Germany

Overview
The Federal Republic of Germany, also known as Deutschland, is Europe's largest economy and second most populous nation as it is home to 82 million people. It stretches some 357,000 square kilometers and is bordered by Denmark, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

The official language is German, and while the majority of the population is of white, European ancestry, there is a sizable Turkish minority that dates back to the Second World War. Other minority groups come from Italy, Greece, Croatia, Serbia, and Poland.

Germany is a democracy. There is a President, but his role is more or less ceremonial. The true Head of Government is the Federal Chancellor, who exercises executive power much like the role of a Prime Minister. The voting age is 18.

The currency in Germany is the Euro and the capital is Berlin.

Culture
Germany is famous for the Black Forest, cuckoo clocks, cars (Mercedes, BMW, Volkswagen), wiener schnitzel, sauerkraut, beer, wine, and Schnapps. Other traditional festivities include Oktoberfest, Carnival, and Christmas Markets. Famous German musicians include classical composers Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

Germany is a meat-and-potatoes country, although recent trends favor a healthier diet. A typical German diet contains a lot of bread, meat (very often pork eaten in sausage form), and potatoes.

A typical German breakfast is muesli, bread, butter, jam, cheese, cold cuts, and coffee. Lunch is the largest meal of the day and usually is a hot meal containing a meat dish, potatoes or dumplings, and a vegetable such as cabbage, carrots, spinach, turnips, and beans. Dinner is a light meal with cheese, salad, fresh bread, butter, and cold cuts.

Meeting etiquette is often formal. A quick firm handshake is usually a traditional greeting. Titles are also very important and denote respect as Herr or Frau are commonly used amongst older people. Germans usually bring a gift when invited over to someone's house. When entering a room, Germans shake hands with everyone individually including the children.

School attendance is mandatory for at least 10 years. Children generally enter primary school at age six. Primary education lasts for four years and secondary
education is a four track system in which the individual, along with a teacher’s recommendations, determines which track the student intends to pursue, upon completion of secondary school.

The four tracks include Gymnasium, which prepares students for university studies, Realshule, which has a broader range of studies with emphasis for intermediary students, Hauptschule, which prepares individuals for vocational school, and lastly Gesamtschule, a comprehensive school that combines the three approaches.

After the school day, German students may be active in sports, band, choir, and/or theater. There is no school competition between schools. Students spend about 2 hours outside of school studying or doing homework but this amount increases as students enter higher levels of education. Private tutoring is becoming more common.

In their spare time, German teenagers do very similar activities as teens in the U.S. – meeting friends, going to parties, playing sports, dating, movies, shopping, and chatting online. Going to dance clubs starts at age 15 and is more common for German teens than Americans as Germany has the largest Electronic music scene in the world.

Teens start dating in groups when they are 13-14 years old. When they are 15-16 they often begin steady relationships.

The driving age is 18. Curfew times and house rules differ from family to family, but German parents usually allow their children more freedom and independence than many American parents.

The drinking age in Germany is 16 for beer and wine, and 18 for hard liquor. Drinking is culturally accepted in Germany as beer and wine are a normal part of means and social gatherings. Many people start drinking before they reach the legal drinking age, but it is not so much of a ‘thrill’ as it is for American teens. German teenagers generally do not drink for the sole purpose of getting drunk, but drinking is usually a part of teen parties and social gatherings.

**Family Life**

While it is fairly common for both parents to work, many mothers choose not to work or to work part-time while their children are small. To promote the idea of family, German law allows for new mothers to take a year off work to raise their baby. They receive kinder geld (“child money”) each month, and must be placed in the same or similar position when they return to work.

Families have an average of two children and pets are fairly common for people who own their own home or live in suburban areas. Favorite pets are dogs, cats, birds, and hamsters. Germans take great pride in their homes. They are kept
neat and tidy at all times, with everything in its appointed place. The common areas surrounding the home such as sidewalks and steps are also kept clean at all times.

Teenagers are accustomed to helping around the house. They clean their rooms but are free to clean or leave them as is. They also do the dishes, take out the garbage, and shop for garden and food groceries. Boys and girls do minor cooking and laundry and girls usually help out with vacuuming.

Hosting Considerations
Host families should be aware that German students can be strong-willed and opinionated. This should not be seen as a negative, Germans feel they are only being honest, but American culture may view such opinions as insulting or condescending. German students feel they are not only entitled to question authority or decision, but that it is their right and responsibility to do so when they do not understand a decision or rule, or if they feel it is unjust. Host families should be prepared to listen to definite opinions and be willing to challenge those opinions with a good, civilized debate.

The most common problem German students face during their exchange year is the lack of freedom they experience. German parents tend to be less strict than American parents with curfews. German teens are also brought up to be self-reliant and to take care of their own affairs such as school work, doctor appointments, and shopping for clothes. They are taught to never take a command from someone without thinking about the reasoning behind it. Therefore, many German students feel disrespected if they are not involved in the decision-making process.

The most common issue host families experience with German students is the fact that the students can be blunt in their comments, question the host parents’ authority, and may criticize or comment on the host families lives, activities, religion, politics, and lifestyles. Host families should be aware that German students will be honest and open with their feelings and opinions, and that they will not lie to avoid hurting feelings. Host parents’ should be aware of this so they do not become offended by this bluntness.

Host families should know that German natural parents may plan to come visit their student during their time here in America. Because German parents may ask if they can stay with the host family when visiting their child, host parents need to be honest with their student and International Coordinator about any potential visits, and not feel pressured to host the natural parent in their home if it is not convenient.

German students come with good English skills, a solid understanding of U.S. lifestyle and culture, and a much more international view of the world. Most students come to the U.S. prepared to integrate into a family, be active in the
school and community, make friends, and see as much of the area and country as they can. If the host families are open-minded and aware of the cultural differences between Germans and Americans, the overall experience will be very positive.