

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



GET THE WORD OUT

BY CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT | WASHINGTON POST

My parents moved from New Jersey to Passau, Germany, when I was a toddler. After a few weeks of playing with the neighborhood kids, I spoke fluent, Bavarian-accented German. That's probably not an option if you want to learn a language before your next international trip, but there are some new ways to learn key words and phrases before your departure.

"The ability to communicate basically can be done pretty quickly with almost any language," says Marc Greenberg, who directs the School of Languages, Literatures & Cultures at the University of

Kansas. "Acquiring literacy — writing, speaking in all circumstances, comprehension of all types of communication — takes a lot longer."

So why bother? Because not everyone speaks English. Knowing the difference between "Ja" and "Nein" can help you get around, and people generally are more receptive when you try to speak their language.

Besides playground immersion, the best way to learn a language used to be in a classroom. My parents used the Berlitz method when we moved to Europe. Today, there are all kinds of options that use technology to give you a linguistic edge, and perhaps even a cultural one.

The last few years have seen a proliferation of language-learning software. These programs — many of which have popular mobile apps — use such techniques as gamification, crowdsourcing, and adaptive algorithms to help beginners learn language basics.

For example, Memrise, a user-generated language-learning platform that uses flashcards as memory aids, can help you nail the basics. Memrise offers instruction in 25 languages, and its basic level is free, with some advanced features like progress statistics available at \$4.99 per month.

Duolingo, another program with free and premium levels, offers courses in 37 languages. It's one of my 16-year-old son's favorite language-learning tools, probably because it treats the process like a video game, allowing him to collect points for scoring well on the evaluations. Mango Languages, another well-regarded program, includes notes on cultural context and language. Many of its best features are available only to subscribers, who pay \$19.99 per month.

Rosetta Stone may be the best-known

language program and one of the most expensive. You can buy its classes — which focus on developing spoken fluency — through an online subscription or on a CD.

There's also Babbel. With more than 1 million active, paying subscribers, it's among the largest language programs. It costs \$6.95 to \$12.95 per month, depending on your level of use. According to the company, 73 percent of its users could have a short, simple conversation in a new language within five hours of using the app.

There are so many language apps, all claiming to be the best, that there are even sites to help you sort it out. You can find detailed reports on these programs on Compare Language Apps, an independent testing site run by Roumen Vesselinov, a professor at Queens College in New York.

Vesselinov told me that he's skeptical of some claims made about apps, particularly claims that you can learn a language quickly. "Language app users need to study, on average, 20 to 30 hours in a two-month period in order to cover the requirements" for the first semester of college Spanish, he says.

I've had access to most of these apps over the years, but found that they were either too complicated or too time-consuming to help me learn a language before an international trip. Maybe my experience of acquiring a language early in life and then trying to acquire another in a classroom

(three years of French, which didn't really stick) also contributed to my skepticism.

I'm not alone. Dane Kolbaba, who owns a pest-control company in Roselle, Ill., also has reservations about the programs, both in the classroom and online. He spent two years preparing for a move to Venezuela, which included intensive language classes.

"When I got to Venezuela, I was in for a rude awakening," he says. "I had no idea what people were saying to me and no idea how to respond. The accent was just too different for me than my American teachers. It took me about six months to really understand everything being said to me — and only after speaking Spanish 24 hours a day."

Martha Merritt, the dean of international education at the University of Richmond, uses Duolingo to build her vocabulary and to fine-tune a language she already knows. But learning Russian took her five years in a classroom and a year in Moscow.

"That isn't always a realistic expectation for language learning," she says.

The language experts I spoke with say you shouldn't allow the promises of a course or an app to fool you into thinking that you'll easily learn a language before your next international trip. Greenberg, the University of Kansas professor, says that having already learned at least a second language helps a lot, "so that language-learning isn't mysterious." And experts agree that there's no substitute for on-the-ground experience practicing and speaking a new language.

"Think of learning a foreign language like learning to drive or playing an instrument," says Maureen Linden, a retired French and Spanish teacher from Miami. "Be satisfied with the basics for a long time and work slowly forward."

What if you don't have the time? You can always cut corners and let the app do the talking. A real-time translation program like Google Translate can quickly, and reasonably accurately, translate simple English words and phrases into another language — and translate into English what someone is saying to you. Be sure to download the language so you are not reliant on cellular service.

