

“This is the highpoint”

Günter Genser steers the big crane behind city hall. A chat about toilet breaks, trolleys, landmarks and a true sense of elation

Munich has a new landmark. In the evening at nighttime, it lights up in every color and stands between the Frauenkirche, St. Peter’s Church and city hall. The big crane on the construction site for the second main S-Bahn line, which was set up a few weeks ago and is a “WT 1000 e.tronic” belonging to the company Wilbert, is operated by Günter Genser. The Austrian Genser (55) works for **Hochtief**, and has been a crane operator for many years, but this equipment and this view are new to him – and exciting.

SZ: Mr. Genser, how high up do you work?

Günther Genser: 75 meters.

The highest crane you’ve ever worked on?

Yes, it’s a highpoint for me.

In two senses?

Absolutely. This and the highest. I’ve worked on a lot of cranes before, 50 or 55 meters high, but this is still new for me as well.

What’s your working day like?

I get up there before seven, because we start at seven. And it takes me about ten or 15 minutes to even get up there. There are nine ladders. As soon as I’m above the houses I know whether or not it’s a windy day. That in itself makes my work harder or easier.

Did you ever count the rungs?

No, I’d prefer not to. I go up in all kinds of weather, snow, rain, so the equipment can be pretty soaked at the top sometimes. But I have a great cabin up there.

How so?

It’s heated, air-conditioned in the summer. I don’t want for anything.

Do you come down for lunch?

If I can, yes. But usually no.

But you come down when you have to go to the toilet?

No. There’s a urinal in the cabin with a waste pipe going all the way down. I basically have everything I need for the day, including snacks and drinks, of course.

How do you operate a crane?

I have a pedal that I use to operate the radio. Because I need my hands to drive the crane. The joystick on the right moves the load on the hook up and down. The left hand moves the crane around and moves the trolley backwards and forwards along the boom.

The trolley?

That's the part that moves along the boom where the rope and the hook hang off.

Do you work with computers as well?

Yes, there are monitoring systems that always calculate how far out on the boom you can move a certain load. There's a warning signal if you get too close. In an extreme scenario, the crane would shut down and you wouldn't be able to go any further.

What are the requirements for your job? Spatial awareness?

That too, yes. You have to be able to judge distances well. But mostly you need a head for heights. And you have to be somewhat physically fit.

Did you always want to become a crane operator?

No, it just turned out that way. When I left school in Austria I started out as a skilled construction worker. And then you know how it is: Someone doesn't show up, someone else steps in, does a good job of it. You need training as well to operate a crane. It's like learning to drive, with an instructor up there on the crane with you, and you practice. I did training for this one as well. That was a first.

A first?

I went to the factory where they make the crane and did a three-day course. This crane is the first of its kind, a prototype. I'm quite proud that I get to drive this brand-new crane.

But there must be even bigger cranes.

Sure, like if you work at a port. But for a construction crane, it's already unusual to have a lifting capacity of 1,000 ton-meters. That means you can load and lift 48 tons over slightly more than 20 meters. That's a huge amount.

So what do you move?

Drilling equipment, concrete parts or steel supports, stuff like that.

You have a great deal of responsibility on the construction site. Do crane operators play a special role?

Maybe. That might be true. But I also have a supervisor just for me. We speak to each other on the radio. He has a very important job as well. He sees a lot of things better than I can from 75 meters up, so we have to be in synch.

What do you do when you have nothing to more?

Lubrication, maybe. Sprocket maintenance. And I have to get out of the cab to that. That's when I enjoy the view the most.

Nobody else sees Munich quite like you do. The Theatine Church, the opera, city hall, the Frauenkirche. Did you know Munich's landmarks well before?

No. I've worked on a lot of construction sites, including in Vienna. But I'm sure this is the most famous one, and I haven't been here for work before. So I still have to find out a bit about everything I can see.

Ever thought: Maybe it would be nice to see an opera after work?

Sure, but it doesn't usually come off (laughs). I mostly enjoy the view of the mountains. It feels like they're at the same level. And I think: That's my home, I'm going back there on Friday.

You spend all day up there, towering over everyone and everything. Does that affect you at all?

Sure. But mostly because I hardly have any contact with my co-workers. You don't get to stop and chat. I have my supervisor on the radio, nobody else. I only see the others from above. I can recognize most of them from how they walk or their helmets, but we only really see each other in the morning and the evenings.

How does the team handle that?

By sitting together in the evenings and talking.

At the moment its dark well before that. The crane is illuminated at night, at the moment it's often disco lighting that changes every few seconds.

There are different lights. Firstly there's the mandatory lights for air traffic safety, and the crane can shine a directional light on the construction site. The bright lights started with the idea of adding a spot of color to the landscape. At first we had Bavarian white and blue. The lights are fitted every three meters. We'll be trying different patterns as well.

Such as?

Who knows. Maybe they'll even do a competition to design the lights. We can control them like stage lights.

How would you most like to have the lights?

I like it colorful.

And have you gotten used to the view yet?

A bit, but I still have time. At least six years.