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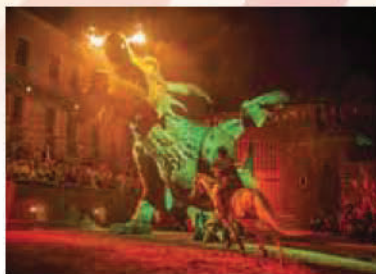
WHAT'S UP

THE RIDE GUIDE



PLAN AHEAD

By Katie Wells



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BAVARIA

Der Drachenstich, Fürth im Wald | Aug. 8 – 17, 2026

Tradinno, a four-legged, fire-breathing dragon, still holds the Guinness World Record as the “Largest Walking Robot,” and Drachenstich in Fürth im Wald is an over 500-year-old festival all about him. Visitors can enjoy the main event, which is a historical pageant about the return of the banished dragon. There is also a medieval market, where you can sample roasted pig, stews and Cave-Gladium Beer, a specialty lager from the region. Kinderdrachenstich is a kid-friendly version of the pageant where they can participate and win prizes. Purchase tickets in advance. [Drachenstich.de](https://www.drachenstich.de)



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KAISERSLAUTERN

Metropolink Art Festival, Heidelberg | Aug. 5 – 8, 2026

A former U.S. military base turned urban art festival grounds is celebrating its 12th anniversary. Patrick Henry Village in Heidelberg transforms into an artist's paradise for the Metropolink Festival. Visitors can admire large-scale murals and international street art, enjoy live music and creative workshops. The former commissary is the central hub for street art, food and music. Street art workshops are available for children to participate in. We recommend purchasing tickets in advance. Children aged 13 and under receive free entry. [Metropolink.art/festival](https://www.metropolink.art/festival)



SPANGDAHLEM

Säubrennerkirmes Wittlich | Aug. 14 – 18, 2026

Despite being a fun cultural festival, the *Säubrennerkirmes*, or Pig Burner Fair in Wittlich, has a slightly morbid history. One evening, during ancient times, when the city was threatened by enemy forces, a guard couldn't find a peg to secure the gate, so he used a turnip. During the night, a pig ate it, making it easy for the invaders to sack the village. As a punishment for the pigs, the villagers roasted them. Today, the city ceremoniously roasts 100 pigs on a spit to open the four-day fair. Visitors can shop at a craft market, enjoy live entertainment and watch parades where participants dress in pig costumes. There will also be rides and Mosel wine. [Wittlich.de](https://www.wittlich.de)



STUTTGART

ESTIVAL Esslingen | Aug. 1 – 13, 2026

This free summer fest spreads around the market square and lasts for two weeks. Guests can enjoy live music, creative street art and plenty of specialty Esslingen wine. Guided tours and wine tastings are available with tickets. There will be a children's day on Aug. 3, which includes a play paradise in the pagoda, giant Jenga and ice cream. For those feeling lucky, enter a drawing with the tourist information office July 1 – Aug. 7 to win a hot air balloon ride at the castle on Aug. 10. [Estival-esslingen.de](https://www.estival-esslingen.de)



WIESBADEN

Mainfest, Frankfurt | July 31 – Aug. 3, 2026

The Main Festival in Frankfurt takes place right on the banks of the Main River. The festival reflects the blended culture and liveliness of the city. Traditionally, it was a fishing festival that “paid homage to the river and its bounty.” Today, there are rides, regional food and cultural programs. Additionally, there is a fishermen's joust where courageous participants dressed in historical costumes compete against one another while balancing in boats. Try “Ox on the Spit” (a specialty roasted ox) and sip wine from the fountain of justice. You can also shop from the many market stalls. [Visitfrankfurt.travel](https://www.visitfrankfurt.travel) ■



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SPOT
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Spielplätze

By Kat Nickola

As you explore Germany with your kids, you are sure to notice the wide variety of playgrounds, or *Spielplätze*. Some are simple monkey-bars; others are wooden structures. Some are in the forests; others are surrounded by urban graffiti. What they all have in common, however, is a German mind-set about what makes play worthwhile that is different than what is typically seen in the U.S.

