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## **Banana Peels, Ferris Wheels, and a Cup of Joe**

By Katherine Petersen

If there is one thing I appreciate about European culture, it is the coffee shops. Not only can I sit for hours without suffering exasperated glances from the serving staff (a novelty for a California girl like myself), but I also receive a concentrated dose of the aforementioned culture for the price of one steaming mug filled with my favorite bitter brew. Cafés are where the people are, whether it be families on vacation, old friends meeting for lunch, flirtatious couples from the local university, or the elderly who seem uniquely contented with a cup of espresso and the morning paper. The vast majority of Europeans I've met introduced themselves over a cup of coffee. It's a simply exceptional way to acquaint oneself with a new place.

I took advantage of Heidelberg's numerous coffee houses by making them a daily stop between classes. I'd drop in with my journal, a textbook, or a few colorful characters of Moore Haus to sample the various espresso creations before moseying back to the classrooms. Since my visits were devout, I quickly found favorites, and grew accustomed to visiting only a few choice caffeine suppliers. While I enjoyed the comfortable familiarity of my routine stops, I decided that I needed to expand my horizons, if only by a few kilometers. As a result, I hopped on a train to Mannheim several Sundays every month to ensure myself a fresh aroma and a less familiar habitat.

It was on one such trip that I first noticed the man in the banana suit. I was browsing the playlists on my overworked ipod when he waddled past me, taking special pains not to jostle anyone with his violently yellow peel. I abandoned my musical search to grant a double-take to his awkward retreat. My eyes had not deceived me. A man dressed as my favorite breakfast fruit was moseying through my train car.

A few uncertain glances at my fellow passengers made it clear that either nobody noticed the odd company, or middle-aged efficient-looking German men dressed as bananas were a common occurrence on trains that I had previously missed out on. The banana

disappeared into the next train car, muttering apologies auf Deutsch to a young woman his peel assaulted along the way. Since the other passengers seemed unruffled, I did my best to stem the fresh flow of questions, as well as my instinct to laugh openly at the image of a sensible German in a banana suit, to gaze at the dreary landscape whizzing past my window.

My arrival in Mannheim awarded me with yet another surprise: the train station was packed. Since Sundays are an observed holiday in Germany, most businesses are closed and, consequently, the downtown population dwindles dramatically. That Sunday, however, the station was teeming with patrons disguised as clowns, prehistoric beasts, and Mad-Hatters. Aside from a few equally-confused foreigners examining the Departures board, I was practically the only one not painted or wearing a costume.

Intrigued, I ventured beyond the station, only to be swarmed by a horde of cheery masqueraders. The current of painted masses swept me up and carried me along the normally empty streets. I made no effort to protest. Instead, I smiled at the vampire to my left and ignored the four year-old ladybug that kept trodding on my foot.

As it turned out, Mannheim boasted a massive Ferris wheel, dozens of merchant tents, blaring music, and other such festive embellishments. Only when I noticed forsaken bags of popcorn in the gutter did I realize that I had stumbled upon a Fasching celebration: Karneval, Germany's last party before the solemn days of Lent settle in. The sidewalks were littered with colorful pieces of candy, bratwurst stands were in abundance, and every corner sported a cluster of costumed participants merrily sloshing glasses of beer and bellowing to the tunes of a hokey brass band.

I bought myself a serving of warm candied almonds and eagerly joined the crowds, who were lining up along the sidewalk. Minutes later, parade floats came cruising down the street laden with animated men and women who tossed popcorn, candy, and other prizes into the hordes. The decorated personalities on the floats danced to the blaring music, cheered at the energetic crowd, and occasionally stooped to pour drinks for the people in

the street. I braced myself against the hurricane of candy that rained down on us and cheered right along with an excitable group in green bowler hats.

Mid-parade, the clouds split and graced us with real rain. My spirits couldn't be dampened, but my coat was another story. When the heavy drops refused to relent, I forfeited my curbside seat and wandered off in search of the coffee I came for. I decided on my usual place, one of the few that are open on Sundays. I set up shop beside a window and watched the parade procession chug past, sipping gently at a scalding latte that warmed my palms through the mug.

Even toward the end of my international experience, Europe still surprised me. There is no end to the new things a foreign place might reveal. There is no way to anticipate the way such things change one's view of the world, or the way one relates to their fellow man. That day, I left Moore Haus expecting to down a latte or two and finish an essay. I ended up roaming the streets of Mannheim with a group of masquerading Germans, browsing festival tents, and celebrating with a handful of green-capped locals. Small impromptu adventures were typical of my time in Heidelberg. I could never imagine where my day would lead me. I could never image what colorful things could stem from a simple cup of coffee.