. You're separating your plastic from your paper and your *Akkusativ* from your *Dativ* with great aplomb. As a result, you might be surprised to hear from me again. *We're done, Adam, aren't we? I've integrated your first fifty steps into my Alltag. You should see how many ways I can prepare potato, Adam. How long it's been since I drank liquid that didn't fizz. How many new qualifications and insurances I now have. I never resist a chance to klugscheiß...*

Not so fast.

The work of cultural assimilation never ends. It's a lifelong commitment. Just when you think you've got a handle on a nation's psyche, it squirms out of your grasp and runs off to reinvent itself once again. This is especially true here, in our beloved fatherland. It's only been three years since *How to Be German 1* took its place on the bestsellers list, and yet already so much has changed:

1. In a desperate attempt to re-brand themselves as anything other than efficient, frugal engineering marvels, the German government initiated some of the most spectacularly inept development projects in recent history—namely *The Hamburg Philharmonic* and *The BER Airport*. Collectively, these projects are years and billions over budget. An expensive anti-PR initiative, some might say, which perhaps tells you how being seen as the planet's most *ordentliche* people can really get to you after a while.
2. Deciding to kick itself while it was down, Germany then

crashed the world's faith in its auto industry. The home of car makers, car lovers, and carnivores learnt that Volkswagen had been cheating on its emission tests, deliberately over-poisoning the *Umwelt*. The response was, well, mostly bafflement. We put down our Bionade, finished sorting our *Altpapier* from our *Plastik* and looked on, confused as to why this sort of nonsense was happening here. To us. And not in the USA where it would at least have been expected.

3. In a remarkable act of unexpected reasonableness, Germany responded to 2015's humanitarian crisis (in which so many others lost their heads) by becoming the *wir schaffen das* nation. While other countries strafed to the right, building new walls and fences, Germany continued pulling them down, opening its doors, tents, and (most) of its hearts as a million new citizens arrived—citizens attracted to the strong legal and social systems, quality of life, lack of devastating civil war, and Bielefeld.
4. Germany's far right, largely in response to this sudden influx of new, often bearded *Mitbewohner*, mobilised itself on the streets of Dresden under the banner of PEGIDA, and did some marching. Marching that then spread out to other cities, towns, and social media, where, ironically, it did succeed in exiling something—cute cat videos and selfies from our previously less politicised Facebook timelines. It got serious. There was hate. Lots of hate.
5. Angela Merkel was voted *Time* person of the year. The *New York Times* said, "There's a new can-do nation. It's called Germany." The *Economist* trumped that with, "If a country can ever be said to be good, Germany today can." *Außenpolitik* clashed with *Innere Angst* as eighty million Germans were left bemused by this sudden, un-forecasted praise tsunami, assuming it would pass and they could return once again to the more comfortable position of repentant former bad guys. In short, it's just as fascinating a time to be trying to under-

stand Germany as when the first book came out. Actually, even more so, since, with the basics already covered in book 1, we're free to cancel the holiday to *Malle*, kick off our Jack Wolfskin shrousters, put down our cold glass of *Apfelsaftschorle* and swim out from the shallower Teutonic stereotypes into the darker, murkier, deeper waters of the German psyche. Accordingly, the fifty steps that follow are a little more complicated and subtle than those of the first book. Maybe a few less of the natives will admit to them. But they're all there, if you look closely and prod a little more forcefully. After all, we're not *Anfänger* anymore, *Ausländer*. This is the *Profi* edition. It's time to step it up a bit.

Don't worry, *wir schaffen das...*

P. S. Oh, and Germany also won another major football tournament! A little bit greedy now, guys.

1. POKER FACE

I would never say that Germans are less emotional than other nations. To typecast eighty million people like that? Never. Absolute no-go. However... now, wait, hear me out... while Germans have emotional lives just as dramatic, fantastic, and varied as anyone else on the planet, I would say that they're much less inclined to show it via their faces. The German *Nationalgesicht*, if there were such a thing, would be a poker face—a restrained expression that gives away as little as possible. If the eyes really are the windows to the soul, the German window comes equipped with *Rollos*.

