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## HOLIDAY MAGIC AT GERMANY'S CHRISTMAS MARKETS

Story by Anne Z. Cooke, Photography by Steve Haggerty

"What do Christmas markets look like?" I asked my friend Allen, a former travel agent who specializes in Europe. "They look like your Saturday farmers' market, where vendors sell their wares out of temporary stalls," he said. "Cakes and cookies, chocolates, cheeses, tree ornaments, hand-made toys and crafts, that kind of thing. The difference is that they're usually in the town's center square and they're busiest in the evening."

What he didn't mention was that when twilight settles down over Germany's cobblestone streets -- and it comes early in these northern latitudes -- ten thousand tiny lights twinkle on and holiday revelers, swaddled in thick coats, gather to stroll, gawk, shop and meet their friends for an evening's merriment.

In Dresden, my first destination, that meant a lively atmosphere, and afterwards a Christmas concert in Dresden's restored Frauenkirche church. Here, too, was my chance to visit one of the country's oldest and most traditional Christmas Markets, the Striezelmarkt, founded in 1434 and about to celebrate its 579th anniversary.

In Weimar, where a heavy snowfall frosted the town's doll-house-size Market Square, grilled bratwurst and Christmas carols were in full swing by 10:00 a.m. Despite the weather, both visitors *and* residents were out in force, wandering among the stalls, poring over carved wood figures and decorated bird houses, shopping for gifts, meeting friends and pushing their kids in strollers or pulling them on sleds.

Later that afternoon I toured the Weimar house once owned by Germany's famous polymath, Goethe, who was not only a poet and dramatist but a politician, amateur scientist and economic advisor to the regional ruler.

In Berlin, where the blaze of lights from the bustling Alexanderplatz Christmas market were visible from my hotel window, the impulse to walk over after dinner, even after a long day sightseeing, was impossible to resist. As the biggest and busiest of Berlin's four large holiday markets -- some say Berlin has 70 markets -- it was the perfect place to enjoy a nightcap of the season's traditional mulled wine (gluhwein).

I didn't buy much. Carry-on suitcases impose unwelcome limits. But that didn't lessen the pleasure of browsing among the rows of stalls, each



A giant-sized pyramid, replicates the traditional table-top Christmas decoration.



Snow falling on Weimar's Christmas Market.

one piled high with food or crafts. Wood toys, carved winter scenes, blown glass birds with fluttery tails and glass icicles vied for space with sparkly stars, scented candles, gilded angels, knitted scarves, leather handbags, painted round-headed dolls, carved nutcrackers, bird houses and Christmas "pyramids," their topmost windmill blades revolving slowly, turned by candle power.

Food was equally abundant, ranging from fresh-baked fruit cakes, traditional "stolen" cakes, wheat breads and pumpernickel, frosted cookies and gingerbread to dozens of sausage varieties, honey, jams and cheese imported from all over Germany. sausages and dozens of cheese varieties.

Despite freezing temperatures, mothers in thick coats pushing baby carriages swaddled in blankets were as common as bakers with their loaves. And mixed among them were visitors from every continent, their accents floating on the night air. Russians, Poles, Turks, Italians and Brits walked past, shopping bags stuffed full. A French family pored over wool hats, choosing something their teenagers would wear. A Spanish tourist who thought I was German asked me for directions. Nor was I the only American there; passing visitors sounded as if they came from Texas, Brooklyn and Boston.

Recently, some Christmas markets have extended their seasons, staying open from late November past Christmas and to New Years. As always, profit is the great motivator. I spotted stalls selling t-shirts, jeans, cheap wallets and backpacks at the Alexanderplatz Market, and in Dresden, a Mickey Mouse kids' ride. Both were a disappointment.

But if tradition serves – and it will -- the butchers, the bakers, the candlestick makers and the toy sellers will still be front and center for many years to come, lit for Christmas by a thousand twinkling lights.

**TIPS FROM THE TOP:** Here are two ways to smooth out the bumps. (1) Fly nonstop if possible so that you can sleep away the hours in the air, and (2) buy a German rail pass for intra-city travel, to avoid driving and searching for parking spaces. I found an affordable ticket on airBerlin for a nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Dusseldorf, Germany. (AirBerlin also flies out of Chicago, Miami and New York City.)

As for the rail pass, Germany's "Deutsche Bahn" trains link every town of any importance to every other town. Connections are good, tickets and sandwich shops are located in the stations, and the stations are right in town.

**I LIKED THESE AND YOU WILL TOO:** In Berlin, try the contemporary Hotel Indigo Berlin, a block from the Alexanderplatz Market; [www.hotelindigoberlin.com](http://www.hotelindigoberlin.com). In Dresden, try the stylish Swissotel am Schloss, one block from the Frauenkirche church; [www.swissotel.com/Dresden](http://www.swissotel.com/Dresden). In Weimar, stay at the resort-style Dorint Am Goethepark Hotel, a ten-minute walk from the Market Square. This hotel, a favorite with tour groups, serves a huge, unbeatable buffet breakfast; at [www.dorint.com/en/hotel-weimar](http://www.dorint.com/en/hotel-weimar).

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Hand-made birdhouses for every taste at Weimar's Christmas Market.



Dresden's traditional wood decorations illustrate Christmas scenes.