

Finced and confused in Germany

18.56: Dusseldorf Airport Station. Next train to Dusseldorf Hauptbahnhof platform four. We board after asking the guard if this was the correct train. Seconds later the same man said: "You are on the wrong train."

We were shocked. Yes, it was the train to Dusseldorf Hauptbahnhof, one stop, around five minutes. He summoned the ticket collector. "You are fined 60E each." Why? "You are on an express train and not a local train."

We appealed but were told: "You should have seen that. I would be fined in your country. 14 days to pay."

Shocked, we continued to Monchengladbach after changing at Dusseldorf and asking several other passengers if we were on the right train. We did not want another fine.

We were stunned and it still rankles. Yes, we were on the wrong type of train, but a warning would have seemed more appropriate. Welcome to Germany!

There were several other occasions when we were bemused. Take the entry gate for the EuroHockey Championships at Monchengladbach. Day One and ticket holders turned up with water bottles. They were allowed in but only up to 500ml.

However, some fans were told: "That bag is too big. You must go to the bag store and pick it up later." A 2E charge was

levied.

Day Two: Water bottles not allowed in and you had to empty the liquid into a black bag. Food was also not allowed in and stewards would not listen to the allergy argument.

Dump sandwiches in the black bag we were told. A few steps inside the ground and people were filling their empty bottles with water at taps used to wash your hands after going to the portaloo.

People were then forced to queue the food kiosks. No warnings appeared to have been given on the ticket or in the entry area that we could see. Bad vibes again. Next day, temporary water taps were installed yards inside the ground. The water was hot as it had been heated by the sun. The taps were removed during the tournament. Confused.com.

Why were we there? To watch the EuroHockey Championships, A Division, featuring Scotland and, apart from the water and food issue, which angered not just Scottish fans but home supporters, the event was well run. Scotland came seventh, by the way, thanks to a 2-1 win over Spain in their last game, a historic result.

So, what of Monchengladbach? Well, it has seen better days, that's the best I can say. Soulless main street, empty shops and very little to do, apart from a museum, we were not tempted, and an outdoor, swimming pool.

This is a gem of a place with a leisure pool and a competition pool for those who want to swim and enjoy quietly lounging around the pond. The on-site cafe served reasonably priced snacks and drinks. No alcohol on the two days we visited. Cost? 8E a day. Value, and the weather was great.

The main square had a period feel and that is where the tourist information office sits. We went in and, frankly, it was a waste of time. They did not even know the hockey was on

at the SparkassenPark and it was the biggest event in town for ten days, 70,000 people attended during the 40-games played. A map please? 1E.

Borussia Monchengladbach football next door to the hockey park then took centre stage. Interestingly, fans came off buses, not coaches but town buses, with empty bottles of beer. Volunteers were there to collect the empties and we were told that the bottles were returned and that the cash raised went to charity. Enterprising and the return scheme works. SNP take note.

Cologne is near, with its much-talked about cathedral, and easily accessible by train, but we opted for Dusseldorf, 40 minutes on the train. We approached the prospect nervously and there was nobody to ask in the station and no ticket office so one lady helped us as even our phrase book was not explicit enough.

You do everything on a machine and once you get your ticket you have to punch it into another machine. Thankfully, we did the right things and boarded the train.

Dusseldorf Hauptbahnhof is busy. We find a help booth near the entrance and the incumbents were very helpful. We clicked on Google maps and strode out of the station in search of The Rhein, the longest river in Germany. Surely, it would be easy to find. Wrong, but we got there eventually.

Cruise boats leave at regular intervals and we boarded, not without more confusion about where it was going and the price. The deck hands cast off and we waited, and waited, and waited for a commentary. Nothing. It was just a cruise up river.

More confusion as your ticket allowed a drink, beer, wine or soft. Oh, we have run out of big glasses you must come back if you want more. We did and were topped up and 45 minutes out we docked at a village.

Nobody could really explain what was there and if we could stop off and when the next boat would return so we stayed put. On came a man and his wife with bikes. They had cycled 23k from Dusseldorf and did not fancy cycling back.

They were charming and turned into great tour guides. They suggested making our way back to the station through the old town of Dusseldorf with bars, restaurants and wee shops. It was busy but had a charm. And there was a tourist information office where the staff were extremely helpful. One wonders why it was not at the station, but perhaps we missed it.

Dusseldorf is a mix of old and new and it has good shops and a decent park. Signposting needs upgrading but, otherwise, a decent place. Back to Monchengladbach. Our self-catering apartment was in Hotel Select, around 15 minutes walk from the station. A taxi would not take us from the station saying it was close and we found it only thanks to the intervention of an extremely kind Good Samaritan from Ukraine who went out of her way to walk us to the hotel and would not accept anything for doing that.

Hotel Select was clean, comfortable, with a good bed, an extremely helpful owner and staff, good wi-fi and SkySports but we could not fathom how to receive it. No washing machine, but that was the only drawback and it was in a quiet street near a bio supermarket where prices were good.

Buses were frequent and you can buy saver tickets at the bus station for set allocations of time. We strolled around the town and stopped off in Hoffmanns, a classy cafe near one of the city parks where you can watch the world go by.

It is next to a herd of brass donkeys street furniture but nobody was able to explain why they are there. We ate in several restaurants and our particular favourite, and a pick of other Scots who had made the trip, was Mokka which served superb food, decently priced and had quality staff who spoke

extremely good English.

Nearby was Pizzeria Nido, good food and atmosphere and run by an Italian who has been in Germany 30 years. Dated decor but good for those who love artex.

Bei Michael and Tapa Loca on the main square is also worth a visit as is the Vietnamese just around the corner. Would I go back to Monchengladbach? No. Would I return to Dusseldorf, no, seen it and got the T-shirt, but I would fly in there, 1hr 20min from Edinburgh direct with Eurowings and move on.

PICTURE: Main shopping street in Monchengladbach. Picture ***Nigel Duncan***