

# Fog Holler in Europe – travel blog #3

Posted on [June 8, 2023](#) by [Guest Contributor](#)



*Fog Holler at Grevengrass in Greven, Germany – photo by Kianna Mott-Smith*

---

[Fog Holler](#) is a young bluegrass band from Portland, OR with a modern approach to this traditional art form. Or as they like to say, *It's a new shade of grass.* They include Tommy Schulz (guitar), Lillian Sawyer (fiddle), Noa (bass fiddle), and Casey James Holmberg (banjo). As they continue an extended European tour, the band has agreed to share their experiences in a travel blog, available exclusively here at Bluegrass Today. Kianna Mott-Smith, the band's manager, will be our tour guide.

*Look for recurring contributions from Fog Holler for the next several weeks.*

Hello again, Bluegrass Today readers!

The Fog Holler tour train had parked in Dordrecht last you heard from me, and we were all soaking in the rare opportunity to spend multiple nights in one place. Since then, we've hopped back on the tracks, with stops in Aarschot, Belgium, Hengelo, Netherlands, and Antwerp, Belgium. Fog Holler toured Europe back in winter of 2020, so they wanted to stop by some places they'd been to before, for the novelty of familiarity while on an international tour. They'd visited a falafel restaurant in Antwerp in 2020, and as soon as they walked in the door, the shopkeeper took one look at the group and said, "Let me guess. You're a band from Portland, Oregon."

Now, at the time, this was not actually correct – all Fog Holler members lived in California in 2020. But, as many of you likely know if you're reading this blog post, Fog Holler is local to Portland now. The band was determined – they needed to visit this prophetic falafel merchant again. He actually remembered the band, despite the long break between encounters, and was wholly unsurprised to hear that the band did in fact reside in Portland now. Was this man a seer? A diviner? A genie of bluegrass past and future? He didn't tell us, so we'll never know, but he does make a mean falafel – check out [Falafel Tof](#) if you're ever in Antwerp and need a good bite to eat with a side of augury.

Next we headed towards one of our most anticipated stops of the tour. The trajectory of this two-month tour is based around several festival bookings – for those of you who read

the first installment of this tour blog, [Bühl Bluegrass Festival](#) was the earliest of those. The next was booked for the final week of May: [Grevengrass Festival](#).

We'd been hearing about Grevengrass since the start of our tour. First, from folks in Bühl who hoped to see the band perform again, which we thought was an incredible testament to the commitment of bluegrass fans in Germany – Greven and Bühl are over five hours apart by car! But then we kept hearing about it, not the least from other musicians who were planning to attend and participate in the jam culture which, we were excited to hear, was as prevalent at this fest as it is at many bluegrass festivals back in the States. We even heard that our good friend Leo would be attending (our host from Witzenhausen, for those following along with each update) and that he planned to instigate an old-time jam, bluegrass gatekeepers be damned.

With our excitement well stoked, it was with true joy that we stumbled into the fairgrounds, a little bedraggled after a short night's sleep, to the comforting cacophony of many jams gently competing with each other from across the campsite. That promising omen did not disappoint: Fog Holler had an incredible first set that night, with a loudly appreciative crowd calling for an encore and cheering on the band, and many fans waxing on about Fog Holler's unique balance of respect for tradition and dedication to innovation. American/Canadian band Sally Jones and the Sidewinders closed out Saturday night, and it was quite a treat to meet the trio, composed of Sally, her sister Sandra, and their banjoist extraordinaire, Ron Block. Besides their excellent senses of humor, they're all seasoned bluegrass professionals, and had many industry stories and much appreciated pearls of wisdom to share.

Grevengrass felt like a true meeting of all the German folks we'd met up until this point, a sort of summation of the trip we'd had thus far. We encountered hosts from various accommodations, promoters from multiple venues, and bands that had opened for or shared bills with Fog Holler. Recently-made German fans said hello, excited to be seeing Fog Holler perform again. We're not sure what Bluegrass Wish Dragon we managed to please, but we all felt we'd somehow been granted a mystical boon when EVERY item we'd lost on our journey thus far, left like little band breadcrumbs all across the country, managed to find its way back to us at this festival. Needless to say, we were riding high after our first day at Grevengrass.

The second day started off very well – none of us had to set an alarm. After a leisurely morning, several coffees, and a deluxe hotel shower, we arrived for our second day of festivities. There was even more time on the second day to jam and listen to other bands, since Fog Holler was closing the festival that evening. Lily got in on some old-time jams with Leo, and participated in a flashmob for the German bluegrass band The Looping Brothers – they asked various musicians to sit in the audience while they played and then join in on a tune midway through their set. Casey got to talk about the pros and cons of various brands of finger picks with Ron Block.

When it came time to play for those fine folks, the energy from the crowd was palpable. They'd been listening to and playing bluegrass all weekend, and they were ready for a proper festival send off. The band pulled out a set list they hadn't tried before, opening up with what they refer to as their mini clawhammer set, and moving from there through several punk/metal-inspired tunes that really stirred up the crowd. Despite the fact that the festival was running an hour behind schedule, and with the full knowledge that all the bands were due on stage after Fog Holler's set for a superjam, the crowd simply wouldn't let them leave. After one encore the audience stood and clapped, yelling and stamping their feet until Fog Holler returned for a second encore.

