



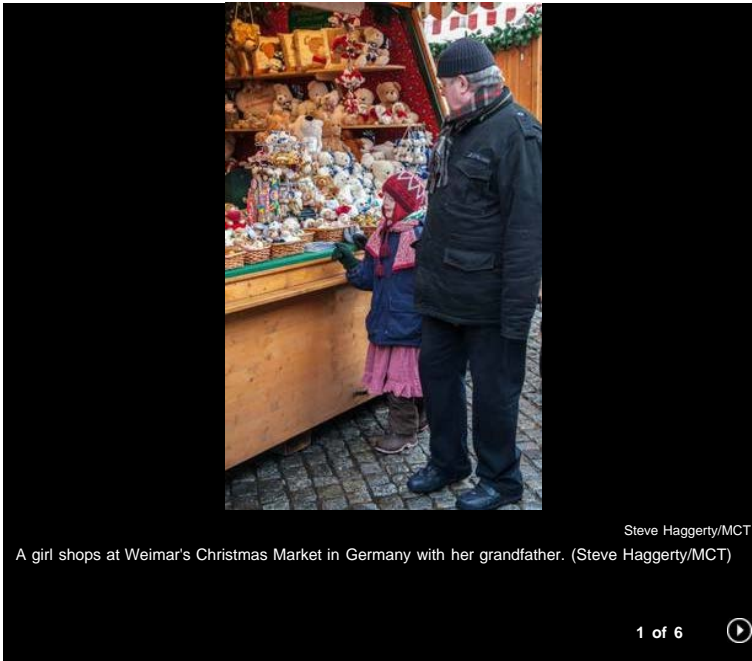
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# Celebrating the season in Germany's Christmas markets



Steve Haggerty/MCT

A girl shops at Weimar's Christmas Market in Germany with her grandfather. (Steve Haggerty/MCT)

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DRESDEN, Germany — The holidays came early last year, no thanks to old Saint Nick.

With visions of twinkling lights and sugarplums dancing in my head, I left California in early December and headed for Christmas markets in

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three of Germany's most historic cities: Dresden, Berlin and Weimar.

I found myself in a wonderland, enchanted by falling snowflakes and discovering that what they say is true: When it comes to celebrating Christmas the old-fashioned way, nobody does it like Germany.

So what are Christmas markets?

They look like farmers markets, with outdoor stalls in rows and each vendor selling his own merchandise. They offer an assortment of cakes and cookies, chocolates, cheeses, ornaments and more.

Usually, you'll find them in the middle of the town's oldest square, fabulously decorated and busiest from 4 p.m. to midnight.

When twilight settles over Germany's cobblestone streets, tiny lights twinkle, and holiday revelers, swaddled in thick coats, gather to stroll, gawk, shop and meet their friends for an evening of merriment.

In Dresden, that meant a lively atmosphere, and afterward, concert tickets purchased at the door of Dresden's restored Frauenkirche. Here, too, was my chance to visit Germany's oldest and most traditional Christmas market, the Striezelmarkt, founded in 1434 and celebrating its 579th anniversary.

## Snow? No problem

In Weimar, where a heavy snowfall turned the town's dollhouse-size Market Square classic white, the smell of bratwurst and sounds of carols created a different atmosphere.

Not only were visitors wandering among the stalls shopping for gifts, but residents were there, too, undeterred by the snow. Parents pushed strollers or pulled children on sleds. Couples pored over carved wooden figures and hand-knit sweaters.

Later I toured the home of Goethe, who was not only a poet and dramatist but a politician, amateur scientist and economic adviser to his royal patron.

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 day of sightseeing, was impossible to resist.

As the biggest and busiest of Berlin's four holiday markets, it was the perfect place to sample a cup of the season's traditional mulled wine (*gluhwein*) before bed.

I didn't buy much. Carry-on suitcases impose unwelcome limits. But that didn't lessen the pleasure of wandering from stall to stall, each one piled high with the most amazing crafts: wooden toys, carved winter scenes, blown-glass birds with fluttery tails, glass icicles, sparkly stars, scented candles, gilded angels, knitted scarves, leather handbags, tiny painted dolls with round heads, nutcrackers, bird houses and Christmas pyramids, their topmost windmill blades revolving slowly, turned by candle power.

Food was there as well: fresh-baked cakes, fruity *stollen* loaves, frosted cookies, gingerbread, sausages and dozens of cheese varieties.

Despite freezing temperatures, mothers in thick coats pushing carriages were as common as bakers with their loaves.

And all around came fragments of conversation, the world's languages in one place.

Russians, Turks, Italians and Brits walked past, shopping bags stuffed full. A French family stopped to outfit their children with woolen mittens. A Spanish visitor who thought I was German asked me for directions. Plenty of Americans took in the scenes, too.

## Longer season

In recent years, some Christmas markets have extended the season, from late November to New Year's. The motivation is, of course, profit.

I spotted some stalls selling T-shirts, jeans, wallets and backpacks at the Alexanderplatz Market, and a Mickey Mouse kids' ride in Dresden.

But the butchers, the bakers and the toy makers are still front and center, ensuring that twinkling lights will be there for next year.



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### When you go

Two smart moves I made and can recommend to friends:

Fly nonstop and buy a German rail pass for intracity travel.

WHERE TO STAY: In Berlin,

the contemporary Hotel Indigo Berlin is a block from the Alexanderplatz Market; hotelindigoberlin.com.

In Dresden, the stylish Swissotel am Schloss is one block from the Frauenkirche; swissotel.com/Dresden.

In Weimar, the resort-style Dorint Am Goethepark is a 10-minute walk from Market Square, a favorite with tour groups and a five-star choice for lavish buffet breakfasts; dorint.com/en/hotel-weimar.

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