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AN OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS AT GERMANY'S MARKETS

Tradition grew from a medieval town scene to an annual tourist attraction in a growing number of the country's communities

By Anne Z. Cooke MCT News Service 12:01 A.M. NOV. 17, 2013

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If you go

Two tips to remember: Fly nonstop if possible, and buy a German rail pass for intracity 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.

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;

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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.

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 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, 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

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grills offered grilled bratwurst in a bun, the traditional match for mulled wine (gluhwein).

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