First and foremost, German playgrounds encourage children to be out-of-doors, in any kind of weather, getting fresh air and a touch of nature. It's not necessarily about 'burning energy' but more about simply being outside. Next, there is a certain amount of calculated risk built into playground creation. You won't find rubber ground covering and excessive railings. Instead, the mentality leans more into allowing kids to assess risk on their own to build resilience. Parents accept that kids learn from accidents and a playground for the proper age group allows for minor injuries. For this reason, most parents are content to chill on a bench while their kids play, fall and problem solve on their own. There are no strict rules about how kids should play on the playground, either. Going up the slide, climbing on the roof and digging outside of the pit are all fair game, as long as you aren't harming someone else. This is a playground after all, a space for kids to be kids.

Playgrounds in Germany must be inspected regularly by the Technischer Überwachungsverein, or TÜV, who verify structural integrity, safety compliance and analyze the level of risk. ■

GERMAN WORD OF THE MONTH

Weichei (noun) *Vike-eye*

Literal translation: Soft egg

Meaning: A teasingly insulting name to call your friend, typically a male, who is giving in too easily or wimping out too quickly.

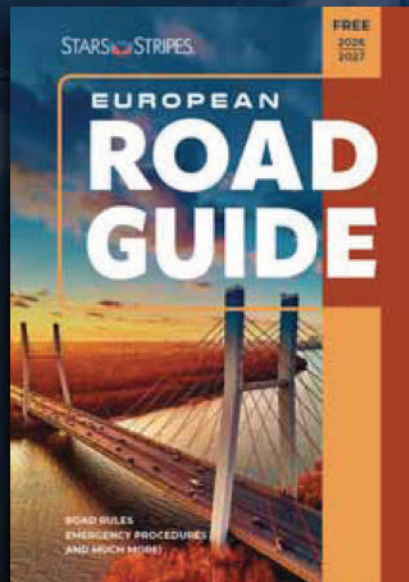


Ready for an easy family break somewhere with plenty of kid-friendly activities? Scan here to read about vacationing in a European holiday village.

Ready for your next **ROAD TRIP?**

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EXPLORE PLAYMOBIL® FUNPARK!

By Katie Wells

Hey kids! This story is for you. Have you heard of PLAYMOBIL® Funpark? It's a theme park where, instead of big scary roller coasters and pesky signs saying, "you must be this tall to ride this ride," everything is accessible and ready for exploration. And the best part — no waiting in lines. So, grab your favorite adult, some friends, and maybe your brother or sister if they've been nice to you, and head to PLAYMOBIL® Funpark in Zindorf, Germany, for a day of grand adventures.



OUTDOORS

There is so much to do! In the Pirates area, you can captain your own enormous pirate ship. Spin the wheel and call out "land ho!" in your best pirate voice as you ring the giant bell. After you walk the plank, or disembark the ship, test your sea legs and sail across the lagoon on a raft or hop over to the Power Paddle Boat area, where you can use your hands and a crank to propel your boat.

If you prefer the more serene life of a mermaid, head to Mermaid Kingdom, where you can build sandcastles, comb and style a mermaid's hair, whisper secrets to a starfish, or slip on a mermaid tail and take a picture! And of course, splash in the water.

Back on land, make your way to the Knights' Castle, but beware the monstrous ogre as you rock climb over the castle walls, explore the dungeons and investigate a spooky underground mirror hall.

Perhaps one of the unicorns in Fairyland can help you, after you brush their coat until it is shiny. Although, you may get distracted by a side quest while there: look for the giant seashell where you could find a golden crystal.

Other outdoor activity areas include:

- **Action Park:** Jump on trampolines or a giant, colorful bouncing pillow.
- **Adventure Tree House with Dinos**
- **Noah's Ark:** Find the complete PLAYMOBIL® Fleet.
- **Farm:** Learn all about life on the farm.
- **Police Station with Gokart Course:** Go on a high-speed chase go-kart-style.
- **Construction Site and Quarry:** Learn from real pros how to dig and build stuff.
- **Goldmine:** Pan for gold and have a wild west adventure.
- And much more!

