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ECO 4956

8 August 2023

Germany-Belgium Reflection Essay

In May 2023, myself and a cohort of fellow study abroad students took a weeklong trip to Germany and Belgium, visiting parts of the European financial system, government, and other important landmarks. We toured each of the three branches of the EU government, attended a lecture from a local university, and dealt with the language barrier. But it was the small stuff that was surprising. Some examples:

Germans do not drink water. Not like how it’s done in the US, at least. They must carbonate it first. Ask for a glass of tap water and a glass bottle will come out, and do remember to specify “flat” or you’re going to end up drinking a milder form of club soda. If you even drink water. Somehow the beer is cheaper[[1]](#footnote-1), which makes as little sense as it sounds.

Transportation is much less car focused, which I think most everyone already knows, but it really was striking. I didn’t step foot in a car for the entire trip, and was in a bus once or twice. Everywhere else was trains, the metro, and walking, some of which I foolishly did in dress shoes. The train system is well connected and goes everywhere. The only complaint I have is about the ear popping on high speed rail lines, whenever we went through a tunnel some sort of pressure wave of air would build up. I doubt that’s worth fixing though, pressurized train cars sound like quite the investment for little gain. A symptom of good a good high speed rail system, I suppose.  
 Prepared food is in less variety, but good and cheap. The EU subsidizes agriculture, but so does America. I think the main difference comes down to either labor costs and/or an easier tax/regulatory environment for small food related businesses. Additionally, there’s long been a minor conspiracy theory in gluten intolerance circles around European wheat not triggering symptoms. I can confirm there is something to this. Three possible reasons I can see are a difference in wheat type (Europe does grow less glutinous strains), lower portion sizes, and less potentially agitating chemicals in the food (preservatives, bleaching agents, glyphosate, etc.). Whatever it is, they’re doing something right that we’re not.

One of the main differences our trip was supposed to highlight was the availability of credit in the EU vs the US, and we had heard plenty about that both before the trip. I thought that would be mostly confined to experiences we wouldn’t have, trying to get a loan, or a low maximum on a credit card, but no, almost every store had a sign saying some variant of “cash only for items under x Euros” and there was cash floating around everywhere. Clearly credit card usage isn’t as normalized. The EU does have a lower GDP than America, so another factor might be merchants and customers unwilling to eat transaction fees from credit card companies[[2]](#footnote-2). Thankfully, credit card machines were still common enough that I could make larger purchases with them – my bank has a good exchange rate.

As a tourist you’re naturally a target for opportunistic crime, having more money than local knowledge. One word of advice to any prospective travelers: Avoid the area of Frankfurt directly around the train station as much as possible. I don’t know if my group just had cursed luck or something, but the first thing we saw on our trip was someone getting arrested for selling drugs by three or four cops. Not to be outdone, later that day some guy in a camo vest rides up to the group on a probably stolen bike, yelling obscenities and waving a pair of pliers around[[3]](#footnote-3). For a moment we thought he was about to start stabbing people[[4]](#footnote-4) or something, but there happened to be police stationed nearby – they weren’t even after the guy, they just station police on that bridge. And my experience riding the Frankfurt metro back to the hotel after getting separated from the group was *very* sketchy. Maybe it isn’t usually like that, I’m sure we *were* unusually unlucky, but the drug use and scent of urine around the train station argued otherwise. In Brussels someone tried to pull a scam[[5]](#footnote-5) on me, but that was the only encounter with crime outside of Frankfurt.

1. Food safety laws that mandate excessive purity of water? Maybe beer sells faster so there’s opportunity costs to stocking water? EU agricultural subsidies? It’s probably some sort of subsidy, isn’t it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These companies are international and American, so plausibly they don’t pay most of said fees back into the EU via shareholders and expenses – less true for America. Those funds leaving the EU might be part of the explanation for a lower GDP, though a very small part. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Likely used to steal the bike, according to our guide. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Which would have been especially bad given that half our group was in dress shoes and unable to effectively flee. I was genuinely worried it was about to go down right there on the bridge stairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It involved “getting them a cigarette out of their jacket pocket” (which they could clearly reach themselves). What’s even the point? Accuse you of stealing? Grab your hand when it’s trapped? Razor blade in the pocket? I’m just not sure how they end up making money. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)