



TOP STORIES / CULTURE



INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

## Persian Cologne up close

Culture tours in people's hometowns are in demand. Tour operators are hoping to promote integration and intercultural dialogue in large cities, like in Cologne.

Rose water sorbet melts on the tongue and the sounds of a daf, a traditional Iranian drum, ring in the ears. A group of exhausted tourists sits in an Iranian restaurant contemplating the impressions they took in on their culture tour.

For the past three hours, the group has been touring the Iranian features of Cologne - the language, music, literature and art of the Middle Eastern country subsumed within the German cathedral city.

Two years ago, the *Kulturklüngel* or Culture Clique initiative was devised by Thomas Bönig in Cologne. "Klüngel" is a regional expression used in the Rhineland to mean "people know one another," in a positive sense.

With his initiative, Bönig wants to improve relations between immigrant and native communities in his large, multicultural city. He and his team offer insights into a wide range of different community circles in the local area.

### Two-way street

Bönig believes that it is not enough when the onus of integration is only placed on the immigrant population. He says, for integration to really work, native communities must also take an interest in the immigrant cultures they live side-by-side with.

"The best way for a good coexistence is to get to know and understand one another," he said. That's also the motto of the Kulturklüngel team. "People from different cultural backgrounds who work on one project: They present and communicate their cultural heritage and work for more tolerance and intercultural understanding," Bönig said.

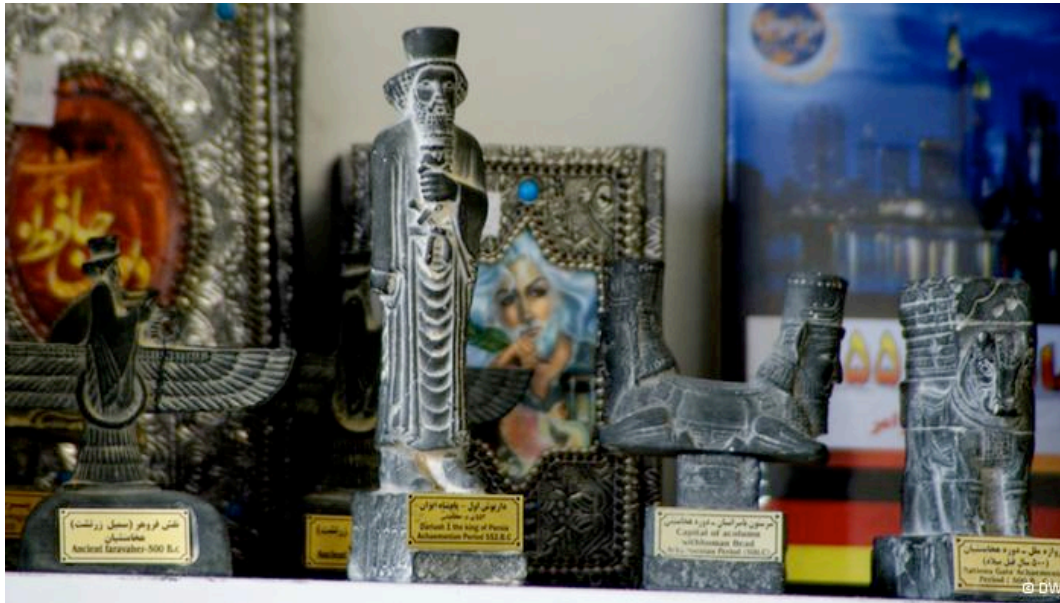
The large number of participants on the tours through the lesser known areas of Cologne indicates that Bönig has struck a nerve with his idea. On average, 350 people take part each month. They can



Musician Syavash Rastani plays an Iranian daf

participate in 16 different tours, including journeys through African communities in Cologne to Indonesian life and culture in the city.

Bönig can't test whether or not his tours actually promote intercultural understanding in the long term. But he's sure that, at the very least, they awake people's interest in other cultures.



Iranian artworks on display in Mashallah Bahrapour's grocery store

### Any questions

The culture tours are guided by people from the respective communities. "You don't wear a headscarf?" asks one of the participants, Sabine, of the guide leading the Iranian tour. "I'm German, but with Iranian roots," is the answer she gets.

During the culture tours, participants also have the opportunity to contribute. Sima, an Iranian participant on the tour, explains that Iranian law requires women to wear a headscarf, but that many women in Iran do not agree with the law.

Later on in the tour, the scent of saffron, turmeric and cardamom fills the air. The Kulturklünger participants meet Mashallah Bahrapour in his Iranian grocery store. As he offers around sweet lemons and Iranian dates, he explains how Iranians spice black tea with cardamom, and that in Iran people drink distilled water with mint to cure upset stomachs.

The owner of the Iranian store enjoys passing on his knowledge to his curious guests. With their bags packed with Iranian specialties, the group moves on.

### Countering clichés

At the next stop on the tour, Nuri Ansari has opened the doors to his carpet store afterhours on a Saturday. He shows them a "flying carpet" made famous by tales such as 1001 Nights. "Silk rugs are very finely woven and because they are so light they are also called flying carpets," he tells the inquisitive group.



The history of Iran is depicted on one of the rugs

Store owners open their doors for the culture tours and are ready to answer questions from tour group members. They are involved in the tours out of interest in the project, but they are not paid.

Ansari has lived in Cologne for more than 50 years and has experienced periods during which

Germans have reacted more critically to foreign cultures within Germany. Because of that, he's even more pleased when people show an interest in Iranian culture. "I am happy to play my part in intercultural exchange," he says.

At Hossein Tohidlou's glitzy store, the carpets are almost forgotten. "I expected more gold and kitsch and thought that Iranian women would tend to wear less silver," says Lena, one of the participants.

The Iranian jeweler explains that he actually has more German customers than Iranian. "Most Iranians buy their gold in Iran or want jewelry from me at Iranian prices. But I can't offer them that," says Tohidlou.

The trained goldsmith uses the opportunity to present pieces of jewelry from his own self-made collection. "When I've finished producing a necklace then I first ask my wife if she would like to wear the piece," he says, proving that romance can transcend cultural differences too.

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**Author** Anahita Mehdipor / hw

**Editor** Kate Bowen

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