INDOORS

Worried it might rain or be too hot or cold? Have no fear, there are plenty of indoor things to discover, too. Like the covered HOB Center, a large play city where you can get creative with all the current PLAYMOBIL® toys like the Viking's Ship or Princess Castle.

If your adult(s) are looking a bit withered, ride the glass elevator down to the Café Bar to recharge them with caffeine and snacks. The park has plenty of food options like the Pizza & Pasta restaurant as well as The Pub opposite the HOB Center. Plan to see a mini disco or concert at the Entertainment Stage.

At the next can't miss indoor attraction, plant your adult on a comfy chair and see if you have nerves of steel at the Indoor Climbing Area. Leap across rope bridges and shimmy up steps to all seven of the hexagonal towers. Then, climb back down into an underground labyrinth of lights. You can also take one of many thrilling slides.

If one day just isn't enough, the park has a hotel with package deals. Plus, your room will be decorated with your favorite PLAYMOBIL® places and characters.

The main season this year is March 23–Nov. 8, 2026. Nearly every activity is open except for the winter ice rinks. During the "Snooze Season," the park has discounted "Sleep Days" tickets available since limited play areas will be open. For more information, visit playmobil-funpark.de with your adult(s). ■





GERMANY'S

BEST THEME PARKS

By Kat Nickola

Sure, everyone has heard of Disneyland Paris, but if you are looking for a park with the same kind of immersive theming, much better rides, reasonable rates and closer proximity, my advice is to visit one of these three stand-out German amusement parks.





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EUROPA-PARK

Europa-Park is, hands-down, the best theme park in Germany. But you don't need to take my word for it; military families have also voted it as the "Best Amusement Park" in the Stars and Stripes "Best of Germany" poll for over a decade. The park has won numerous accolades for their coasters, performances, theming, family-friendliness and is a 10-time winner of the Golden Ticket Award for "Best Theme Park Worldwide."

There are 20 themed worlds at Europa-Park, with each highlighting multiple dimensions of a particular culture or country. The Icelandic area (my favorite) has the geothermal-themed Blue Fire Megacoaster, a cute downtown seaport with water rides and the incredible WODAN—a Viking mythology-themed wooden coaster. The park does an amazing job of combining high-thrill rides with calm slower rides for small kids and pretty playgrounds tucked into the tree-filled grounds. Shows are also top notch and my parents (yes, I dragged them along) loved the horse spectacle in the Spanish Arena. This year, Europa-Park is opening a brand-new Monaco world with Formula 1 Grand Prix coaster, yacht marina and a cirque show.

Rust, Germany hosts Europa-Park and is surprisingly well stocked for such a tiny town. It is full of apartment rentals (*ferienwohnung*) and small hotels. We've always found a place within walking distance of the park entrance. Europa-Park also offers six hotels and a campground, whose patrons get benefits like pre-opening hours and a dedicated entrance.



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PHOTO BY KAT NICKOLA



KAT'S TIPS FOR YOUR VISITS

Europa-Park

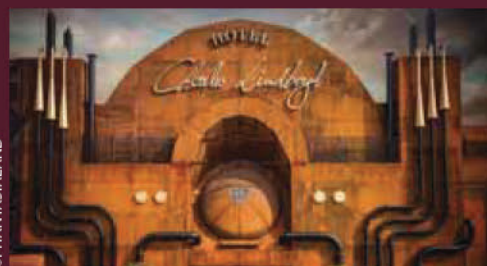
Book tickets ahead of time at www.europapark.de, and consider a second day to spend at the affiliated Rulantica water park. I highly recommend downloading the app to store tickets, see line times, shows and to queue virtually for some of the larger rides.



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Phantasialand

Book tickets and hotels at www.phantasialand.de, and download the Phantasialand app to see waiting times and show details live in the park.



