

Europe Without Borders

"Not so fast, Bucko..."

by Joe Hall

In 1985, five of the European Union (EU) countries agreed to facilitate travel within their alliance by generally eliminating border passport checkpoints. To do this, they signed a treaty at the city of Schengen in Luxembourg – the so-called “Schengen Agreement.”

The Schengen Agreement now includes some 25 European countries. While certain EU member states like Ireland and Great Britain decided not to join the Schengen Agreement and, therefore, still have mandatory passport checks in place, some non-EU member states like Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland did join the Agreement.

So, nowadays, when you cross the border into any neighboring country of Germany, you may well see deserted passport control facilities. But be careful and be prepared. That open border may not be so open.

Regarding passport control. Unfortunately, the United States is not a member of the Schengen Agreement. What that means to US Forces, members of the civilian component, and family members is that you still need to have your passport with you when you take leave/leisure travel from Germany into any other European country. As an alternative, uniformed personnel normally can travel on their military ID cards and leave or travel orders.

You may not get stopped at the border, but remember the phrase above – “generally eliminating.” You still could be stopped and checked, not only at the border (especially at times of heightened security) but at any time and anywhere during your visit. Without your passport (or military ID card and leave form or travel orders), you are subject to being arrested and possibly fined/prosecuted and/or expelled from the country you had planned to visit. Definitely, a lousy day-trip experience.

Then there are custom controls. Start with Switzerland. Although the Swiss have generally dropped their passport controls, they still have an active customs control policy – so you have to slow down when entering Switzerland and may be stopped at the border to declare your goods or have your trunk inspected. The other Schengen countries generally have dropped their customs inspections, but inspections still could happen at the border or they could be conducted by roving customs patrols several miles from the border.

Finally, for official travel requirements, you need to have the appropriate ID card and NATO travel orders for military, or an official duty passport for US Government civilian employees.

The electronic foreign clearance guide: <https://www.fcg.pentagon.mil/fcg.cfm> sets out required documentation, approvals, and clearance lead times in detail, and should be consulted well in advance of any official or unofficial travel you intend to take outside of Germany.

So, get out there and enjoy visiting the other countries of Europe, but when it comes to your ID card and leave or travel orders, or your civilian passport - like the commercial says, “Don’t leave home without it.”



Memorial at Schengen, commemorating the signing of the Schengen Agreement. Schengen is located on the Mosel River in the beautiful German-French-Luxembourg tri-border area approximately 90 minutes from Kaiserslautern. A short day-trip there will reveal the benefits of the treaty.

