

Rita Meeh

From Dream to Reality

Since my parents worked for the Deutsche Entwicklungshilfe (DED) and spent several years abroad in Papua New Guinea, I had the opportunity very early on to get to know various different continents (including Asia and Australasia). My parents' open minds towards other cultures had a lasting effect on me, and I was particularly attracted by the USA – not least because of the freedom and sheer size of the western landscape and the extraordinary cities, as well as my weakness for history and the fate that befell the original inhabitants of North America. There was also the romantic notion of the cowboys, propagated by films and television. One of my dreams is to go on a cattle drive, or ride along one of the old trails. My course in American studies removed several of my one-sided illusions about the country.

In summer 1998 I visited for the first time the USA. My sister and I visited our cousin and her family in Tucson, Arizona, and used that as a starting-point for a three-week-long round trip. This eventually took us to the finest national parks in the western United States, and even up to the Jasper and Banff national parks up in Canada. We returned to Germany overwhelmed by the sheer size of the country, and impressed by the hospitality of the Americans and Canadians.

The first time I heard about taking part in Green Card raffles was from a fellow student which took part in it. I never thought for one moment that I would win – but on my second attempt, the 2000 draw, I was among the winners for the "diversity immigrant program" (DV-2002). It was only when I was officially informed about this by American Dream in May 2001 that I actually realized what this meant: I could now live, and work, in the USA for as long as I wanted. For my studies and my aims, this was the perfect opportunity to shape my future life. The problem was the point in time that I won the Green Card: I still hadn't completed my studies in Germany and I did just want to "up sticks" and emigrate to America; and I also had my horse I didn't want to leave. Nevertheless, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I couldn't afford to miss.

Since I'd passed my A-levels I already possessed one of the basic prerequisites for a "diversity" visa. To receive a visa number I had to send off passport photos (US size), fill out numerous forms, and send them as fast as possible to the Kentucky Consular Center (KCC). The forms included the application for an entry visa and alien registration (forms OF-230 Parts I and II) and also the form DSP-122 (an additional registration form). Only after

receiving and checking these forms did the KCC send me an appointment for the interview at the US embassy in Frankfurt. My visa appointment there, was set for January 14, 2002. Apart from the invitation I was also sent a list of the documents I had to bring with me: school reports, birth certificate (and wedding certificate if required), two passport photos, a vaccination certificate, bank statements and/or a letter from the bank saying I had enough money in my account to cover my own expenses for the first six months in the US. The interview was pleasant, and not all that long. After the interview with the consular officer, I had to go to a registered doctor for a medical examination.

After I'd made it over this first "real" hurdle, I was sent my entrance visa by registered post. The package was valid for six months, and I had to travel to the USA within that time. So in March 2002 I flew for a week to New York, where I had to hand the visa unopened to the immigration officers at the airport there. I was then given a stamp in my passport with a temporary residence permit that would be valid until I received the "Alien Registration Receipt Card" (Green Card). The actual Green Card was then sent to my cousin, whose American address I had provided. My cousin then sent the card to me in Germany. At the beginning of September I travelled for seven weeks to Arizona in order to fulfil the precondition of travelling to the US at least once a year. It now turned out that I also had to "take good care" of the Green Card. At the airport in Phoenix I was able to pass by the long line of "tourists" because I was now an "alien resident", which was nice, but then an airport official told me that since I was still studying in Germany and only "living" in the USA now and then, I should apply for a re-entry permit to avoid any problems the next time I came in. This cost another 110 dollars, and I had to wait for over a year before finally receiving the re-entry permit – a turquoise-coloured travel document – in March 2004.

All in all, I sometimes wonder whether it has all been worthwhile, because financially I've invested a lot so far. On the other hand I am certain that the trouble I took to get this entry card to America was a worthwhile investment. At the end of August this year I will be travelling to the USA for another few months – in order to meet my two-year deadline for permission to re-enter, of course, but also to check out the American work market now that I've completed my studies, and to possibly make a few contacts in the international culture sector so that I can dive into American life. Because of my doctorate course I will probably apply for another re-entry permit in order to write my dissertation close to my "home university" of Eichstätt in Germany. I'll certainly travel several times to the USA again, because I certainly don't want to lose my Green Card under any circumstances.

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