

## The Metamorphosis of the Red Man

If you want to know how to become part of German life in a single day, start at Frankfurt-Hahn at midnight. My first lesson in punctuality? The promised two-hour Deutsche Bahn trip turned into four. My pride in navigating the journey was quickly met by my second lesson: bureaucracy. By 8:00 a.m., I was drowning in *Papierkram* - so many forms and stamps for a country so obsessed with recycling!

Stressed and hungry, I found my sanctuary: Görtz. In this corner of Germany, a bakery roll is the only therapist you need. Suddenly, without realizing it, my tongue began to move on its own: "*Mit Karte, bitte,*" "*Dankeschön,*" "*Tschüss!*" Within weeks, my vocabulary expanded to the essentials: "*Ach so!*" and the legendary "*Genau!*" Before I knew it, I was heading home for dinner with a loaf of bread and a pack of *Geflügelfleischwurst*.

Coming from Georgia, where crossing the street is a creative dance of bravery and eye contact with drivers, the silence of German streets mesmerized me. But then - stop. The little red man at the crosswalk appears. Even if the street is empty and it's 2:00 a.m., the "German in me" is born in that moment; my body stops automatically. It is a quiet, internal law.

That little red man was just a temporary hurdle on my way to the local wine festivals. Back home, I rarely drank, but Palatinate culture has a way of pulling you in. I traded my fear of the unknown for a *Dubbeglas*. Seeing everyone from grandmothers to students - lifting that massive, dimpled glass of *Schorle* or *Neuer Wein* was a revelation. The next thing I knew, I was standing on a wooden bench, wearing a beautiful *Dirndl*, singing along to songs I didn't know, and shouting "*Zum Wohle!*" to friendly strangers who treated me like a neighbor. And no matter how much fun I had, I never forgot the most sacred rule: *Pfand*. I would carry that empty bottle across the city just to get my 25 cents back!

As the October festivals end, the *Wintermarkt* begins. With a *Glühwein* in hand, I look up at cathedrals and ruins, realizing that history isn't just in the stone - it's in the people. After a few conversations with locals, I realized how easily this "straightforward" culture pulls you in.

Now, months have passed. I am no longer surprised by the direct humor, the sausages everywhere, or the absolute, eerie silence of a *Quiet Sunday*. And when I find myself sprinting to the *Hauptbahnhof* at 10:30 p.m. on a Saturday night just to buy groceries because I forgot about the Sunday closure - that is when I knew: I am finally learning the true rhythm of German life.