The band chose *Camp a Little While in the Wilderness*, an old camp meeting hymn, for their final contribution to the evening. Tommy and Casey perform this number acapella,

with sparse atmospheric accompaniment from Noa and Lily. Their rendition is haunting, often catching listeners a little by surprise. The crowd's entire energy shifted in response to Fog Holler's sign off. Rapt attention and deep emotional reactions replaced the rambunctious energy from moments earlier. Standing in the midst of this huge festival crowd, I felt the collective hush as Fog Holler cast a spell over the listeners.

The next day our tour locomotive had to chug along towards our next destination. Greven is located in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, not far from the Dutch border. It's fairly close to the city of Münster, which is only about a half hour drive to the south. We had several shows to play in southern Germany towards the end of the week, so we made a pit stop in Münster on our way down. I was particularly interested to see St. Lambert's Church in Münster, both for its impressive gothic architecture, and because of its grizzly history during the Münster rebellion in 1535. If you've never heard about this rebellion, it's a fascinating tale of religious extremism, individual narcissism, radical social change across Europe due in at least some part to the invention and proliferation of the printing press, and, controversially, ergot poisoning. The rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful and three of its most prominent leaders were tortured, killed, and placed in cages which were hung conspicuously from St. Lambert's steeple. The cages are still there today – you can see them in one of the photos provided below.

After Münster, it was time to continue our journey towards southern Germany. As stated in a previous update, Casey does most of the driving on this trip, and he's found that he's quite a fan of the autobahn. Here are some of Casey's thoughts on our last few dates in Germany:

"How fast can our tour van travel? This is a question I've pondered many a time while driving our trusty Toyota Sienna back home, but I've never managed to top out the speed. Here in Germany, though, the situation is entirely different. With the beautifully maintained roads and completely discretionary speed limit, I was able to put the pedal to the floor and hit speeds of 180kmph (111mph). Even at these speeds, we were getting passed by Audi and BMW owners who must have been going at least 220kmph. What's even more impressive to me is that we never saw any evidence of collisions, which seem pretty common back in the western states of the US. Maybe it has something to do with the 12" of asphalt that they pour to construct the roadways here, rather than the four" standard in the States. I also suspect that the drivers here are better, or at least less distracted, because of the prevalence of manual transmission vehicles.

With slowdowns regulated only by city traffic, and the ever-present road work projects, driving through Germany was a beautiful and exhilarating experience. I was particularly excited for this week in Bavaria because it took us to some truly stunning places. We got to spend a rare day off in Munich, and bathed in the Isar, a tributary of the Danube, while enjoying liters of delicious beer and pretzels bigger than our faces. From there we went to play the truly picturesque town of Schwäbisch Hall, a rare place where you can see Medieval, Baroque, and Gothic architecture all in one place. After a wonderful show, we spent the next morning with mouths agape as we hobbled along the smooth cobblestones, enjoying the masterpiece of architecture that is St. Michael's Church, or Michaelskirche. The town was ravaged by the plague and many wars, and the iconography at the church reflected the town's connection to death, not to mention the ossuary that housed piles of human femurs and skulls.

For our last show in Bavaria we headed east to a beautiful farm outside of Bad Kötzing. The fare that night was sulz, an aspic that is traditionally eaten in the region. As the band's resident enjoyer of such sumptuous morsels, I was very excited to eat this clear gelatin, which housed bits of veal and vegetables. I can report it had a pleasant tang and acidity reminiscent of a dill pickle with a beautifully beefy and rich counterpoint. I ate some on rye

bread, but it was good by the spoonful as well. Our host and the promoter of this show was a man named Olli, who graciously treated the band to some post-show burgers, noting that not everyone was as keen on the sulz as I was.

Olli spent quite a few years in the UK, and has an immaculate British accent and command of the English language. His home was furnished with only the most vibey of '70s furniture. Despite being in what some of our German fans called "deepest Bavaria," I could have quite easily imagined we were at the home of a Londoner who was still living in a decade long ago. His good humor and excellent conversation was the perfect way to end the German leg of our trip. Cheers Olli!"

We were rather sad to say our last farewell to Germany, and with it leave behind some of our favorite tour food: schnitzel and spaetzle. Schnitzel is truly available everywhere in Germany, even the gas stations, where it's actually surprisingly high quality and excellent road food. We've spent the last few days in Belgium, and head back to the Netherlands today – the land of doner restaurants, which always seem to be open here at odd hours, i.e. when musicians are getting off of gigs and realize they're starving.

We leave the continent for the first time this weekend, and head to Ireland for the Westport Folk & Bluegrass Festival. We're all very excited for this portion, though it will likely be strange to be around English speakers again. We'll see what adventures, food and otherwise, await us there. Off to the land of shepherd's pie and colcannon!