

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

Set up in historic town centers, stands offer seasonal fare such as mulled wine and spiced gingerbread as well as items such as hand-carved wooden toys and tree ornaments.

McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

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 Nuremberg. 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 St. 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.

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.

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.

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, or *gluhwein*.

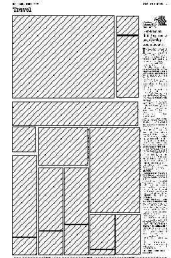
Wandering over to the Frauenkirche church, I poked my head in the door and was lucky enough to get a ticket for that evening’s Christmas concert. Here, too, was my chance to visit one of Germany’s oldest Christmas markets, the Striezelmarkt, now celebrating its 579-year anniversary.

In Weimar, where the market was busy by midmorning despite falling snow and drifts piling up on the town’s miniature 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 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 adviser to his royal patron.

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, it was an ideal place for a gluhwein 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 holiday celebration.

What do most of these affairs look like? They resemble the sort of farmers market you shop at on Saturday: rows of stalls, tents or wood huts. In the daylight before visitors begin to arrive, you'll think it looks more like the state fair. But switch on those twinkling lights and set the "pyramids" a-twirling, and magic hap-

pens.

In Dresden, the stalls are set up in front of the Frauenkirche church. In Weimar, they're lined up on the market square. In Berlin we visited three markets, though I was told as many as 70 exist.

We spent most of our time at the Alexanderplatz market.

As I wandered among the stalls, the world's languages and their owners drifted past. Here was a bit of Russian, and there some Turkish. An Italian couple looked at cheeses, and a French family sorted through wool hats. The overtones of Brooklyn, Texas and Missouri accents revealed that Americans had arrived.

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 Swisshotel am Schloss, one block from the Frauenkirche church; www.swisshotel.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.



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A giant "pyramid" replicates the traditional German tabletop Christmas decoration at a Christmas market in Dresden, Germany.



Seasonal weather adds atmosphere to Weimar's Christmas market.



A girl shops at Weimar's Christmas Market in Germany with her grandfather.