

How to  
**BARTER** for  
**PARADISE**



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**PARADISE**

My Journey Through 14 Countries,  
Trading Up from an Apple to a House in Hawaii

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# CONTENTS

<b>Prologue:</b> Hawaii, Here I Come!	vii
<b>1. Germany:</b> Bitten by the Bug	1
<b>2. Austria:</b> My First No	17
<b>3. Switzerland:</b> Help, the Pleiadians Are Coming!	21
<b>4. India:</b> Sled Masala	27
<b>5. Australia:</b> Parasite Exchange	61
<b>6. New Zealand:</b> Help at the End of the World	75
<b>7. Singapore:</b> My First Billionaire Buddy	81
<b>8. Thailand:</b> The Great Trade-Out	85
<b>9. Tanzania:</b> Africa till You Drop	89
<b>10. Kenya:</b> A World-Class Runner among Peers	113
<b>11. Germany:</b> Home Sweet Home	121
<b>12. Ukraine:</b> Illusory Beauty	127
<b>13. Portugal:</b> Bartering by a Thread	141
<b>14. Brazil:</b> Lederhosen and Folk Music under the Palm Trees	145
<b>15. USA:</b> A Microcosm of the World	155
<b>16. Hawaii:</b> The Showdown	177
<b>Epilogue</b>	187



# HAWAII, HERE I COME!

Mars, Pluto, and Jupiter were my constant companions when I was a child and nothing fascinated me more than the universe. I still remember how one Christmas I asked for every book that had anything to do with the realm of the stars. Of course, I also asked for the newest toy space station with a moon unit and extra intergalactic telescope. One year later I got a real telescope. Its 32X magnification, additional finder scope, and various sunlight filters infinitely increased my desire to be near the stars. But before the Easter Bunny even came in the spring, my telescope had disappeared from the living room cabinet. My fear of the neighbor, whom I observed with my telescope and who had made it clear with his emphatic waving that he would rather watch his evening TV show alone, created knots in the pit of my stomach.

So, for better or worse, I focused on the things that our own planet had to offer. I devoted myself to the far-flung regions of the earth—initially with my student atlas. The most far-flung region that I could find was, without a doubt, the group of islands known as Hawaii. That moment, I declared Hawaii as my dream destination. White beaches kissed by low-hanging palms, tropical mountain peaks, water as clear as glass . . . During puberty, the fantasy of flower-bedecked, dancing Hawaiian girls added itself to this enticing list. So what was more fitting than the thought of owning my own home there? A Hawaiian dream house!

From then on, the front of my wardrobe was decorated with a poster of Hawaii, which I unfortunately had to cut in half to continue opening the doors. The sides of it were gradually decorated with Hawaiian postcards, maps of the islands, and of course, the state license plate with the famous rainbow.

The Hawaiian dream house unfortunately remained a dream as I started my career; however, I was able to live out my wanderlust.

I didn't just gaze at my student atlas—I traveled to seventy countries and made my passion into a career by writing about my travels. I was a curious visitor to the Yanomami Indians in the Amazon who laughed at me for managing to miss shooting an anteater that was so close by. I was able to visit bizarre capsule hotels in Tokyo and I went up against Sumo wrestlers. At the Spanish Tomatina Festival, I wore white and had tomatoes thrown at me. I traveled to Antarctica on an expedition ship, and Queen Elizabeth gave me a stern look when I showed up to her fiftieth Jubilee at Buckingham Palace dressed as Prince Henry VIII (no joke).

But none of that ever got me a house in Hawaii. What to do? Should I travel to Hawaii and appear on a millionaire bachelorette show? Or would a headline appear in a tabloid one day proclaiming, "German Travel Writer Behind Bars after Attempting to Squat in a House in Hawaii!" Unlikely!

I remembered that on my last trip through North America I had met a young Canadian who successfully bartered up from a paper clip to a house within a year on an online bartering website. A paperclip as the down payment on a house—not bad, I thought! Even if the house wasn't in sunny Hawaii.

Unfortunately, I'm not very good at closing deals online (I've still never won an auction on eBay), and also unfortunately, I didn't have a year to spend on the project. Nevertheless, the idea fascinated me. Why couldn't I do what I had been doing for years—travelling the world—except this time, I would barter. I would give myself six months to travel the world and barter, barter, barter. In this way I could learn an unbelievable amount about trading and the value of goods in different cultures—fascinating! And totally coincidentally, I would get closer and closer to my dream. At the end, I could unlock the door to my Hawaiian dream house. Sounds simple enough, right?

