

WO KANN MAN SPEISEN UND GETRÄNKE KAUFEN? (Where can you buy food?)

supermarket: der Supermarkt, die Supermärkte

Even in the largest supermarkets there will be no "bagger" to pack your groceries and carry them out to your car. Wages are just too high in Germany for such "luxury," so you'll have to be your own bagger. In many places you can use the same cart with which you took the merchandise to the cashier to transport them to the parking lot. Generally plastic — not brown paper — bags are available but as a result of rising oil prices they often cost a bit extra (usually ten Pfennigs).

Some supermarkets are paying lip-service to the idea of customer service. My local monopoly has installed a bell for customers to ring when the lines at the only one or two open check-out registers are a mile long, and all the other registers are closed. The bell activates an automatic recording, "Thank you for letting us know that more registers should be opened. We will take care of the matter immediately." Nine times out of ten, nothing happens. I happen to know a lawyer on the board of this particular mammoth chain, and he agrees that service is the least of anybody's priorities. "Our customers have no real choice," he says with a grin, "there's nowhere else for them to go, so service, American-style, simply doesn't pay off."

In a big country

I chalked it up to coming from a big country with lots of space where people did not queue up so close to you that you began nervously wondering whether you were about to be either mugged or asked out on a date. Maybe people were pushier in this regard in Germany because they had to operate in a lot less space? Or maybe Germans just have trouble standing in line? Or perhaps this was just a personal pet peeve of mine? (Germans, by the way, often find the pace of supermarket shopping somewhat slow in the US.)

Leaving aside such musings on slightly stressful moments in German shopping, I still miss my irreplaceable favorite Bavarian buttermilk beverage (*Weihenstephan Multifrukt Buttermilch* - nectar of the Gods!), my friendly neighborhood Kaiser's supermarket and the gleaming grandeur of my Kaufhof gourmet grocer in Frankfurt. And every time I see people use those horribly crinkly sounding plastic bags at supermarkets in Washington DC I cringe. I hear they are banning them in San Francisco. Maybe this eco-friendly idea - long a standard policy in Germany - is finally catching on over here.

My boss, German Information Center USA Director Stefan Möbs, and his family are always warmly received at their local supermarket in Washington when they break out their special bright yellow collapsible plastic boxes.

"We picked up these two boxes once in Germany and really love shopping with them because they're so sturdy," said Möbs. "I always have them in the back of my car, take them into the supermarket and pop them open just as I reach the cash register. Everyone at the store knows us now because of these nifty 'flat-pack' boxes. Some people have even asked us where they could buy them."

So maybe German and American shoppers aren't so different, after all?