© PHANTASIALAND



PHANTASIALAND

My colleague here at Stars and Stripes disagrees on my rankings and thinks Phantasialand should be #1 in Germany. Her reasoning is justified. This place is incredible if you are happy to have fewer rides in exchange for fully-immersive theming. Spread across six distinctive fantastical worlds, Phantasialand takes scenic storytelling to the next level. It won the "Most Immersive Theme Park in Europe" award from Parkscout in addition to honors for rides, events, coasters and hotels.

The worlds in Phantasialand lean into the imaginary and fanciful. This is especially true in the park's newest area: Rookburgh. Contained within a steam-punk town of floating dirigibles and 1800s-esque travel trunks is the world's longest flying coaster: F.L.Y. It is a super smooth ride even with two high-speed launches and a fun transition from sitting to flying. Each world at the park



© LEGOLAND DEUTSCHLAND



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has at least one major ride to keep adventure-seekers happy. There are also plenty of places for low-stakes thrills, especially in the fantasy world. My favorite area is the Africa region with its Black Mamba coaster snaking around the walkways and the Adventure Trail my family loves to race through.

Phantasialand is located in Brühl, tucked in the countryside between Köln and Bonn with convenient public transit connections, meaning it can be a day trip from either city. However, if you can splurge for one of the on-site hotels, do it. They are highly themed and integrated into the park. The Hotel Charles Lindbergh won "Europe's Best Theme Hotel," jumping into the deep end of steampunk even on the booking page where you reserve aeronaut cabins and become members of the Explorers Society.



LEGOLAND® Deutschland

Get tickets and resort reservations for LEGOLAND® Deutschland at www.legoland.de, and download the app for ticket storage, wait times, shows and an augmented reality game to find hidden creatures in the Mythica land.

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LEGOLAND® DEUTSCHLAND

If you want a park tied to recognizable characters, shows and products, LEGOLAND® Deutschland is for you. Part of the LEGOLAND® chain of parks, the German location sets itself apart with its massive Miniland that includes many of the world's biggest LEGO® builds. This is the perfect park for a family of brick builders.

LEGOLAND® is unique on this list in offering a family-focused amusement park. All the staples: coasters, rides, shows and restaurants are designed for a variety of ages, and there are a lot of places to play and explore in 11 themed zones. If your kids make you watch every single episode of NINJAGO® like mine, be sure to go meet La-Lloyd and your other favorite characters in their ninja world. LEGOLAND® Deutschland's newest ride is the Maximus family coaster, built for brave kids as young as 6 years old who are ready to take on some speed and corkscrews. The park also recently announced that an entirely new Harry Potter-themed area and hotel are in the works.

Super unique to the Germany LEGOLAND® is the extensive Holiday Village that makes it a true resort destination. I highly recommend staying at the village, giving your family the chance to explore its 16 playgrounds, especially the massive pirate ship. There are themed hotel, cabin or camping options.

For families with toddlers, it's good to know that adjacent to LEGOLAND® is the Peppa Pig Park. This place is ideal for little Peppa fans. All the attractions are sized for kids aged from 2 to 5 years old, with solo and parent-child rides. It is not affiliated with LEGOLAND®, but they do offer a "Brick and Pig Adventure" discounted two-day ticket for both parks. ■



10 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT ROAD TRIPPING WITH KIDS

By Tamala Malerk

Driving to your theme park destination or your next vacation? [Here are 10 things to keep kids occupied on the ride.](#)



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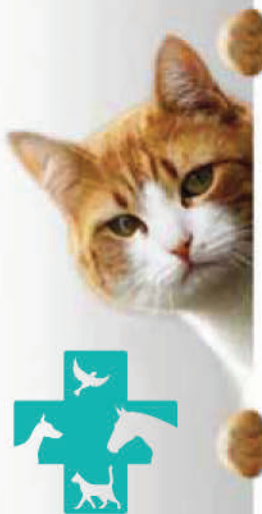
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1. START SMALL

If all your kids are used to is a neighborhood trip to the store, try branching out on two to three-hour trips and then maybe an overnight trip before venturing out on a long-distance trip.

