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Have yourself an old-fashioned Christmas at Germany's markets

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DRESDEN, Germany—"So, you want to celebrate the holidays in style," said my seat partner, Max, a businessman flying to Berlin. He gave me a knowing look. "And you're going for the first time? Don't miss Nuremburg. That's where you'll taste the very best lebkuchen. It's a spiced gingerbread. We try to go every year."

His advice wasn't the first to come my way. I'd been urged to go to Leipzig where choir concerts in the Saint Thomas church mark the season. Or to Cologne, famous for spekulatius, a cinnamon-spiced biscuit; or to Erzgebirge for a nussknacker, a carved wood nutcracker. If I wanted to buy one of the candle-powered twirly-whirly "pyramids" typical of Saxony, I'd been assured that tabletop versions were sold everywhere.

Would three markets in eight days be too hectic? Not if I abandoned the idea of renting a car and decided to ride the rails. With a German rail pass good for the week, I saved myself the trouble of driving and parking. And I booked hotel rooms in Dresden, Berlin and Weimar, all fairly near each other and with conveniently located in-town train stations.

By early December, a good two weeks before Saint Nick and the reindeer were due on my rooftop in California, I was already among the revelers in Dresden, primed for decorated trees, shimmery glass stars and roasted chestnuts.

When it comes to celebrating Christmas the old-fashioned way, nobody does it like Germany. For 11 months of the year, summer holidays and the health of the European Union occupy most conversations. But as December approaches, tradition takes precedence, a fond reminder of simpler days.

When twilight settles over these ancient towns—and it comes early in the northern latitudes—10,000 tiny lights twinkle on and holiday revelers, swaddled in thick coats, gather to stroll, gawk, finish their gift shopping and meet friends for an evening's merriment.

Not knowing quite what to expect, I started in Dresden, a good place for an initiation into Saxon-style cheer. Here were crafts, wood carvings, ornaments, baked goods and cheeses of every size and kind, with smiling vendors bundled in winter coats offering bite-size tastes. Sausage vendors standing at sizzling grills offered grilled bratwurst in a bun, the traditional match for mulled wine (gluhwein).

Wandering over to the Frauenkirche church, now famously rebuilt, I poked my head in the door and was lucky enough to get a ticket for that evening's Christmas concert. Here, too, was my chance to visit one of Germany's oldest Christmas markets, the Striezelmarkt, now celebrating its 579th anniversary.

In Weimar, where the market was busy by mid-morning despite falling snow and drifts piling up on the town's minature Market Square, the smell of bratwurst and sounds of Christmas carols filled the air. Instead of deterring residents, the weather brought them out, with parents pushing babies in strollers and pulling older kids on sleds.

Soon Santa himself appeared in the town hall's uppermost window, and hoisting a sack on his back, climbed down on a rather wobbly looking ladder to greet the kids. Later that day I toured the home of Goethe, the legendary polymath who was not only a

poet and dramatist but a politician, amateur scientist and shrewd economic advisor to his royal patron. This was news to me, since I'd known him only as an author.

In Berlin, where the blaze of lights from the bustling Alexanderplatz Market were visible from my hotel window, the impulse to walk over after dinner, even after a day of sightseeing, was impossible to resist. As the biggest and busiest of Berlin's largest holiday markets—the street car runs through the middle—it was an ideal place for a gluhwein (hot mulled wine) nightcap.

In recent years, Christmas markets have popped up all over Germany, a trend resulting from population growth and a booming economy. A tradition that originated in medieval market towns (before the advent of refrigeration and the supermarket), they're now the core of the annual holiday celebration.

What do most of these jolly affairs look like? They resemble the sort of farmers' market you shop at on Saturday: rows of stalls, tents or traditional wood huts, usually—but not always—set up outside on the town's largest historic town square. Clustered among Gothic churches and Renaissance halls, they make you feel that old Saint Nick might just be around the corner.

In the daylight before visitors begin to arrive—mid-afternoon, say—you'll think it looks more like the state fair. But switch on those millions of twinkling lights and set the 20-foot-tall "pyramids" a-twirling, and magic happens.

In Dresden the stalls are set up in front of the restored Frauenkirche church with the overflow creeping down adjacent cobblestone streets. The Strietzelmarkt is in an empty lot. In Weimar they're lined up on the market square under the gaze of the City Hall clock tower. In Berlin we visited three markets, though I was told as many as 70 exist, one for each neighbourhood.

We spent most of our time at the Alexanderplatz market because we could see the lights and hear the music from our hotel window. Hotels fill up quickly, with visitors and tour groups coming from all over Europe for a long festive weekend with plenty of shopping, sightseeing and eating marking the occasion.

As I wandered among the stalls, each piled high with gifts and goodies, the world's languages and their owners drifted past. Here was a bit of Russian, and there some Turkish. An Italian couple read the labels on the cheeses, and a French family sorted through hand-knitted wool hats, trying to find something their two teenagers—in tow—would wear. A Spanish woman who thought I was German stopped and asked me for directions. The occasional overtones of Brooklyn, Texas and Missouri accents revealed that the American contingent had arrived.

For Europeans, Christmas markets promise a weekend getaway. For a Californian like me, it might have been daunting. But I booked a night flight and was there the next afternoon. A Minnesota couple I met at the Frauenkirche concert told me it was their gift to each other, the kind of gift that would never go out of style and wouldn't take up any room at home.

I didn't buy much, but that didn't spoil the pleasure of browsing among tables loaded with hand-carved wood toys, holiday cakes, cookies, chocolate candy, hand-knitted hats and scarves, candles, piles of cheeses and sausages.

The tree ornament sellers were the busiest, swamped by so many customers that lines formed to keep prospective buyers orderly. With racks and shelves displaying everything from blown glass bells and crystal icicles to silvery stars, carved choir singers, drummers and nutcrackers, there was something for every taste.

In recent years, some Christmas markets have extended the season, starting early and ending later, from late November to New Year's. Profit is the motivation, of course. I even spotted some sellers offering T-shirts, jeans, wallets and backpacks, and in one market a Mickey Mouse-themed kids' ride. Horrors! But the butchers, the bakers and the toy makers are still front and center, tempting you with their wares and ensuring that in Germany, at least, Christmas isn't about to change.

IF YOU GO

Two tips to remember: Fly nonstop if possible, and buy a German rail pass for intra-city travel. I flew on airberlin because I could get an affordable nonstop flight to Germany from Los Angeles, Miami, New York City and Chicago. Look for rail passes with Deutsche Bahn, with rail service to nearly every town of any importance. Connections are on time, the trains are comfortable and new, and the stations are centrally located. You won't have to find or pay for a parking space, and once in the city center, you can walk or take public transport.

Where I stayed: In Berlin at the small but contemporary Hotel Indigo Berlin, a block from the Alexanderplatz Market; www.hotelindigoberlin.com. In Dresden at the stylish Swissotel am Schloss, one block from the Frauenkirche church; www.swissotel.com/Dresden. In Weimar at the resort-style Dorint Am Goethepark Hotel, a 10-minute walk from the Market Square, a favorite with tour groups and an unbeatable choice for lavish buffet breakfasts; at www.dorint.com/en/hotel-weimar.

In Photo: Weimar's Christmas Market in Germany is set up by city hall. (Right photo) A giant-sized "pyramid," replicates the traditional tabletop Christmas decoration in Germany. (MCT)