

20018 Why Germans are flying less

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Malte Kleinwort, 46, never felt bad about flying. That's until last year, when Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg changed his mind. Now he is one of a growing number of Germans to abandon short-haul flights in favour of the train.

"Before, I didn't feel any flight shame at all really," said Kleinwort, a research associate at the Ruhr University Bochum. "I felt I shouldn't fly too much, but it was cheap and I got to my destination quickly." Then, last summer, he took his nine-year-old daughter to a Fridays for Future demonstration, the weekly climate protests inspired by Thunberg. Hearing activists' pleas for travellers to use more environmentally friendly modes of transport, Kleinwort felt moved to make a change. Now he belongs to a group of 3,000 German-speaking academics who have pledged not to fly distances under 1,000 km (621 miles) – journeys of up to 12 hours on the train.

Passenger numbers on German domestic flights fell sharply last year, with the German Airports Association (ADV) registering a 12% drop year on year in November.

So, is flight shame to blame? "I can't see anything more plausible than flight shame to explain these changes," says [Konrad] Gössling, [a sociologist]. "There has been a massive debate in Germany. What we are witnessing is a social norm change now translating into a change in behaviour." Others are less sure. Industry leaders point to economic factors for the shrinking passenger numbers on domestic flights often frequented by business travellers. "Essentially, the falling passenger numbers have to do with the declining German economy," said Ralph Beisel, managing director of the ADV airport association. "People aren't forgoing important flights, at least not for climate reasons," agrees Eric Heymann, an analyst at Deutsche Bank. "Economic conditions are behind the decrease in air traffic. If a firm sees that the economy isn't doing so well, they might reconsider flights to make savings." "It's too early to conclude that there is an impact on traffic in Germany based on environmental concerns," [he added]. "It's more the rationalisation of networks, overcapacity in the market and the weak profitability of some players over recent years."

And when it comes to tourism, increasing numbers of Germans are flying on intercontinental flights, with a year on year growth of 1.8% in intercontinental passengers through German airports, reflecting continued growth in air travel worldwide.

So, if Germans are still flying, why aren't they taking domestic flights? The answer is simple. Within Germany, travellers prefer the train.

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