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Roving carpenters keep tradition alive

With their black corduroy suits, flared trousers, travelling bundle and broad brimmed hats, the hitch-hiking journeymen look like characters from a bygone age. Which is really what they are, young craftsmen who "wander" for three years and a day, faithfully following the principles of an 800-year-old European tradition "on the waltz".

After working for almost two months on the restoration of the fifteenth century town hall in the western Swiss lakeside town of Murten, two young German wanderers decided it was time for them to move on.

Fellow members of the association, whose headquarters are 1,000 kilometres away in Kiel, Germany, may have lent a hand when the town hall was built in 1416, or worked on renovations and additions to the building in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Today's journeymen take this historical significance in their stride. Working on such an old building is not awe-inspiring, according to Krasnenko. "It just means you have hundreds of years of dust on your head".

Krasnenko, from 100 kilometres north of Hamburg, has been on the road for a year. He teamed up with fellow journeyman, 21-year-old slater Kunkel from eastern Germany along the way.

The conditions for embarking on this age-old custom are quite strict. "Gesellen", as the travellers are known in German, must be aged between 20 and 30, unattached, with no children and no debts.

They are men, and in a few cases women, who have completed their training in one of the building crafts and the idea is that they head off to see the world and perfect their skills.

Once on the road, the journeymen are not allowed to return closer than 50km from their home town for three years and a day. They don't have mobile phones and are not supposed to

use public transport. They walk and hitch their way from workplace to workplace, turning heads as they go.



As journeymen Krasnenko (left) and Kunkel cannot go within 50km from their home town for three years

"The idea is not to get rich in money terms but to get rich in experience," Krasnenko said. Indeed they left home with €5 and are meant to return with the same amount.

The wanderers are not supposed to go more than a week without work and should not spend more than six months in any one place.

In Murten, the German duo were taken on by local carpenter Bosch for the town hall job. But as required by tradition, this was not arranged in advance. Krasnenko and Kunkel just turned up at Berntor, a small bar which is known as the wanderers' contact point in the town.

It wasn't long before Bosch, himself a former journeyman, heard about the newcomers and was able to offer them work and arrange temporary lodgings.

Krasnenko and Kunkel also presented themselves at the town council offices when they arrived in Murten, as custom dictates. The wanderers have a logbook in which they collect the official stamps of the places they visit on their travels. In the past this would have been equivalent to a work permit.

The eye-catching costume is symbolic as well as practical. It

identifies the wanderers as respectable journeymen and displays emblems of their craft and the association they belong to.

"The eight buttons on the waistcoat are for the hours we work per day and the six buttons on the jacket represent six working days per week," Kunkel said.

The tradition has been undergoing a popular revival and there are more young people on the road now than a generation ago. With a strong presence in German-speaking countries, versions of the tradition are also followed in French-speaking Switzerland and France, Belgium and Scandinavia.

The German wanderers in Murten were armed with a list of addresses in different countries of contact points, usually guest-houses, allowing them to follow a spontaneous route with a network of support. There are about ten Swiss journeymen currently on the road, travelling as members of the German association.

Krasnenko and Kunkel are happy to live a simpler, less hectic lifestyle, separate from the age of instant and constant communication. "You could say the others have the clock but we have time," Krasnenko said.

The practice, which was an alternative to remaining as a craft master's employee, served the dual purpose of providing further training while keeping newly-qualified competition at bay.

Banned in Germany during the Nazi years and not workable under the communist regime in East Germany, the tradition is currently enjoying a popular revival but is still only practised by a handful of newly qualified carpenters, roofers, slaters and stonemasons.

The brotherhoods of journeyman, who united to defend their interests against the masters' powerful craft guilds, are seen as the pre-runners of modern trade unions.

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