2. GIVE THE KIDS TASKS

Before you go, give each kid an age-appropriate checklist to get them more involved with the whole experience. For example, put one kid in charge of making sure everyone has underwear. (Also, double-check everyone's checklist before final takeoff).

3. SNACKS

Pack finger-friendly snacks that are a mix of healthy items and treats. Have the kids help you pick out what snacks you pack so they feel more in control. Make a "road trip" trail mix with the kids that is a blend of healthy and sweet that will make even the pickiest eaters smile.

4. TRAVEL AT NIGHT

If you've got really small children, traveling after bedtime can help kids sleep along the way. Eat a nice hearty dinner and pack their favorite movie to watch before they fall asleep.

5. CHANGE UP THE ENTERTAINMENT

Movies and shows can get old quickly for short attention spans. Bring along travel-friendly games and activities such as crossword puzzles or word searches. Have the kids pick out books from the library before you go.

6. ROAD TRIP BINGO

Find or create some road trip Bingo cards of things and places everyone might see on the drive (i.e., dog in another vehicle, a McDonalds, etc.). Also, teach kids the license plate game (the international version is fun over here in Europe).

7. HOPE FOR THE BEST; PREPARE FOR THE WORST

Pack plenty of sanitation wipes, rubber gloves, hand sanitizer, sickness bags and towels. Older kids (and adults unfamiliar with where the nearest rest stop is) might appreciate a portable potty kit like the one from GoGirl or even a small portable toilet.

8. PLAN YOUR STOPS

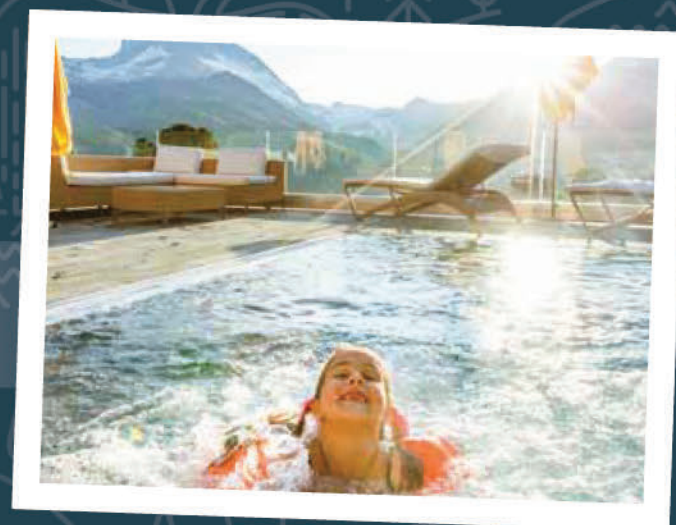
Is the world's largest twine ball five minutes off your route? Why not stop, stretch your legs, eat a sandwich and take a pic for the Gram (or Grandma)? Educate kids about the places you'll stop along the way to ramp up the excitement.

9. VARY UP THE ACCOMMODATIONS

Stay at a cabin in a campground one night and maybe the next night stay at a hotel with a pool. Make the overnight just as exciting (if not more) than daytime travel stops.

10. CREATE A REWARD SYSTEM

Did the kids go three hours without fighting? Reward them with a pre-planned toy, a small activity of their choice or maybe a candy or popcorn snack to go with their next movie. ■



