

Living like a Local

Life overseas is an adventure, which comes with uncharted territories and surprises. Being aware of the differences is the first step to navigating like a native. Call it culture, customs or the way of life. Regional quirks, behaviors and unspoken rules loom in every destination. Guidebooks may direct you to the cheapest hotel or hottest meal, but learning how to live the local life is up to you.

For instance, did you know you are not allowed to wash your car at home, in Germany? You must take it to the car wash. Also, check for any oil spots you may have leaked behind. It's bad for the environment and being conscious of this can save you from the fees involved, if you're caught by authorities.

Sunday is a day of rest and quiet hours are enforced in many countries. This can be a big adjustment for many. Especially, if you come from a place where things are usually open 24/7. If you encounter quiet hours in your community, this means no loud noises or disturbing other residents. No mowing your lawn or cranking up the stereo. If violated in Germany, fines up to 500.00 Euro can be issued for violating the German Noise Protection Regulation.

What are the biggest pet peeves Europeans have towards American neighbors? "Improper disposal of trash and unattended pets," said Ellen Sutterfield, Chief, Housing Referral for the Kaiserslautern Military Community. It is up to the tenant to dispose of trash properly and recycle. When it comes to caring for pets, the rules are rigid. Unattended dogs are a big no-no in Germany. So is leaving them in a kennel or cage. It is also mandatory to walk the dog every few hours.

It's always good to air things out and in this case, it's not about the dirty laundry. Houses overseas are poorly ventilated. It is necessary to open the windows for at least ten minutes, once a day. If neglected, the excess moisture could lead to mold growth. While taking a shower it is wise to leave the window open, if only a crack so it prevents mildew buildup. If you already have mold issues, there is still time to combat it. First, try scrubbing off the mold with detergent and water. Open the window and turn up the heat. By raising the thermostat, air will suck out the moisture from the walls. Continue to open the window when showering and keep your bathroom door open at night.

You may already possess a day job, but now you can add street sweeper to your set of skills. It is necessary to keep the front of

your home clean, swept and free of debris. This includes snow and ice removal. You are responsible for the sidewalk in front of your home. No sidewalk? Look to the street and don't forget about the corridors in apartment buildings.

Before taking extended leave in the winter months, don't turn off your heater all the way. Leave the radiator knob on the star setting, that way a little heat is coming through. Otherwise pipes will freeze and burst. Heating is varied. In Italy, apartments with central heating or steam radiators have a seasonal heating period for a minimum of 120 days, November 15 – May 15. Using a space heater might be necessary for a few months.

You probably noticed houses in Europe are built differently. This is especially true in the UK, where hallways are narrow and rooms are much smaller than in the States. Large villas in Italy can be scarce. It's imperative to measure your furniture first before moving in. In Italy and Germany, don't expect the walls to be constructed of drywall. The walls are made of concrete and hanging pictures can be a tricky task. German houses have become Americanized over the past 20 years. They are more modern, larger and come with two-three bathrooms on average. In the newer homes you can find solar heat, spacious open floor plans and radiant (floor) heating. Often European homes are missing screens, closets and bathroom cabinets. Some even lack kitchen cabinets and kitchen appliances.

Protect your property and tenant rights with various types of Insurance: Personal property, liability, pet insurance and legal representation. If you have continuous problems with your landlord think about joining the Tenant Protection Agency. For less than 100 Euro a year you will receive legal assistance and representation in court. However, you must be a member for at least three months. Pet owners may want to seriously consider investing in dog liability insurance. All Germans keep their dogs insured, especially for scenarios like this: If a dog runs into the street causing the driver of a car to crash instead of hitting the dog, the owner of the dog will be legally responsible.

Finally, if you ever have problems paying your rent, get help. Go to the housing office. They are there to help and will put you on a payment plan. ■

Sources: Housing Referral Office Brochure,
Kaiserslautern Legal Services Center German Landlord-Tenant Law