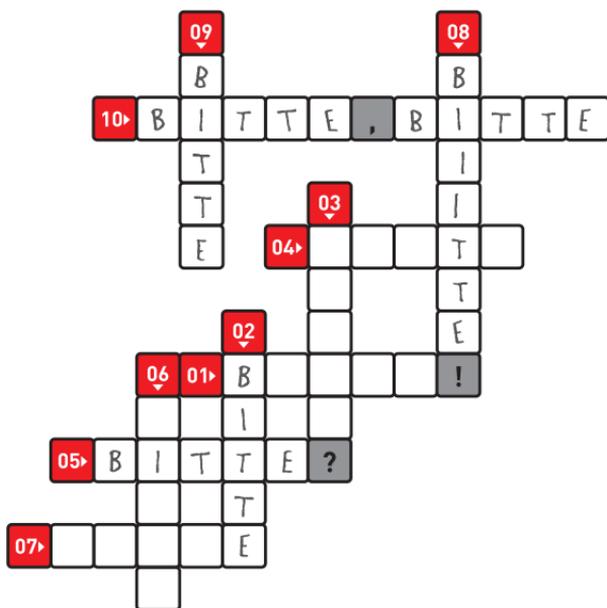
It's not that Germans don't smile, or gesticulate with their hands when lost in explanation or emotion. They just want those physical expressions—when they do bring them out of the bag—to have an impact. If everyone just went around giving smiles out *total kostenlos* because they've found a euro on the ground, or it's only two days until the weekend, or they are thinking about a loved one—well, that could weaken the whole emotional economy! People might begin smiling at even the smallest provocation and everyone else would, in turn, be forced to keep up, and that could trigger Hyper Emotion Inflation. There's been more than enough hyper-inflation in this country already, thank you very much. We might become Italy, where buying a loaf of bread requires a fifteen-minute-long mime performance. No, that won't do. To be German is to be an M&M—hard on the outside, soft in the middle.

Of course, all this might be a problem for you, what with your *Migrationshintergrund*. Rein it in, buddy! Because living here is awesome, you might be tempted to show that by turning your mouth up at the edges, or widening your eyes in a commonly accepted display of joy, wonder, and happiness. Don't, *Poker Face*.

2. FIND THE BEAUTY IN BREVITY

Brevity is not just about the face. While some cultures might rush to fill their sentences and silences with inane chatter, here, people have realised that there is a certain noble beauty to brevity. Just because you're out with your *Ehepartner* in a restaurant

A GERMAN WORD FOR...



ACROSS

- 01 ▶ Oh, it was really no problem at all!
- 04 ▶ Knock yourself out.
- 05 ▶ Pardon?
- 07 ▶ After you.
- 10 ▶ The pleasure was all mine.

DOWN

- 02 ▶ Go ahead.
- 03 ▶ I'm sorry?
- 06 ▶ Here you are.
- 08 ▶ Please stop that!
- 09 ▶ Please.

doesn't mean you have to talk to each other. What have you to say that you've not already said? Exactly. Nothing. Just because you have had a feeling, it doesn't mean you should automatically feel a need to share it. Everyone has feelings. Big deal. See someone you know in the *Hof*? Don't have an awkward conversation about the weather. Just "*Guten Tag*" them and get on with your day. So what if they're your next-door neighbour? There will be plenty of other chances to talk to them then, won't there? You might have heard the English expression "loose lips sink ships." Here, it's more like "loose lips sink *friendships*."

Because words are precious, don't cheapen them with polysentence-filla. Short and sweet is fine. If there's not enough time for that, just go with short. Short and sour usually also works, in case you're wondering. I could say more, but really, why? Let's stop here and both enjoy the beauty of brevity. *Ende der Diskussion*.

3. DO IT YOURSELF

While living in New Zealand, I heard of a popular Rent-a-German-Handyman service. Apparently, Germans are so much better at DIY than anyone else that this company relocated them all the way to New Zealand to help confused Kiwis, who don't know their monkey wrench from their monkey business.

It's now time for you to get just as skilled up. At first, German hardware stores will be scary places for you. Don't worry—that's perfectly normal. You'll think you can just nip in like they do, and quickly grab a *thingamajig* to go on the end of the *what-doyacallit*, and be back in time for *Dschungelcamp*. No, beloved migrant, that's not how it's going to be. Germans are *Profis* at this; you're still an *Anfänger*. You're going to wander in, your eyes aghast in fear, your mouth open in wonder as you're pre-

sented with the German Temple of Excessive Specialisation. Where you think there will be a dozen or so screwdrivers, more than anyone could realistically ever need, you're going to find six hundred. Being a foreigner in a *Baumarkt* is a bit like being Kaspar Hauser on the first day outside his cubbyhole. You've no idea what's going on and you don't even have the correct categories in your brain to store the things you're seeing. To borrow a term from Donald Rumsfeld, visiting a German hardware store is not taking a leap into the unknown, but into the "unknown unknown," where the limits of your DIY knowledge really do prove the limits of your *Baumarkt* world.

So what do you do? Well, wandering aimless amongst the aisles, you'll quickly realise you need help. So you'll look for a staff member. You won't find any. There are none, anywhere. Germans don't need them. They know what they're doing. Hours pass. Near an aisle containing six thousand showerheads, you begin to weep softly. You only wanted a *thingamajig* for the *whatdoyacallit*. *Dschungelcamp* ended hours ago. You've no idea who got forced to eat a kangaroo's testicle. So you stumble back towards the exit, emasculated and hungry. This, in case you are wondering, is why they put sausage stands outside—sustenance for the lost and the damned. Next to you, a confident German person with perfect posture will coldly say, "*Vorsicht*" as they brush past you, expertly navigating a flat bed trolley full of enough parts to rebuild the ark.

