SINGAPORE - With a surfboard snugly under her arm, my local German buddy strides briskly out of the subway station. The Brazilian hit tune The Girl From Ipanema bounces in my mind.

Except that this is not a golden beach in Rio de Janeiro. Rather, we are deep in winter in Germany and the water fountain in front of central square Marienplatz is frozen stiff.

We are smack in the city centre of landlocked Munich.

"I surf every morning, so long as the sun shines, before I start work," says industrial designer Erika Schmidt as she dodges morning traffic to get to her surfing spot. She exemplifies the Munich locals who work hard and love their lifestyle.

Munich is less than an hour's drive to Olympic-class ski slopes, deep canyons and turquoise lakes. Towering castles dot the countryside.

Its city centre boasts one of the world's largest public gardens while its mediaeval town square is top-ranked for its beauty.

And if Munich is a first name, beer should be its last name. Science and research will do nicely as the middle name.

With the Vaccinated Travel Lane between Singapore and Germany starting next Tuesday (Sept 8), here are five quintessential experiences of Munich distilled from my dozen trips, including extended stays, to this prosperous yet easygoing city.

1. No swimmers, but cool surfing dudes

Surfers in thick neoprene suits waiting for their turn to ride the metre-tall waves gushing beneath the bridge at Eisbachwelle, in the centre of downtown Munich. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

Winter or summer, dawn or dusk, there is likely a courageous surfer riding the metre-tall waves gushing beneath the bridge at Eisbachwelle.

On a busy day, there will be a queue of surfers - decked out in thick neoprene suits - standing by the river bank, waiting for their turn.

They enter the water with a toss of their boards, followed by an acrobatic jump, all perfectly timed. It is a circus act hard to follow.

The law says you cannot swim in the river, though some locals sneak a dip in the hotter summer months.

But surfing is officially permitted and the site has hosted international competitions.

Ingenious locals started experimenting, in the 1970s, by holding a tow rope attached to the bridge, balancing on wooden planks.

Over time, they realised they could ride the waves, yet stay upright without the ropes.

Then, their biggest fear was that the police would confiscate their boards.

Fast forward and the authorities have since accepted this pastime, turning Munich into an uncanny surfing capital of Europe (there is another river surfing spot in the pretty Swiss town of Thun).

Locals and tourists peer over the bridge to watch the entertaining spectacle. Best of all, it is free and just a 15-minute stroll from the main square.

**Pro Tip:** The surfers emerge in the sunny late afternoons or show up during their lunch break.

The Eisbachwelle surfing spot marks the southern edge of Englischer Garten - one of the world's largest urban public gardens.

Take a morning walk or an evening run around the massive 3.7 sq km garden - the size of four Singapore Botanic Gardens. Chill at its Japanese garden and snack on a Weisswurst (boiled white sausage) under the shade of a five-level wooden Chinese pagoda.

Or sip an ice-cold Bavarian beer at one of the garden cafes. But just don't gape at the locals enjoying their nude sunbathing.

The garden is a therapeutic reboot after a night of beer toasting and hearty eating.

2. Beer, the night before

Every year, from mid-September till the first Sunday of October, Munich almost grinds to a halt.

Some six million visitors gather at the world's largest beer festival Oktoberfest for parades, horse riding, brass bands and endless tents of beer halls, some large enough to seat 8,000 happy revellers.

However, the event is cancelled this year because of the pandemic.

In my initiation to the festival many years ago, I realised it was possible to get tipsy by breakfast.

Add the ferris wheel, cotton candy machines, rows of food stalls and even a flea circus - this is reputedly one of the world's greatest carnivals.

Hotel rooms triple in prices, so book ahead for next year.

As an alternative, Munich's centuries-old beer houses offer local specialities, oompah music and busy beer maids - all in an authentic Bavarian setting, loud and jolly.

Many tourists will head for the world's most famous beer house, Hofbrauhaus. This photogenic restaurant serves one-litre jugs of beer, swings to a live band and hosts up to 5,000 partygoers. Regulars drink from their own mugs stored inhouse and use inflation-proof beer tokens to pay.

Service, however, can be erratic because of the crowd.

**Pro Tip:**When it comes to any 1,000-calorie guilt trip, I will save it for the pork knuckles at Haxnbauer.

One cold evening, I stood spellbound by the window that displayed a grilling stove inside. Rows of crispy golden-brown pork knuckles and veal rotated, beckoning me inside.

This centuries-old restaurant is less touristy and offers more attentive service - a great place to debate the difference between a pilsner and a lager.

The food was so memorable that on some late evenings, I would drop by for a takeaway. The grilled meat can be ordered by weight, so go more for variety than quantity. Once, they doubled my portion for free as they recognised me and it was near closing time.

3. One-of-a-kind museums and an opulent bath

Munich is famous for its beautiful Rococo architecture and over-the-top palaces, cathedrals and museums housing works of art, enough to keep you busy for three to four days.

Car lovers will love the BMW Welt and BMW Museum here, where you can jump into the seats of the latest production models and rent them for an hour.

Better still, enrol for a safe-driver course with a professional to drift around corners and burn rubber.

On a visit years ago, a stuntman scrambled his BMW bike down two floors via the staircase of the cavernous hall and past the gasping crowd - just like in a spy thriller movie.

