

If you tend to be shocked by motel prices in the United States, bring a portable defibrillator along to Cologne or Birmingham. There is a range of options in both locations, but none of them could be categorized as inexpensive.

Staying and Playing

A Hilton and Crowne Plaza are attached to the BETA venue, but you pay dearly for the convenience, plus it's difficult to get reservations. Several hotels, including a Holiday Inn Express, are located within shouting distance of the NEC. Less expensive options include hotels in downtown Birmingham, which entails a quick train ride each morning and evening.

Several cozy bed and breakfast inns are located near the NEC. Unless they happen to be on a transit line, however, you will need to take a cab to and from the hall or rent a car and learn to drive on the "wrong" side of the road.

A handful of lodging facilities are located on the Messeplatz side of the Rhine, but the bulk of Cologne's hotels are across the river in the heart of the city. The two sides are connected by train every few minutes, and your attendance pass for SPOGA serves as your train ticket. The bridge also has wide and spacious walking paths, should you feel the need to spend additional time on your feet.

Most hotels in Cologne are business class or above. Those that are lower class are generally not recommended. If you're into luxury and money is no object, you can probably find as nice a room in Cologne as anywhere on the planet.

There are also bed and breakfast inns throughout Cologne and a short train ride out of the city you will find more lodging possibilities at slightly less cost.

If three days of walking your feet flat at a trade show isn't the only reason for your travels, you are in luck in both cities.

Cologne offers considerably more in

the way of restaurants and entertainment than Birmingham, but both have their own unique style and approach.

German restaurants are everywhere in downtown Cologne. Look off the beaten path for the most original cooking styles, rather than those that tend to Americanize their food. The Cathedral (Dom) dominates the city and is well worth seeing.

There are a handful of restaurants around the NEC in Birmingham. Those located in hotels often limit their seating to guests staying at the hotel, especially in the evening.

A quick train ride to Birmingham's New Street Station downtown opens a world of dining and shopping opportunities. The village of Solihull, a five-minute cab ride from the NEC, also offers a variety of restaurants.

Birmingham is known for its great Balti restaurants, a somewhat spicy India-based cuisine served in an authentic environment. Dozens of other outstanding ethnic restaurants also dot the city, including at least one world-class Thai restaurant.

For those who are not food adventurous, both cities offer everything from bakeries to American fast-food chains.

The Messeplatz in Cologne contains several restaurants, all of which serve good quality food. Because of the captive audience nature of their business, prices tend to be higher than outside the venue.

Although it is being improved, food offerings at the NEC can only be described as poor. Several small food centers are part of the BETA layout and offer a convenient alternative.

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