

The grass isn't always greener

The idea of working abroad has many attractions but the reality can be somewhat different. Two greenkeepers with experience of working in Germany explain some of the pitfalls.

For many years an accepted way of making a bit of money was to work abroad. Spending a few years on the continent involved coping with a foreign culture and a foreign language and a bit of homesickness but after that, unless you had decided to stay and make your life as an ex-pat, you would have enough experience to land a good job back home and enough money to make your old friends a tinge jealous.

That was perhaps the case a few years ago but now, particularly in Germany, times are hard and seeing a wanderlust well

rewarded is the exception rather than the rule.

Jeffrey Heath and Iain Douglas both work in Germany and have done for a number of years – long enough to have seen the difference the dismantling of the Berlin Wall has done for the united Germany's economy and the fortunes of British greenkeepers working in the country.

"If a young guy wants to take a chance and go over to Germany and maybe marry a German girl then fine. But taking a wife and family to Germany is fraught with difficulties," explained Jeffrey, who has been in Germany for 20 years and has indeed married a German.

Iain, and his Scottish wife, experienced some of those problems when they moved to Germany ten years ago and it was only their tenacity which saw them through the initial bad times.

"I had a good job in Scotland and was quite happy when the President of one golf club called and asked if I was interested. My wife and I were flown over, put up in a posh hotel and given first class treatment.

"The course had just been seeded and we saw it as something new, an adventure and a chance to bring in a new golf course. But they didn't tell me the truth about the golf course. They told me the greens were made of a sand soil mix but they were actually black ash from the base to the surface and I found out later that the course had not been seeded by a professional company," explained Iain.

"I liked what I saw when I went out originally so I went for it but when I got there I realised that all the greens were covered in fairway grass and some of the black ash had come to the surface. The greens were rock solid. Coupled with that the machinery that had been promised to me never came."

Another problem which Iain encountered was his salary.

"The high wage I'd been promised was cut by the high taxes in Germany and the high rents. All these things add up.

"I went to the committee and told them the wages I'd been promised were not working out and they said they'd solve my problems. They got my wife a job in a factory punching nails. This was to make up my wage and we fell for it because we are in a different system and by the time we'd been drawn in we had no choice," said Iain.

"For a couple of years my wife and I were worse off than we would have been at home but we decided to make a go of it and stayed."

He moved on to a few other clubs before ending up at a very good course where there is money to spend and the club is prepared to invest.

"Any married British greenkeeper who is well established in Britain but who thinks he's going to be better off in Germany has got to think very carefully," cautioned Jeffrey.

"You can be taken in by the salary but as much as 55% comes

up in tax and insurances and you have got to allow for high rents."

Jeffrey explained that in many cases the better jobs are already taken by Germans or established British greenkeepers. The clubs with the real money tend to go to greenkeepers they know.

"Often what happens is that a British greenkeeper is taken on for a short time to run the golf course and train up the local greenkeepers before being kicked off. Make sure your contract is in English so you can check it thoroughly."

Another pitfall occurs when a greenkeeper is given his budget and salary and is made responsible for paying his own taxes and medical insurance.

"When he gets a lump sum there is a great temptation to go out and spend it but if he gets found out by the German Government he gets thrown out of the country or sent to prison for tax evasion. I know examples of this happening," said Jeffrey.

The Government is extremely strong at the moment as it needs the money after reunification.

"I meet greenkeepers who have just arrived and they say they are in Germany just for the money and I meet them again six months later and they are beginning to get downhearted. What they do save they use to fly home and it's difficult for their wives to get jobs," said Iain.

"What we are trying to say is that life is not that good in Germany. Since the wall came down the country has been destroyed. Every time I go the filling station petrol is up in price."

Jeffrey and Iain would not discourage anyone from making the move if they are going as a stepping stone into mainland Europe and Italy, Spain or Austria and are prepared to accept whatever comes along.

"Just don't do it to make a lot of money and for a better way of living," is their warning.

There is one thing about which Jeffrey is adamant however.

"The best greenkeepers come from Britain because we can adapt to conditions so well. We fly the British flag abroad and are proud of the job we do abroad."

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