Another standout is the Deutsch Museum, a mind-boggling display of 28,000 exhibits from 50 fields of science and technology, spread over seven levels. Ships are exhibited, fighter aircraft hang from the ceiling and there is even an underground mine.

It is a crash course in science and discovery for children and adults. I would love to return and spend at least two days to tinker with the interactive exhibits. I may even check out the popular techno club Blitz on its premises.

**Pro Tip:** After a day at the Deutsch Museum, drop by the nearby Mullersches Volksbad (Muller's Public Baths) to freshen up in a Neo-Baroque indoor pool.

The 120-year-old Art Nouveau bath is more like a grandiose palace than a pool.

Picture this: lions that spout water from their mouths, hammam baths, Roman thermal spas and wide staircases with detailed murals. You begin to wonder what stories the bronze statues can reveal.

The star is the set of three-temperature sauna rooms that soothe the aches away. With the pool's entrance fee costing only €5 (S$8), you leave feeling like a million bucks.

Do check for changes in operation due to Covid-19 measures.

4. Castle in the air

Neuschwanstein Castle looks magical in winter, beautifully framed by trees blanketed in snow. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

If there is only one castle in the world to ogle at, it has to be the Neuschwanstein. It sits dramatically on a cliff's edge and soars 150m into the sky. It has appeared in numerous movies and inspired the design of Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle.

**Pro Tip:** The easy self-drive from Munich takes less than two hours. Arrive early in the morning, no later than 10am, before the tour groups arrive. Alternatively, stay overnight at the nearby charming town of Fussen.

Do check the weather forecast. Sunny skies bring out the colours. Better still, you will get a dream setting on a mid-January, deep-winter trip - the castle looks magical, beautifully framed by trees blanketed in snow.

About two-thirds of the way up the castle, the Schwangau viewpoint offers a stunning panoramic sweep of the valley and distant mountains.

But the best spot - Neuschwanstein Castle Viewpoint - is from an iron bridge across a ravine, a further 10 minutes south from Schwangau. Both locations are marked in Google Map.

Be careful in winter as the trails are narrow and slippery. Preferably, use hiking boots and just go slow.

5. Sleep with history, catch the best sunset views

The five-star Hotel Bayerischer Hof is a grand dame dating back to 1841. Kings, presidents and celebrities have stayed there.

**Pro Tip:** For a bird's-eye view of the old town, saturated in sunset hues, go to the hotel's top floor for early-evening drinks (Frauenkirche Gothic cathedral looms across the street).

To kick-start your day, grab a window seat upstairs in the Cafe Rischart that overlooks the Marienplatz. Savour the Kaiserschmarren - a fluffy, shredded, sweetened pancake.

Pair it with strong coffee and watch Munich starting its day. The array of pastries and desserts will tempt you to skip your lunch.

In essence, Munich is a wonderful mixture of old and new. It is also a bustling city ringed by the tranquil outdoors and nature. It is a fine combination, just like its salty pretzels and beer.

Tips for Singapore-Germany trips

With the imminent launch of quarantine-free travel between Singapore and Germany under the new Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) next Tuesday, here are some pointers:

1. Snag bargain business class fares

Leisure travellers are still hesitant, but there is pent-up demand by business travellers.

Most flights from Singapore to Germany show good availability for economy class. For example, a Sept 10 departure from Singapore to Frankfurt or Munich, with a return VTL flight about two weeks later, starts from $959.

But business-class VTL return fares, especially to/from financial hub Frankfurt, are sky-high.

For some flights close to the launch date, Munich's business fares are almost half the fares of Frankfurt. So flying into Munich, before hopping on a short domestic flight or a four-hour train ride to Frankfurt, can mean thousands of dollars in savings.

So take economy and spread yourself across a row of four seats or wait a few weeks to snag bargain business-class fares.

2. Fares from November onwards are still low

Take-up by business and leisure travellers is still spotty after the initial launch dates. For example, November flights for economy and business class seats, even on VTL flights, are available.

The fares are 20 to 40 per cent lower than pre-pandemic times. Singapore Airlines' business fares start from a low $3,598.

In pre-pandemic days, a $4,000 business class return ticket would get you only as far as China or less popular destinations of Japan.

3. Frankfurt or Munich? Do both if you have time

Get an "open-jaw" ticket. You can enter through Frankfurt but exit from Munich, or vice versa - the fares are about the same. "Open- jaw" tickets qualify as return fares if the flights are served by the same carrier and are within the same country or region.

Thus, you can do a longer trip or a one-way road/rail trip without the need to backtrack to the original gateway city.

4 . Start in Frankfurt and work your way south to Munich

The shopping in Munich is better and so is the food. Munich's airport is smaller and friendlier, with a shorter Tax Refund queue, compared with Frankfurt, which is a huge and busy airport, with more travellers and long security queues.

5. Covid-19 cover travel insurance

As the VTL is an endorsed travel arrangement by the authorities, do take up travel insurance and make sure your policy covers Covid-19 medical emergencies at the very least. It will be a well-expensed item.

6. Local health guidelines

Check the Singapore Airlines website for updates as you do research on Germany's Covid-19 measures.

There are reports that foreigners can bring their overseas vaccine certificates to local pharmacies to endorse and sync with European health apps. Do it to avoid a lot of inconvenience during your trip.

Restaurants, clubs and public venues such as museums, palaces or theatres, and local tours may ask to see vaccine certificates or a negative Covid-19 test.