It wasn't simple at all. But I was lucky: my reputation as a man of extravagant travels preceded me. The German TV station ZDFneo offered to finance my bartering world tour along with two cameramen,

Jakob and Dominik. The deal was that I had to make my bartered-for house in Hawaii available to anyone—the viewers and readers—who wanted to vacation there and could offer a trade for it. I would have two hundred days and I had to set foot on all six continents to learn about and report on the culture of barter on each of them. I accepted the offer enthusiastically. Soon, I would be moving into my house in Hawaii as a bartering expert!

Standing in her apartment doorway, my neighbor burst into laughter when I told her about my plan. She said I could leave the key to my apartment with her if I decided I never wanted to come back from Hawaii. I watched her walk down the stairs and heard her murmur as she shook her head: “A house in Hawaii . . . what nonsense. . . . No wonder the natives and the Queen thought he was ridiculous!”

Maybe she was right. But twenty-five years had gone by since I hung that poster of Hawaii on my wardrobe. The way I saw it, it was time to get down to it and make this dream a reality. I believe everyone should try to fulfill their dreams sometime in their lives. Who doesn't have one of those constant dreams that accompanies them through life? And there's always that voice in your head saying that it isn't a good idea, isn't appropriate, isn't realistic, and that you couldn't do it anyway.

But this voice might be wrong. And so, after a twenty-five-year delay, I was off.



# BITTEN BY THE BUG



# Germany

I'm standing at a little fruit stand in Mainz, attempting to buy an apple—my first object to barter with. It needs to be a pretty, healthy, delicious apple—an organic one. In Berlin organic is trendy.

I proudly explain my project to the salesman. I tell him that this very apple is my startup capital for a Hawaiian dream house, and that I'm well on the path to fulfilling a childhood dream via persistent bartering. But before I can trade my seventy-nine cents for the organic apple, the salesman's mood darkens. These young people with their crazy ideas. Always more, always farther away, always knowing better. They're never happy with what they have. Can anyone these days still enjoy the simple things?

I stare back at him. I had never expected this kind of reaction.

I take my apple but the uneasy feeling remains. I begin to have my first doubts about the real appeal of this sort of transaction. How would people in Asia, Africa, and America react to me attempting to trade for my own benefit? Not like this fruit seller, I hoped.

I approach my first potential trade partner, a middle-aged tourist from Konstanz, and I forget my rocky start. Without a long explanation I offer him the now bitten apple (you should always be sure of the quality of your offering) for a spontaneous barter. The tourist laughs and offers me an already opened pack of cigarettes. We shake hands very officially to seal the deal. When he leaves, I watch him from a distance for a while and see how he happily bites into the apple.

I'm pleased that I don't have to take the reaction of the fruit seller as a bad omen. I've already increased the value of my first object after one trade. And the fact that my bartering partner received something healthy in exchange for something unhealthy is a pleasant thought. So now I have sixteen cigarettes in my hand, which I can only offer to a smoker, obviously. After a while I seem to have fewer and fewer cigarettes. Soon, I run into a mother who is walking with her daughter. I make sure that the daughter is old enough; after all, we're talking about cigarettes here.

But unfortunately, the two women pass up the offer. They just quit smoking, the daughter explains, but I'm not ready to give up so easily:

Me: "These cigarettes are particularly good."

Mother: "No thank you, we don't need them."

Daughter: "No, we quit."

Me: "One little drag after dinner can't hurt . . ."

Mother: "Oh yes it can."

After that very clear statement, I find myself standing alone again with my cigarettes in the town square. A husband and wife walk up to me with sad smiles, as if they pity the poor guy selling cigarettes even though it's impossible to lure people in that way these days. I explain to them that I am trying to move into my Hawaiian dream house in two hundred days. The man rushes past me and gestures wildly to his wife that she shouldn't get involved with crazy guys on the street. However, the wife senses the chance for a little promo of her own. She is an author, and pulls out her freshly printed book on Saarland, a village in Germany, from her purse. I leaf through it and among photos of landscapes and darling villages a chapter title catches my eye: "SUCCESS!" is printed in fat letters at the top of the page. Yes, Saarland is known to produce successful people—ever since Oskar Lafontaine's (from Saarland) political career took off, no one can deny it. Maybe I should take this word as a positive sign for my mission. The author signs the book for me, takes the cigarettes, and follows her disapproving husband.

