

## Germany, the eco hero?

By Martina Rowley

Barely recovered from jetlag and the strains of cross-Atlantic travel, I am collecting my thoughts on my observations during my recent holiday to my old home country, Germany. Many years overdue, I was also on a quest to refresh my knowledge on some of the environmental initiatives the country has in place and which I have always thought were well ahead of North America and other countries.

One area that always interests me is transportation. While in transit from Frankfurt airport to my first stop, I noticed immediately the greater presence of small passenger vehicles, those referred to as economy or compact cars, as well as many more station wagons. 'Ha!?', I thought, 'sensible Germans are still driving the smallest possible cars and not succumbing to the North American obsession with gas-guzzling SUVs.' Alas, my glee was short-lived when, after one week in the country, I saw a noticeable number of SUVs everywhere and to me that was a new phenomenon.

In 2016, 3.7 million new cars registered in Germany were SUVs; more than six times as many as 15 years earlier. This has become a concern to three of the top political parties, who are calling for a limit to the growth of SUV sales. They cite their high emission levels and want to urge carmakers to advertise low-emission vehicles instead to abide by German air pollution values. As for real low-emission cars, an unconfirmed number suggests that as of December 2017, a total of 129,246 plug-in electric cars have been registered.

Regardless of the overall 63.7 million vehicles registered there in 2018, the country has a fantastic railway network! Wherever I needed to go for my numerous visits and sightseeing trips, there were regional or local train connections. While I was still feeling envious of this, and bemoaning Canada's and Ontario's sadly sparse network, I reminded myself that of course Germany's high population number and density make such an elaborate network so much more feasible in terms of ridership and profit (though I have not researched the numbers yet).

With a total population in 2019 of 83.5 million and a land mass of 357,386 km<sup>2</sup>, it is but a third of Ontario's 1.076 million km<sup>2</sup> with its population of 'just' 14.32 million. Is less density the only reason for the meagre options of rail travel in Ontario, I wonder? And what reason comes first? the chicken (railway and lack thereof) or the egg (cars and the obsession or mindset to drive everywhere instantly)?

While there were many cars on German roads and highways, just as in any developed country with a healthy economy, trains were very well used for daily commuting to work, as well as trips for leisure purposes. I noticed just how many people travelled with their bicycles in tow for easier commuting to and from their final destinations. Even dogs were taken along far more often than I have seen anywhere else. Whereas German railways seem to be thriving, Canada's appear to go to the dogs more often than not.

What I also saw everywhere from train windows were wind farms. No hilltop seemed to go unused for the turbines, marked with a broad red stripe at the end of each gigantic blade. No wonder? 29,000 turbines take up a good amount of space. A few of my friends expressed their disdain for them, citing the loss of agricultural land and forest areas for their setup, unsightliness and the number of birds that are injured or killed? the same reasons given here in Canada? but the great majority of Germans does support them. Nevertheless, their onshore wind industry has slowed dramatically in recent years. Why, I have yet to read up on.

Another fabulous thing I noticed more of were solar panels on residential homes. They were everywhere! Sadly, I was told the financial incentives homeowners received years ago, as well as favourable rates to sell their electricity to the national grid, have been dropping significantly in recent years, probably making new installations less worthwhile.

Instant financial gratification can be found outside many grocery stores and other locations through: bottle deposit refunds. Soft drinks, beer and mixed spirits packaged in PET plastic, aluminium cans or glass carry 8 to 25 cents deposit, which is refunded when

you drop your container into a machine. Bottles or cans clearly state when they carry a deposit, making it easy to recognise. I would think that targeting people's wallets helps decrease unlawful and unsightly dumping of cans and bottles, while increasing recycling rates.

Germany did this by instating a Bottle Bill in 2003 that makes manufacturers responsible for taking back their product packaging ? and it works. They recover 96% of aluminium cans and 98.5% of PET bottles! For Canada, the numbers are turned around: 90% of plastics are NOT recycled. In typical German fastidiousness, which I also have in my genes, residential waste and glass recycling is also far more precise: glass packaging is separated by white, green, and brown or coloured.

After over two weeks in Germany, my eco-bubble on their superiority may have a few small leaks in some places, though overall, I still recognise them as the environmental leaders they truly are. And now please forgive me, I need another jetlag recovery nap.