

WWOOF - Willing Workers On Organic Farms

Ein Erfahrungsbericht von Micky

The main street of Ahndorf cuts Hof Harwege in half - on one side is the family's house and the farm, on the other side there are an additional three buildings: the second house is for visitors and WWOOFers, Heiner's office, packing and distribution, and cooling and storage rooms; another houses the six pigs, their stalls, and their fertilizing waste; the third sheds tractors and other vehicles for use at various markets, especially in and around Hamburg, which is a one hour drive away.

The people we find at Hof Harwege, 250 years under family management, are often changing. I was there for 6 weeks and met WWOOFers from California, (opposite my Pennsylvania), two sisters from Dublin, one from Switzerland, and one from Bavaria. Among the permanent workers who guide us inexperienced farmhands are Danuta from Poland, and Jan who lives on the farm, both with an extensive, useful knowledge of farmwork. As for the rest of the Harweges, Brigitte and the youngest daughter work in the farm-owned shop directly in a beautiful quarter of Hamburg. Among those to be seen less often are the oldest son and middle daughter, Stephan who transports the ABO-Kisten on Fridays, Susanne, also a marketer, and a few other regular characters.

As the day begins, a relative term depending on the WWOOFer, we walk out the large wooden door, say hello to Balu, who beckons with a stick in mouth, past the Harwege house, through a covered gateway, and the farm greets us along with the golden sun to the right. A central grassway cuts the farm in half and runs past the entrances to greenhouses and rows of produce alike. Immediately to the left we find corn, edible flowers, white mangold and various salads. Thereafter is the first greenhouse - a large tomato shelter - ten rows by thirty plants which reach upwards of six feet and yield about fifty fruits at any given time - off the vine delicious... There are still four greenhouses - on the right side another for tomatoes, then the largest for zucchini, four types of cucumber (up to eight feet tall), green bell peppers, red mangold, and basil. Then past a newly plowed field ripe for planting of winter salads, two smaller greenhouses, one for peas and beans, the other for two types of parsley. Still further are strawberry fields (forever, when picking), more beans and numerous types of salads and finally a potato patch. On the left side past the first tomato house continues rows of peas and more beans, more salads, and another type of smaller, tastier strawberries. Further still is Jan and Elizabeth's living quarters, surrounded by an impressive tee garden, and fallow field. This comprises the main farm - a tractor ride away and we discover the immensity of the long-standing Hof Harwege, complete with rows of rye, red and yellow potatoes, and a cow herd of about 40 heads.

This wonderful landscape finds itself in the meadowed and forested Luneburger Heide, a Naturpark which widely extends itself to the Elbe. Like most forested areas in Germany, the trees are young. Biking through one such forest on a warm July Sunday, I picked wild blueberries for an hour or so, returning with a tote of the tiny treats and twenty tics. A few kilometers away is Dahlenburg where we buy the few things that are not already provided at the farm. Der Herr of the farm, Heiner, is a seldom seen and enjoyable boss. For the most part, we work at our own steady pace at whatever employment suits us. Of course, there are times when certain tasks must be completed. The various employments include harvesting/picking, planting, winding and leading the cucumbers and tomatoes with string as they grow upwards, weeding, and feeding pigs and the calf who lives away from the herd.

My stay at Hof Harwege was truly an enjoyable experience. I found good voluntary work, and only friendly and enjoyable people. I hope to return someday when I am once again in Germany to see that the farm is still running - under management from an aware, caring group.

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