I start reading up on Saarland so that I have some good arguments for my third barter: Saarland has the same population as Cologne, has six highways, and you can get culinary delicacies there such as Dibbelabbes or dandelion salad. Will that persuade someone?

A saleswoman in the town square is interested in my offering because she is so taken by my knowledge of Dibbelabbes. She retrieves a kitschy rabbit statue made of silver metal from her shopping bag. She was going to give it to an employee as a gift, but I convince her that the book with the Dibbelabbes recipe would bring her a lot more enjoyment. She agrees but for inexplicable reasons does not want to

part with the bed of moss on which the little rabbit sits. We argue back and forth until she finally gives it up, mostly because she is in a rush.

Now the silver bunny sits on the dashboard of my van, wrapped in nice paper and traveling toward Siegburg in North Rhine-Westphalia. On the way there, I try my luck at a rest stop off the highway, but it is apparently the wrong place to offer up a kitschy silver rabbit. The first driver I speak to refuses to talk to me at all, and he seems almost scared as he makes his escape. Another truck driver gestures as though swatting away an annoying fly when I try to give him the rabbit through his window. He's also in a rush to get going.

But there is a young couple vacuuming their car who remind me of Marc Terenzi and Sarah Connor (before their divorce of course), and they seem a bit more open-minded. They let me look in their trunk. It's full of junk—it looks as if they've just been waiting here for someone to offer to barter with them. Aside from various sprays, a hand broom, and lots of newspapers, there is a first aid kit, expired but unused. The young man, alias Marc Terenzi, agrees to the barter. I ask him and his girlfriend whether they have any doubts about continuing on their way without a first aid kit. Sarah Connor's doppelganger replies that the lucky rabbit would help her a lot more in an emergency than that old box. I see things differently, so I am happy to trade for the kit. I drive on with it to my next destination, Siegburg.

In this little city with its historic center there is a 125-year-old prison, which is now home to a juvenile detention center. I was able to convince the warden to let me stop by before I began my trip. After all, a prison is a place where no one has their own money; what makes more sense than bartering? I was also curious how exchanges between prisoners and officers took place. Were there friendships? Hostilities?

Images pop up spontaneously in my brain of prisoners trading for forbidden items like drugs and tools for escaping, smuggled in by friends and relatives. Is there anything to these fantasies?

The prison greets me with high brick walls and barbed wire. When I approach the entry gate and see how they inspect visitors, I feel like I'm in a scene from a movie. The cliché of nail files baked into cakes runs through my head again, and I can't help but think of the first aid kit, which surely contains a pair of scissors. Was my last exchange not as clever as I thought? Would I cause difficulties for myself and the prisoners? I approach the gate with a guilty conscience. I give the guard my ID and show security the kit with a grin. When I say "This is my trade object," the guard looks at me with some surprise through his bulletproof glass, but then waves me through with a frown. Now I'm inside the jail with my first aid kit complete with scissors. I still have the feeling I'm doing something forbidden.

I'm glad to finally meet the security guard who had agreed to speak with me on the topic of "bartering in prison." We walk down a hall of the correctional facility that is broken up by many barred doors. The security guard tells me that bartering is commonplace for the prisoners. It is the only way for them to get many coveted items that they can't simply buy. The administration tolerates it so long as the bartered items don't exceed a certain value, but they firmly quash bartering for illegal items such as drugs or more expensive items like electronic devices.

Later, I meet several imprisoned youths, almost all of whom are there for violent crimes. Serkan, who was sentenced to two years in juvenile detention, invites me into his cell. It is about eighty square feet but feels like forty, and contains a bed, a toilet, and a TV. A little piece of the sky can be seen through a small barred window. Serkan tells me that being in prison is obviously not easy, but certain conveniences like the TV, working as a mechanic, and friendly swapping with other prisoners make the whole thing a bit easier. He explains how his cell neighbor, David, has become his best friend. Since the cell doors are open daily from 3:30 to 8:30 in the evening, they can hang out. Serkan introduces me to Frank. He is about twenty and also imprisoned for a violent offense. Frank shows me the joinery where he works every day