

Title:

Enchanting Christmas Markets of Fairytale Germany

Word Count:

1157

Summary:

Christmas is a magical time in this land of Heidi, Goethe, the Black Forest and Rhine. There are sleigh rides, majestic alps and gothic cathedrals. Sample the regional beers and festive foods like baked apples, roasted almonds, fruit breads, snow ball dough, chocolate waffles, potato pancakes, grilled sausages, ciders and mulled wines. Shop the craft booths that are overflowing with holiday foods, tree ornaments, candles, toys, art, unique gifts and omnipresent nutcrackers. Each market town is distinct with its own handmade products.

Keywords:

Article Body:

We arrive in Munich and our guide makes it clear this is Bavaria. Bavarians favor autonomy from Germany and even have their own language. I've been here many times but looking through sober eyes now, I find it more vibrant, clean and sophisticated. We spend 2 days with Nancy, an excellent guide who has already emailed me to remain in touch. I have a mini-group of just 26 so this is like a vacation for me. It's a first time abroad for some and I love to learn from them as they notice things with child-like enthusiasm that I don't. This is the hi-tech land of engineering. We pass a 9 story Mercedes dealership with new cars stacked to the shape of an Advent tree. We also see the BMW factory. I wish I could work here with 7 weeks vacation per year, 340 different work schedules to choose from, a gym, spa and its many other benefits. We stop for hot apple strudel and visit the well known sites. Here is the 100' Christmas tree with 2500 candles. Our welcome dinner at Haufbrauhous is a delight with yodeling, alp horns and sausages of everything-wurst. The group toasts their steins of natural beer made only of barley, water and hops.

It's time to move on to the enchanting storybook villages. This is a magical time to visit. No country celebrates Christmas with more passion than Germany. As we head to the alps, the morning sky looks like a pale bruise. Soon a blizzard engulfs our coach but we have an experienced driver named Eno who we fell in love with by trips end in 7 days.

We arrive at Neuschwanstein and ride by horse and carriage up to the famous

castle. (This is the one Disney fashioned its own after.) I've seen more castles than I can count around the world but this medieval knight's fortress with gothic spires is spectacular. Built in 1869, it looks brand spanking new with decorated rooms intact. The 388 steps inside are well worth the climb. There's hardly anyone here whereas summer can draw 5,000 tourists each day. In winter, this fairytale castle becomes dreamlike surreal. That's why I enjoy traveling off season.

Pity poor Mad King Ludwig II who designed this worlds largest, most extravagant, expensive and opulent castle for himself. It's a sad story of the 6' king who lived here only 4 months. The people loved him as much as the German Tourist Board does today. His family however, did not. They sought to declare Ludwig insane and hired a team of psychiatrists to prove such. Although he was prone to depression and insomnia, no doctor could find him mentally unfit. After short rule, his body was found in the lake and the family stated it was suicide. But the body of his psychiatrist was also found so most agree it was murder, particularly since an autopsy was refused. Later it was determined that Ludwig was gay, so the "fairytale king" was truly a fairy.

We stopped in charming Oberammergau, famous for its Passion Plays every 10 years. The wood houses are painted with fairytales: Hansel & Gretel, Red Riding Hood, etc. We then toured Nuremburg with an astute guide who brought the city to life before our eyes from 15th century to its destruction in WWII. Some went off to the Toy Museum or Torture Museum while I set out to explore the world's largest Xmas market.

With giant lit trees, double carousals, horses with bells, over 400 stalls of food and crafts, this is as festive as it gets! I graze my way through on white chocolate bananas, fruit breads, glazed grapes, dipped pretzels, pink marzipan pigs, licorice angles and all types of roasting sugar coated nuts. Shaped gingerbreads are omnipresent and the aroma of warm sweet Gluh-wine fragrances the air. I'm on a sugar high and head for the crafts. Shopping is a blood sport here through narrow lanes but MasterCard is my armor and I find all my toy treasures. There are giant nutcrackers representing every occupation, unique mangers and 29 trillion ornaments. At dusk the illumination begins. I pause for a dinner of 6 bratwursts, Bavarian cheese and a pyramid of sauerkraut to last me to 2012.

In Rodenthal we toured the Goebel/Hummel Factory. I anticipated boredom yet became fascinated to learn how precious each piece is. From 1871 to today, 700 artists create these tiny non-useful figurines. They are paid per piece and if a mistake is made, it must be broken. The highest paid artists are the delicate "face painters." I met one woman who has spent 12 years just painting eyebrows,

another on lips and a man who has worked 10 years blushing cheeks! The eye strain must be like threading sewing needles for a lifetime and it takes 3 years apprenticeship to graduate to this level. Initially our guide assumed we were a collectors club when in reality we can barely afford a 2'' baby Jesus. Later in East Germany we visited Lauenstein Confiserie, a chocolate/praline factory that was so busy with the season, they hardly notice us. I tasted from the chocolate fountain nearly having a cocoa orgasm and confirm again that America can never produce this product as purely or satisfying as Europe.

The best of all towns was Rothenberg, population 2300 where our Hotel Prince was located right inside the fortified walls of Old Town. Our guided walk here instantly awakened all my 5 senses and made me want to linger for days. We tend to go over the top each year with our flashy decorations. Among the half timbered homes here on cobbled streets, it is quieter and softer. One is taken back to the Middle Ages with the pewter ornaments hand crafted and evergreens lit with candles. Afterwards, our guide Claudia invites us all into her home. I go to buy a "snowball" for which this town is renowned. They are piled high like colored softballs in the windows. For over 300 years, these pastries were frugally made from scraps of fresh pie dough. Dipped in chocolate, berries or cinnamon butter, they melt in your mouth. As the sun shines, I remove my coat to a balmy 50°. How I wished it would snow.

We end our tour in the Student Prince town of Heidelberg with entrance to the famous castle and its 55,000 gallon wooden wine barrel. That night I reflect on a great trip, my last one for 2005. I write this journal so my wonderful little group will remember it all. With pride, I'll always remember them; on time, patient, no complaints, generous tippers, polite to locals and friendly with each other. Perfect travelers I wish I could clone.

After hugging Eno goodbye, we exited with so many shopping bags that he now thinks he needs a trailer in tow of his coach. This December, it was joyous to be transported back in time. It certainly brought me in touch with my inner elf. What a gift!