

CITIES

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But he said he has no doubt it's been beneficial to all parties involved. Perhaps more tangible evidence of the value is found in the interpersonal relationships that have developed over the past 37 years. Those have been spurred by Friends of Friedrichshafen and its German counterpart, the Peoria Club of Friedrichshafen. "I like the place," said Willi Huster, the Peoria Club president and unofficial tour guide for central Illinoisans who visit his city. "Peoria is an interesting city. In Peoria, I have a lot of friends."

The harbor promenade is seen in Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance in southern Germany. Peoria and Friedrichshafen have an exchange program that dates back 37 years, helping to forge ties between the two cities.



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apparently the longest-running one in the United States, when they were teenagers. "She is very jealous right now, because I'm here and she is not," said 17-year-old Juliane Sauter, whose mom, Lucia, was part of the first exchange, in 1978. "She really likes the USA." Sauter and some of her cohorts listed the same likes about their trip — visiting Chicago was a major highlight — and also focused on the cuisine. "She really liked the food," said Momo Ganzer, whose mother, Sandra, visited Peoria in the mid-1980s. "When she was here, we didn't have so much McDonald's and fast food." Said Joshua Huster, Willi Huster's grandson: "I really like the food. It's a little bit different."

Some things never change, evidently. Seckinger said her students share the same perceptions about the United States that her generation did. But in some cases, reality might be different. "They say the cars are big, the houses are big, the streets are big, stuff like that," said Seckinger, the Peoria Club vice president. "You hear the same thing after 30 years. I think it's different if you see it. "Whatever movie or TV you see, it isn't real. ... If you go there, you can touch it." At least one of the youths who is visiting Peoria appears to share Seckinger's sentiment about the tactile aspects of this trip. "I like traveling to foreign

countries. It's great," said Ganzer, a 17-year-old female named for the protagonist of a German novel. "I would have regretted it if I didn't go here." Friends of Friedrichshafen officials said there tends to be more German teens going to the United States than vice versa. Part of that might be related to proximity. It takes about eight hours to fly from Chicago to Germany. In that same time span, a German can visit four or five countries and cultures by automobile or train, so such exchanges are more common, Hoadley suggested. But if the distance factor can be overcome, the benefits can be eternal. "They find out that the people from Friedrichshafen, Germany,

or anywhere else they travel to are a lot like us," Hoadley said. "There are cultural differences, but there are so many things that make us all the same. That's reassuring, and it gives those people even more reasons to explore." Just like Karin Seckinger, who once worked for the Friedrichshafen mayor's office and has been mayor six times. "I tell everybody, 'Do it if you have the chance,'" she said. "Because this is so much for the rest of your life. I still have my pictures and my memories from that time." Unlike the pictures, it appears the memories are far from fading.

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Sister cities
 ► **Peoria:** Benxi, China; Clonmel, Ireland; Friedrichshafen, Germany
 ► **Friedrichshafen:** Delitzsch, Germany; Peoria; Polatsk, Belarus; Saint-Die-des-Vosges, France; Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



WILLI HUSTER

Caterpillar, Zeppelin companies also share close ties

Dealer agreement with Peoria-based Cat helped transform German firm

in what then was known as West Germany. Following German unification and the fall of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s, Zeppelin's Cat connection spread to about a dozen countries and became a multi-billion-euro business annually. "Cat was always for good partners in those territories. Partners they trust," Gerstmann said about Zeppelin's ability to conduct business in Russia and former Soviet republics. The Cat agreement was key in Zeppelin's transformation from a company that built airships to one that specializes in sales,



PETER GERSTMANN



DOUG OBERHELMAN

The first was the crashing and burning of the Zeppelin-built Hindenburg as it landed May 6, 1937, at Lakehurst, N.J. The second came during World War II, when Allied bombings destroyed Friedrichshafen and left most of the city in ruins. The Friedrichshafen community's relationship with Zeppelin is similar to the one Cat has with Peoria, but perhaps even more intense. The mayor of Friedrichshafen, Andreas Brand, chairs the Zeppelin board. The arrangement is rooted in the origins of the company, a mechanism that also

provides financial support for Friedrichshafen-area charitable and cultural initiatives. "The city and the company are very strong together, very tied together," Gerstmann said. "You have to accept that the ideas of the city are your ideas, and vice versa." "The relationship between me and the mayor is very good, and that is the normal status, I think. The CEO of Zeppelin and the mayor, we must work together." Sounds a bit like Gerstmann's relationship with Oberhelman. Oberhelman said he visits Peoria two or three times

each year. One of those trips, an informal one, was scheduled for this month. On vacation, Gerstmann and his wife planned to traverse the length of old U.S. Route 66, from Chicago to California. The Gerstmanns scheduled a slight detour, however — to see Oberhelman and his family. No word if any guitar solos were on the agenda, but the visit probably wasn't all about play. "You cannot avoid talking business," Gerstmann said.

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