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State-Controlled Vacations in East Germany (May 23, 1963)

Whereas West Germans enjoyed freedom of travel, East Germans had to use trade-union coupons (so called vacation checks) or government travel agencies to plan their domestic vacations. Foreign travel was limited to neighboring Eastern European states. These restrictions added to the population's frustration with the regime.

Everyone Wants to Travel to the Baltic Sea

Vacation worries in the Soviet Zone – the FDGB monopoly

Mountains of brochures, travel ads, posters – whereas a citizen of the Federal Republic can select a vacation from countless offers, a Central [i.e. East] German still treats it as a stroke of great fortune if he can spend his vacation where he wants. Once again, many residents of the Soviet Zone have had to resign themselves to staying at home during this year's summer vacation. Others will be going to the mountains instead of the sea, as they had hoped; and others still have been looking for a travel opportunity for months.

The majority of vacation trips are organized by the Communist Free German Trade Union Federation [*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* or FDGB]. It only has 1.26 million "vacation checks" to distribute for all of 1963, even though it has 6.3 million members. That means that only about one in five FDGB members will receive a vacation check. That amounts to about seven percent of the total population. But not all of the lucky check holders can travel during the summer months. For the FDGB only owns 400 vacation homes and only contracts with 812 more, which means that it has upwards of 95,000 spots for travelers during the summer season, roughly 30,000 of which are rented private accommodations.

In past years, a vacation check for a thirteen-day FDGB trip (not including transportation expenses) cost 30 [East German] Marks. Now the FDGB has raised its prices and introduced a differentiated price scale so that it no longer has to pay such high subsidies. In 1962, these subsidies amounted to 82 million Marks. This year, the FDGB wants to spend only 60 million. The prices now vary according to the time of travel, the quality of the vacation home, and the income of the vacationer. Only those in the lowest income group, with gross monthly earnings of less than 500 Marks, still pay 30 Marks for a spot in the category "contract homes with outdoor beds" during the shoulder season. If you want to travel in high season, and if you earn more, then you have to pay up to 100 Marks for thirteen days of food and lodging.

That is still relatively inexpensive. But one should not measure a vacation trip on an FDGB check by Western standards. The meals are generally sufficient and good, but vacationers are not spared the effects of general supply problems. And the accommodations leave a lot to be desired. Well over half of all FDGB vacation spots consist of a bed in a three-bed room. It is rare for entire families to be able to travel together with the FDGB vacation service. FDGB instructions call it inopportune to give a check to a “non-working spouse.”

Whoever can't get hold of a vacation check can try for a vacation at the state-run German Travel Agency [*Deutsches Reisebüro* or DER]. DER prices are approximately as high as those for package tours in the West. But by no means do they always offer the “Western standard” either. Vacationers are usually housed in private accommodations. They can use a coupon to eat in a nearby HO¹ restaurant. The DER also suffers from a massive shortage of accommodations. Virtually no hotels or pensions were built in Central [i.e. East] Germany in the last few years, which is why the DER is can barely satisfy one-third of the demand.

It is impossible to plan a private vacation trip to Soviet Zone recreational areas. Any and all hotels, guesthouses, pensions, homes, and private rooms have been monopolized by the FDGB or the DER. Those living in recreational areas are only allowed to have close relatives stay with them. Some farmers along the Baltic Sea coast have set up makeshift sleeping quarters in henhouses and barns to earn some extra income by taking in summer guests. At the beginning of this year, even these sorts of self-made lodgings were “registered” by the DER. Since the erection of the Berlin Wall, the FDGB and DER no longer organize any trips to Western or neutral countries. Only group travel to the Eastern Bloc countries is possible. The two vacation ships, the “Völkerfreundschaft” [“Friendship among Peoples”] and the “Fritz Heckert,” are no longer allowed to call at African or Scandinavian ports as they used to. They cruise the Black Sea throughout the summer. Every two weeks, airplanes from the eastern Lufthansa bring a new batch of vacationers to Constanza. Most foreign trips are distributed by the companies. The intelligentsia gets preferential treatment. SED propaganda chief [Gerhard] Eisler recently announced that 265,000 of the more than 17 million inhabitants of the Soviet Zone travelled to Eastern Bloc countries in 1962, above all to Czechoslovakia. Only 30,000 of them were private travelers.

For many of those seeking relaxation there is only one solution: camping. But even here the options are limited. Almost all camping lovers want to pitch their tents along the Baltic Sea coast, where there are [only] 61 tent cities with 271,000 spots, sixty percent of which are reserved for company retreats and youth groups. The central camping-spot referral agency in Stralsund had already received 1.5 million applications by April [of this year]. Many hopeful campers will therefore have to change their plans, because wild camping is not permitted along the coast. The Central [i.e. East] German vacationer is only allowed to spend time there under supervision.

¹ HO: *Handelsorganisation*, i.e. the GDR trade union – eds.

Otherwise, he might try to reach, via the Baltic Sea, those territories where it is easier to vacation.

Source: "Alle wollen an die Ostsee reisen" ["Everyone Wants to Travel to the Baltic Sea"], *Tagesspiegel*, May 23, 1963.

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