

Housing in Germany: Good to know before taking up residence (2012)

From: <http://www.howtogermany.com/pages/housing.html>

In Germany, the quest for domestic bliss begins with finding the right house or apartment.

But it doesn't end there.

It's important to know German practices and terminology when you set out to find a house or apartment here. If you want two bedrooms with a living room and dining room, you will actually be looking for a *vier Zimmer* (four-room) home in Germany. Bathrooms, WCs (literally, water closets), kitchens and halls aren't included in the number of rooms. Furnished apartments are rare, and will cost a great deal more than an unfurnished place.

Unfurnished apartments here are just that: completely unfurnished. They don't have built-in cabinets, closets or even lighting fixtures. You'll often have to buy everything, perhaps even the proverbial kitchen sink! Stoves, refrigerators, kitchen cabinets, wardrobes, bookshelves, tables, beds, chairs, curtains, curtain rods, lights and everything else are your problem. It's advisable to employ the services of a lawyer or legal advisor before signing a lease. Even if you speak excellent German, the lease may be too long and too couched in legalese for a layman to comprehend. It might even contain a pitfall like an annual rent increase.

On the other hand, you may be responsible for some things that aren't spelled out in the lease. The main parts of a landlord-tenant relationship are codified in a law. There may be nothing in the lease dealing with notice periods, renovations required or actions in the event of non-payment of rent, but these things are still covered because of the law.

An agreement to rent an apartment or house for a fixed term can't be terminated early except under extraordinary circumstances. A transfer is usually not an extraordinary circumstance. Your payment to the landlord, which is usually made monthly, is in two parts: the rent, which cannot be changed for the duration of the lease; and the *Umlagen* - or *Nebenkosten* - which can. The latter can include such things as a share of the landlord's property tax, heat, stairwell cleaning, trash collection and water. If the price of one of these is raised during the period covered by the lease, your *Umlagen* can be increased accordingly. You generally pay separately for your electricity and gas, though these can be included in the *Umlagen*. And you might also pay separately for some of the things we mentioned as being in the *Umlagen*, especially heat.

A few other matters concerning living in German rented quarters:

- It's a good idea to have an inventory of anything that is in your new place and any deficiencies that are seen should be noted. This is simply protection for you and your landlord.
- Avoid loud noises between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. and from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. Monday through Saturday and all day Sunday.
- Most cities now require that trash be separated in a number of ways. There will usually be separate receptacles (mainly on the landlord's property but sometimes community ones on a nearby sidewalk) - one for metal and plastic, one for paper, one each for green, brown and white glass, and one for all else. If you want to get rid of something such as a piece of furniture that's too big for the trash containers, you can call the sanitation office and request its removal. This will usually be done on a *Sperrmüll* (large trash) day. In most cities they will even haul away an abandoned car by appointment.
- Wash and dry laundry only in the areas or rooms provided by the landlord.
- Leave cars, bicycles, baby carriages, etc., only in areas provided by the landlord. The cleaning of rugs, blankets and the like should be done only in designated areas.
- Obtain the landlord's written permission if you wish to keep a pet.

- Lock entrance doors from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. if more than one family lives in the building.
- Close and lock all doors and windows in your apartment during periods of extended absence.
- Install satellite dishes and television or radio antennas only with the permission of the landlord and in compliance with local laws.
- Inform the landlord immediately of any damage to gas, water or electrical lines.
- Find out from the rental agreement who is responsible for the cleaning of halls, stairways, front walk, etc. It could be you!
- Never grill, barbecue or make an open fire on a balcony.
- Never pour or shake anything from windows or balconies. Make sure flowerpots or boxes on windows or balconies are secure and that watering them doesn't create a nuisance to neighbors below.

There are several approaches to finding a place to live in Germany. The first and probably quickest is through an *Immobilienhändler*, a real estate agent. The drawback to this method is the high cost: these firms usually charge between two and three months' rent for the place they find you. Their fee is completely separate from the deposit you'll have to pay the landlord, which will amount to another two to three months' rent, not including the first month's rent.

Let's say an *Immobilienhändler* finds you a place that rents for €1,000. He could charge you some €3,000. The landlord's deposit could be €2,000 to €3,000, and the first month's rent is still €1,000. That's a total of €6,000 to €7,000, of which only €1,000 goes to pay rent! Sometimes landlords and real estate agents will permit you to pay these fees in installments.

Another method of finding a place is through the newspaper. The drawback to this is that a good place may well be snapped up before your call gets through. There also may be a language problem. (See box).

A third method, the oldest and sometimes best, is finding a place through word of mouth. Your friends and colleagues often know of places in their own area, or one being vacated by a departing coworker. Networking is useful in your professional life, and no less so when trying to find a place to live in Germany.

You may also be interested in finding a place through any number of dedicated real estate websites. You may even find some that have information and listings in English. Most of the real estate websites allow you to browse listings selected by price, location, size and other criteria. Most listings have many photographs that allow you the opportunity to take a "virtual tour".

As we've said, deposits usually are two to three months' rent, which is in addition to your first month's rent. However, the deposit will be returned with interest when you leave, provided your quarters are in good order. This usually means a renovation, and it is sometimes required that this be the work of a professional.

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Apartment/House Rental Terms

Finding apartments in Germany these days is normally done by searching the internet or through newspaper ads. Even if you speak good German, the terms used to describe house and apartment rentals may throw you for a loop. This is especially true with abbreviations used in newspaper ads.

What if you saw an ad in a newspaper offering an "80QM 3Zi BJ 96 DG BAD WC" apartment? It might not be as unfathomable as you think.

Here are some key words, their abbreviations and what they mean:

Quadratmeter (QM or M2) - this is accompanied by a number and tells you how big the apartment is in square meters. Zimmer (Zi) accompanied by a number tells you how many rooms the place has.

The term Baujahr (BJ) followed by a number means year built.

The terms Water Closet (WC), Bath (Bad) and Dusche (Du) tell you about the sanitary facilities. Bath means only a tub, and a WC is a room with a toilet but no bathing facilities.

The words Erdgeschoss (EG), Obergeschoss (OG) and Dachgeschoss (DG) tell you how high up in the building you'll be; respectively "ground floor", "upper floor" and "attic floor"

Kaution (Ka, Kt and Kaut) is the "security deposit" that you must lay down over and above your rent. This is usually followed by a number, which tells you what the security deposit is in euros. Gepflegt (Gepfl) means "well cared for" and Ruhig (Ruh) means "quiet". Nebenkosten (NK) means "incidental expenditures" that may not be included in your rent; such as trash collection, stairwell cleaning and water. If you happen to be looking for a fully furnished apartment, keep an eye peeled for the term Möbliert (Möbl), and if you are looking for such comfortable amenities as central heating, a balcony, a garden or a garage look for Zentralheizung (ZH), Balkon (Balk), Garten (Gart) or Garage (Gge).