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German Büsingen – in Switzerland

The story of how Büsingen became a German enclave is complex. The village once even belonged to Austria. Politically, Büsingen belongs to Germany but economically it's very Swiss. After the Second World War, 96% of Büsingen residents demanded integration into Switzerland. However, as there were differences of opinion between Germany and Switzerland about the whole area, Büsingen has remained a German enclave – so much for democracy. The village size is 7.62 sq km, the length of its border is 17.141 km. 123 boundary stones mark the border between Büsingen and the surrounding Swiss communities.

Under the treaty between Germany and Switzerland which came into force in 1967, Büsingen is integrated into Swiss customs territory. Swiss regulations apply to farming/agriculture. Switzerland is responsible for food and supplies for the population of Büsingen in a state of emergency. In health care certain sectors, for example the inspection of food and drugs, also fall under Swiss law.

Local mayor Gunnar Lang has been in the job for the past 17 years and is proud of the place and its unique role.

"We have a land and property register here and we have a register office. You can get married here and register births. We can cover everything."

What Lang can't do, although he's tried hard, is to prevent the exodus of locals. "We are subject to the relatively high German income tax, and we're not very competitive with the surrounding Swiss communes." A second problem is that those village residents working in Schaffhausen are obliged to have Swiss health insurance: "Unfortunately the Swiss demand from people who live in the EU a higher health insurance contribution than in Switzerland. Many people are therefore doubly burdened." The

reverse side of the coin is that when people retire, the tax situation is turned around and the German tax is in most cases more advantageous than the Swiss. That has led to a situation in which Swiss pensioners are attracted to Büsingen.

Down the road at the local hotel, the lovingly renovated and dignified Alte Rheinmühle (Old Rhine Mill), manager Andreas Fischer pays part of his taxes to Germany and part to Switzerland. And for the employees there are two different social security systems.

There are other peculiarities, too. "It's very special because people who come to the hotel can't believe they're in Germany in the European Union, yet they have to pay in Swiss francs." And then there's the menu that has to be put together for both Swiss and German customers.

"The things they like to eat are really different. For example, German people coming on Sunday want to have a nice piece of veal or beef with perhaps Spätzli (egg noodles). The Swiss prefer to have some fish and more the French cuisine. We have to see to it that both are happy with our menu and also our prices because most southern German restaurants are a little bit cheaper than ours. The reason is that we have to buy our food and beverages in Switzerland and there the prices are higher."

Walking around the village, you can spot the local coat of arms here and there. It features a bunch of grapes, which weren't grown any more up until fairly recently.

Farmer von Ow volunteered to remedy that and was given the job of planting vines on municipal land in the 1990s, but it was no easy task.

"We had to ask first for permission from Germany and they said it was nothing to do with them, and then from Switzerland, which gave us approval. We've

now had an entry in the Swiss vineyard register since 1993," he said. His first vintage was bottled in 1997 and he now produces about 7,000 bottles of Riesling Sylvaner (Müller-Thurgau) and Blauburgunder a year, mostly sold in local shops and restaurants.

Büsingen has bathed in its special status for many years and since it pays indirect taxes to Bern - VAT, tobacco tax, spirit and others - it receives about SFr 1.75 million back. "This is a lot of money for a small village," concedes mayor Lang, "but you also have to take into account that we have special expenditures that no other German community has."

These include giving about SFr 700'000 to Switzerland for school fees and SFr 100'000 so that Büsingen can maintain Swiss postal bus connections.

Wouldn't life be much easier if Büsingen were a part of Switzerland? Lang said there would be certainly advantages if there were clear conditions.

"You'd have to change the constitution in both countries to accomplish this ... and therefore I think it's not realistic. It would be a dream and one should not dream too much in politics."

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