What you will hate about these stores: is everything. Absolutely everything. Perhaps you've been raised, as I have, so that when you need something done, you pay someone with life skills to do it for you. This means you acquire no new life skills, sure, but you also get no new blisters. It's a trade-off, the ethics of which you can happily mull over while you're lying on the couch with your feet up. However, we live here now. Surrounded, everyday, by people who know how to put up shelving. People who installed their own kitchens. People who could write the

[...]

29. STAY PESSIMISTISCH

There's a government campaign fronted by Claudia Schiffer aimed at increasing investment into Germany. In beautiful doublespeak, it's called "Deutschland—Land der Ideen." While the international stereotype of Germany as a boring, uncreative place is totally wrong, I think it's also a stretch to call it the land of ideas. "Keine Experimente" was not just a famous political slogan here—it's also a diagnosis of many people's worldview. Of course, this has a lot to do with the country's unique history and so is perfectly understandable. German society has spent a lot of the last hundred years stumbling into—or stumbling dazed out of, and needing to rebuild from—one disaster or another. From the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich, to division into East and West, to the difficulties of reunification, to Europe and its single currency, to today's challenge of integrating a million new citizens, it hasn't exactly been easy.

That many changes in just a hundred years is going to leave scars. I think those are most visible in how pessimistic present-day Germans are. Germany is very much a glass half empty nation. The most regularly used *Tisch* in daily life is not found in the kitchen, but the mind. It's good, old, sturdy pessimistic. The default *Traum*? An *Alptraum*. The average German, coasting along on the *Traumschiff* of their life, remains at all times—even times of total calm and prosperity—scanning the horizon for icebergs. They just can't help it. It was Einstein who famously said that the definition of stupidity was to keep doing the same thing, but to expect different results. In that case, I think the definition of German stupidity is that they keep doing the same thing, keep getting good results, and yet still expect it to go horribly wrong the next time.

30. BE SCHAULUSTIG

A common observation is that Germans stare. This is true. So what. What's wrong with staring? Interesting things should be looked at. In the same way, uninteresting things should be visually interrogated to find out why they have the audacity not to be interesting. In some weird countries, looking into the eyes of someone sitting near you is an act of aggression, a direct provocation, the sort of thing that used to end in a duel. So people there are reduced to meekly observing the floor or their phones. Really, it is these countries that should have to explain themselves, because people are, by far, the greatest entertainment. Far more engaging than any app about rearranging candy and more interesting than the latest click-bait article about how Tabasco Sauce is the miracle cancer cure we've all been waiting for.

It's only logical, then, that Germans, inquisitive folk that they are, enjoy watching other people—especially if they're wearing



a silly hat. Or they're reading a newspaper on the *U-Bahn* and if you stretch your neck awkwardly like you're a giraffe, it's possible to be a *Mitleser*. Or, if they've been involved in an accident of some kind. Germans have a great word for this desire—*Schaulust*. *Schaulust* is not rudeness, as it might first appear, nor an invasion of another's personal space. It's just pure, unbridled curiosity, which is natural, good, and, contrary to popular belief, rarely kills cats. Sure, it might take a bit of getting used to at first, but after a few weeks of being stared at and feeling judged and uncomfortable, or like maybe you forgot to wear pants today, you'll be won over. You'll lift your eyes from the floor and stare back, enjoying this new freedom and becoming as *schaulustig* as everyone else.

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With his first book, Adam Fletcher helped more than a hundred thousand locals and little *Ausländer* navigate the quirks of this charismatic land. Now he's back with fifty new and advanced integration steps that explain the sticky friendship glue of *Kaffee and Kuchen*, the educational superiority of wood, and the rituals of the German *Weihnachtsmarkt*. You'll learn how to blame the weather for most of your ailments, how to survive a visit to your local *Baumarkt*, why Germans take their kitchen when they move, and why you keep losing to them at table football. Adam Fletcher's book is the ultimate, irreverent love letter to a nation that has got so under his skin.



ADAM FLETCHER

is a thirty-three-year-old, bald Englishman living in Berlin, Germany's poor but sexy *Hauptstadt*. One of the country's most enthusiastic students, he's acquired several diplomas in recycling, potato preparation, and *Schlager* singing. In 2013, C.H.Beck published his best-seller *How to Be German in 50 Easy Steps*.

ROBERT M. SCHÖNE

is a German graphic designer, illustrator and hermit hiding in a cave in the picturesque town of Pirna, Saxony. Since the first part of *How to Be German* was published, he's tried hard to get a "real" job. He still flat out refuses to wait at the red *Ampelmännchen*.

