



GERMANY'S

CHRISTMAS MARKETS: SIMPLY WUNDERBAR!

By Kate Orson

Imagine a winter wonderland, where the magic of Christmas still exists, where your senses are enthralled by the sights, and sounds of Christmas past. The air is scented with frankincense, and a tree lit with a thousand sparkling lights towers above you. As you sip on mulled wine, and munch on gingerbread cookies you can hear a choir of angels in the distance.

This Christmas magic is still alive in Germany. At the beginning of advent almost every town and city across the country is transformed by traditional Christmas markets. Shopping at the festive wooden huts is an essential part of the German preparation for Christmas. But the markets are much more than a shopping extravaganza; with music, ice skating, carousels, you might even forget your reason for coming here! There are so many markets, that you could spend the entire advent season exploring them all. Here is just a small selection.

Dresden, Germany's oldest market was founded in 1434. Here you will find a cornucopia of traditional gifts handmade in the local area such as wooden toys, pottery, glass and candles. Also on display is

the tallest nutcracker in the world, and the highest Christmas pyramid at 45 feet tall. Christmas pyramids are traditional German decorations filled with angels, and nativity scenes. A regular sized version, is much more portable at 30cm, and makes a unique Christmas gift.

Nuremburg is considered to be Germany's most famous market. It's known as the 'Little town from Wood and Cloth,' because stall holders display their wares on red and white chequered cloths. Be sure to try the local speciality known as Nuremburg plum people, (Nürnberg Zwetschgenmännla,) little figures made from prunes. A great time to visit this market is on the Friday before the first Advent Sunday, when the market is opened by a real life Christmas angel.

Cologne has seven markets, with the main one around the cathedral. An old legend tells that the Elves of Cologne were particularly skilled in crafts, so this is the ideal place to come for stocking fillers! Other highlights include the floating market; a cruise ship on the River Rhine, and a medieval market where stallholders are dressed in medieval clothing. You can eat specialties from the middle ages including roast wild boar, and try some "Lover's Drink", a blend of wine and herbs known to get lovers in the mood!

For markets steeped in fairy tale magic, then follow the fairy tale road; a travel route that passes through towns featured in the Brother's Grimm fairy tales. Halfway along you'll find Göttingen founded in 1150. Around the medieval town hall artisans demonstrate their work, and there's also an old fashioned ferris wheel.

Hamelin is best known as the setting for the eerie fairy tale, The Pied Piper. In December you're more likely to hear the sound of sleigh bells than the Pied Piper's tune, and its nativity with real life animals to pet makes it completely child-friendly. Stalls are dotted around the old quarter, amidst timber-framed houses, and grand Weser Renaissance buildings, so if you're looking for a market with impressive surroundings, this is one not to miss.

If you want something to keep the children occupied while you shop in peace, then head for Munich. The 'Heavenly Workshop' gives children the opportunity to bake cookies and dress up as angels. The market's opening is not to be missed when the 30 metre Christmas tree is lit up. Every evening alpine choirs and brass bands perform from the neo gothic town hall.

Germany's capital city Berlin, is a shopoholics dream with over 50 markets. When you're shopped out, head to the stage where musicians, dancers, acrobats and jugglers perform every night. For thrill seekers there is a 12m high 70m long toboggan ride at Postdamer Platz.

Father Christmas stops by most of the markets in Germany, but one of the best places to catch a glimpse of him is in Hamburg, where every evening he flies his sleigh across the sky telling the story of "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer." Your own nose may be tempted by the smell of cookies freshly baking in this market.

And if after all this, you've still got some shopping energy, then cross over the border to Basel, in Switzerland. The market here takes place on Europe's longest illuminated Christmas Street, and as you wonder along the pine tree lined sidewalk, it might seem as if the December magic will never end.

Your KhristKindsmarkt Phrasebook:

At the German Christmas markets, you can pick up beautiful traditional gifts to last a lifetime, but there is also enjoyment of the more temporary variety! Don't miss trying these traditional Christmas foods.

Gluhwein: mulled wine, spices, etc, in a reusable mug you can take home as a souvenir or return it when you've finished.

Eierpunsh: an egg based alcoholic drink.

Stollen: a traditional Christmas sweet bread from Dresden with raisins and marzipan.

Bratwurst: pork sausage served with bread and German mustard.

Lebkuchen: gingerbread cookies.

Zimtsterne: cinnamon stars.

Mandel: delicious roasted almonds with sugar and cinnamon.

