

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

Brief an das Christkind / Letter to Christ Child

Letters to Himmelpfort: German Kids Send Wish Lists to Santa

In Germany, plenty of children believe in Santa Claus - or the Weihnachtsmann, as they call him. And as the countdown to Christmas begins, they start writing their wish lists, asking Santa and his elves to bring them the new toys they've been dreaming of all year.

If they address their wish lists to "16798 Himmelpfort", kids in Germany can expect a reply from Santa himself.

The German village of Himmelpfort (which means "Heaven's Gate") receives hundreds of thousands of wish lists every year - and each letter that arrives at least 10 days before Christmas receives a personal response. The village - which has a population of 500 - has been answering letters to Santa for 30 years - but the quantity has increased exponentially.

The tradition began in 1984, when two children wrote letters to the Weihnachtsmann at Himmelpfort. Postal worker Konni Matzke received the letters and was unsure what to do with them, so she decided to answer them herself. And the letters to Santa have increased ever since.

"Word got out and by 1987 we received 75 letters," she told *The Guardian*. "And it was lovely - mothers sent packets of coffee and homemade cookies to say thank you to Father Christmas."

The year 1990 was a particularly big year for the post office in Himmelpfort, which is located in former East Germany: after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, the village was overwhelmed with Christmas wish lists. And by 1994, the flow of letters was so great that the Deutsche Post (German Post Office) stepped in to help, setting up a work station for people to respond to the letters.

Last year, nearly 300,000 letters to Santa arrived in Himmelpfort from over 80 countries. But the Deutsche Post, expecting letters from overseas, is and continues to be prepared; it has the means to respond in 17 languages. In their letters, children often request toys (especially electronics), but those from other countries sometimes write Santa simply to tell him about their lives. And the letters aren't always from children: the *Berliner Morgenpost* reports that one letter from Santa came from a 94-year-old man who always dreamed of receiving a response from the Weihnachtsmann.

Those who want to drop off their letters personally are also welcome to do so: the Christmas post office in Himmelpfort gives children the opportunity to meet Santa, eat baked goods and get creative at an on-site crafting station.

Answering letters from children all around the world can be overwhelming, but fortunately for the small village of Himmelpfort, six other towns in Germany help respond to letters from Santa, including Engelskirchen ("Angels' Church") and Himmelstür ("Heaven's Door").

And although the postal workers can't send kids the presents on their wish lists, they can respond with words of hope, advice and kindness to bring some Christmas cheer into the lives of Germany's youth.