Michele Frolla, a Londoner who writes a blog about travel and language, called the Intrepid Guide, says she recently turned to the Google Translate app while visiting Ostrava in the Czech Republic.

"I couldn't understand the staff at the train station, and needed to get a train to the airport," she says. "It worked like a charm."

A growing number of new apps can help travelers learn foreign languages — up to a point

HERE

WINE AND FOOD GALA RETURNS TO BOSTON

Foodies and oenophiles won't want to miss the 30th annual Boston Wine Festival at the Boston Harbor Hotel. For this milestone anniversary, festival founder Chef Daniel Bruce has assembled an all-star lineup of winemaker-hosted dinners, seminars, receptions, and brunches. No mere weekend-long festival, the extensive wine and food pairing series spans 11 weeks, from the kickoff grand opening reception on Jan. 11 through the final seminar and dinner on March 29. Returning favorites include the Battle of the Cabernets (Jan. 17 and 18); Meritage Madness (Jan. 25); and the Valentine's Day Dinner Dance (Feb. 16). New this year: Uncorked for a Cause (Feb. 15), a charity reception in partnership with Share our Strength, a walk-around style soiree featuring wines from around the world, small plates from Chef Bruce, and wine wall auction. Expand your evening with an overnight stay and receive a special room rate. Prices vary per event \$110-\$395. 888-660-WINE, www.bostonwinefestival.net

THERE

WALTZ FOR PRIDE

Pack your glitziest gowns and most outrageous wigs and head to Vienna for the 22nd annual Rainbow Ball. This classic Viennese ball for the LGBT and friends community makes its return to the Parkhotel Schönbrunn



on Jan. 26. The soiree opens with a polonaise — as custom dictates — followed by waltzes, foxtrots, and sambas. A disco, rainbow casino, various live acts and the public quadrille at midnight add spice to the event.

www.hosiwien.at/en/rainbowball. Another LGBT highlight of the year ahead is EuroPride 2019, which returns to Vienna for the second time since 2001. In addition to parties galore, more

than a million visitors are expected to attend the two-week series of informative events, discussions, and cultural offerings. June 1-16. europride2019.at/en/home



BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE SETS ON DISPLAY

Movie buffs heading to Los Angeles this winter can visit the lot of a real working studio — and peek behind the camera to see how some of their favorite films and TV shows are made — on the Warner Bros. Studio Tour Hollywood. From "Friends" and "The Big Bang Theory" to "Harry Potter" and "Wonder Woman," fans can touch, tour, and visit the real sets and soundstages on the iconic 110-acre backlot. New this season: On the tour's finale at "Stage 48: Script to Screen," see authentic props and costumes from two of this year's biggest box-office hits: "Crazy Rich Asians" and "A Star Is Born." Tours depart every 30 minutes, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Advanced bookings are strongly recommended. Adults \$65-\$68; ages 8-12 \$55-\$58. 818-977-8687, www.wbstudiotour.com/studio-tour

EVERYWHERE

PORTABLE FOOTREST EASES FATIGUE

Feel squished in your economy seat when flying? Those looking for a way to relieve pressure on their legs may want to consider the Andyer Portable Foot Rest. Easy to pack in your briefcase or carry-on, the lightweight traveling footrest attaches to the bracket of your tray table, allowing your legs to float and swing. Folds flat when not in use. Of course it's also important to get up and stretch on long flights. But



when you have to be seated — like on 95 percent of the flight — the footrest may ease your legs' fatigue. \$12. www.amazon.com/Andyer-Portable-Adjustable-Accessories-Footrests/dp/B072V9BKKX

STYLISH HIKING SHOES FOR TOWN OR COUNTRY

Hit the trails in 2019 with Trailhead, the newest footwear offering for men and women by Lems Shoes. Whether you are biking, hiking, or urban trekking, these minimalist hiking shoes feature a low profile rubber tread that works on rugged paths and city pavements. They're engineered with a wide toe box that naturally spreads the toes to avoid common foot ailments, and a 4-millimeter heel drop for proper body alignment. Lightweight and sturdy, the shoes are crafted with microfiber and air mesh plus a full length rubber outsole. Available in three stylish colors. \$130. lemsshoes.com/products/womens-trailhead-hiking-trailshoe

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