fahren vs. gehen

Let's quickly talk about how to say 'to go' in German. How about you test yourself first.

How would you translate*

"I'm going to the shops."

or

"We went to Frankfurt last week."

into German?

In English, we mostly use 'to go' in all its forms like 'I'm going …' or 'I went' or 'I have gone…' to talk about getting to a destination. It's doesn't really matter if we're actually walking, driving or flying to get there.

Driving better than going

The German equivalent *gehen* looks like a good choice, but here's the dirty little secret.

Germans have fallen for another verb instead: *fahren*

Fahren actually translates as 'to drive' but Germans are so fond of *fahren*, they use it to describe **any motion on wheels**.

Please let it sink in. Any time you get somewhere and you get there on wheels like when driving or cycling or even on a shopping trolley, please use *fahren* (to drive).

Germans 'drive' everything and everywhere:

- *Wir fahren zum einkaufen*. (Literal translation (LT): 'We drive to the shopping', meaning We're going to the shops.)

- *Deutsche fahren Fahrrad.* (LT: 'Germans drive bike', meaning Germans ride their bikes.)

- *Die Deutschen fahren auch ihren Einkaufswagen.* (LT: 'The Germans also drive their shopping trolley', meaning The Germans also push their trolley).

Germans prefer the verb *fahren* over *gehen* for anything that you do on wheels.

Activities you also do on wheels

Since planes have wheels too, you could certainly say 'to drive' instead of 'to fly' *(fliegen)* if the fact that you're flying is less important:

- *Nächste Woche fahren wir nach Barcelona. Wir fliegen um 8 Uhr abends.* (Lit.: Next week we drive to Barcelona. We fly at 8pm.)

As you can see, it's best to link 'to go' to *fahren* in your head.

Of course it's also about personal preference and what springs to mind first.

Just remember the basic rule (use *fahren* over *gehen*) and have a look at the following quick summary.

Let's wrap it up

To tell someone you're going somewhere

- Use *fahren* (to drive) if you're not walking and your mode of transport is (also) on wheels.

- Use *gehen* (to go) any other time, especially when walking.

- Use specific verbs like *fliegen* (to fly) if you need to be more precise.

- Expect many exceptions

Ich fahre zum Einkaufen (I'm going to the shops) but you will also hear: *Ich gehe zum Einkaufen* or *Ich muss zum Einkaufen* (Literal translation: I must to the shopping)

Wir sind letzte Woche nach Frankfurt gefahren (We went to Frankfurt last week) but you will also hear *Wir waren letzte Woche in Frankfurt* (Literal translation: We were last week in Frankfurt, Germans use time references before places)