

The German dress code

Trying to work out the dress code in another country is never easy. In her regular Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a question about German fashion sense from someone preparing to move to the nation.

Claire wrote,

My husband has been working in Germany for four months now. The kids and I will join him once school is out for the summer. From his mails home it seems he is a little confused about the dress code. Are there some pin pointers?

Dear Claire,

I am sure that not just your husband is confused, so thank you for sharing this question. The styles are just as diverse as the landscape and the dialects are in this country. Yes, we see the Lederhosen in Bavaria, yes, we see the blue overalls (Blaumann), which are worn with pride by manual workers — and there is so much more.

Let's start off by differentiating between the workplace and private time. At work it is dictated by their corporate culture. Bank and insurance companies, for example, tend to be more conservative in dress — this means a suit and tie. Be aware that the German taste for ties is more elaborate than in the US. It is often a true fashion statement. Combination suits are more for everyday wear, whereas the two-piece suit is for slightly more formal occasions.

The colours for shirts are more pronounced and can be checked or striped. For the most part the "safe" shirts are a shade of blue or regular white.

If the person has no client contact, let's take a data systems engineer, then the dress is much more casual: chinos and shirt/polo.

Quite a number of office staff have clogs (Birckenstock) for the office — they slip out of the presentable into the more comfortable at work. Oh, talking about comfortable, "casual Friday" is gaining more fans, and it allows for the most part the wearing of (clean) jeans.

In addition, (facial) piercings and earrings for men are sported in the workplace — it depends on the company whether they will encourage the removal when client contact is frequent.

One point of attention, shoes...well-polished, solid shoes still make a good impression. A German executive mentioned to me that he invites his potential new recruits to sit at the glass conference table... this gives him a good chance to check out the state of their shoes!

Does this mean we need to change our styles? No, not really — just be more aware about the occasion and should you feel comfortable incorporating elements of the German dress style into your personal style. But do not go overboard, remain true to yourself and do not go native, thinking that wearing Lederhosen in Munich is going to make you more accepted.

In the end it is all a question of taste, said the monkey, and bit into the bar of soap.

(Translated from the original German proverb: "Ist ja eine Frage des Geschmacks, sagte der Affe, und biß in der Seife")

I look forward to your questions.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is WWW.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.