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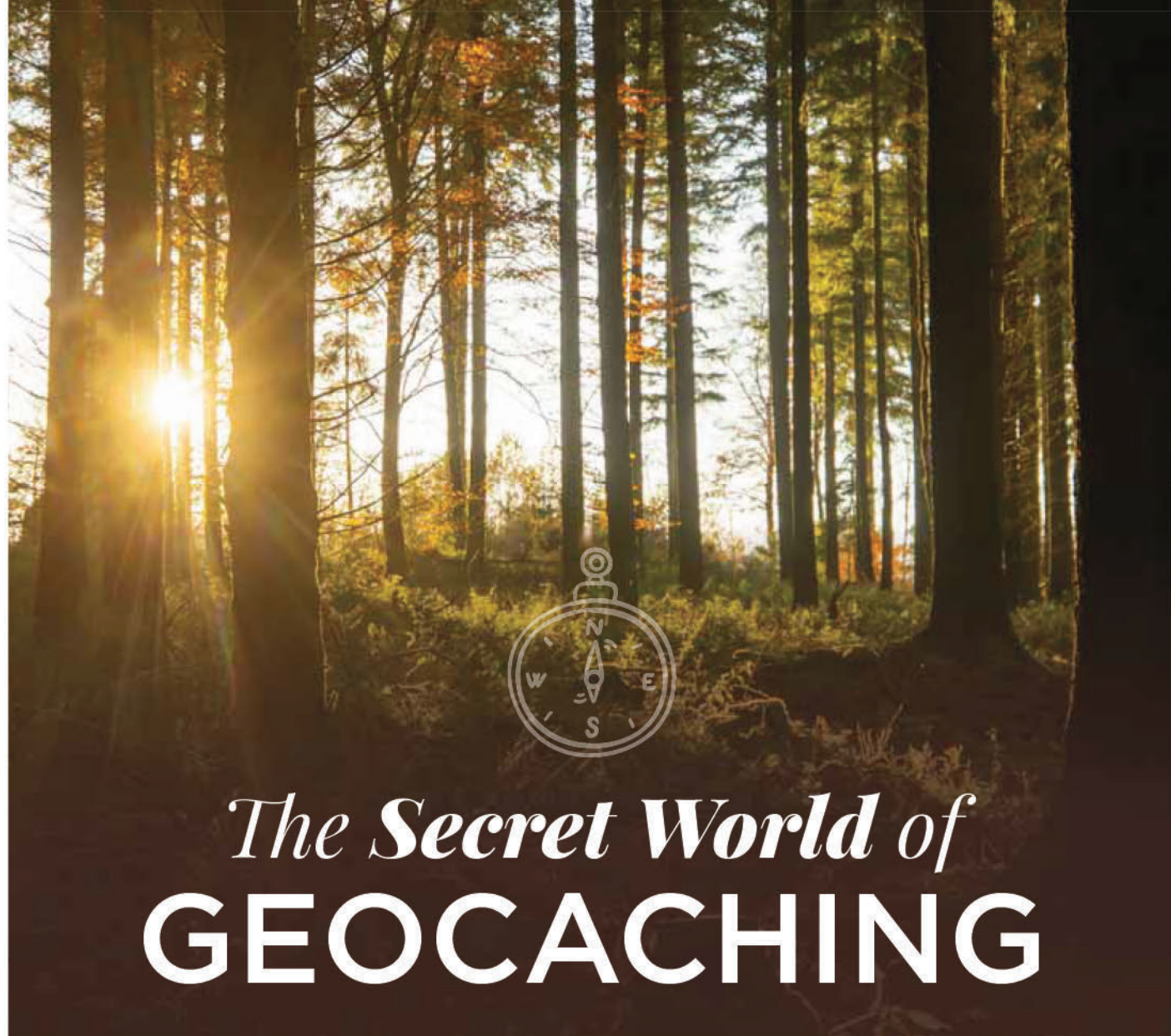
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The Secret World of **GEOCACHING**

By Kat Nickola



I'm hunched over and using the light on my phone to navigate the twists and turns of an underground World War I bunker. My daughter kindly points out a massive spider and I cringe in the dark, camp space. All morning, we have been exploring the corrugated metal structures, historic trenches and dark caves as the cold fog slowly lifts. Suddenly, I hear my husband and son call from a side cave, "We found it!" My daughter and I rush past the block walls and duck under a low rocky ceiling to find them pulling a modern plastic container out of a rubble pile. "Any swag?" I ask.

We've just found a geocache. As a lunchbox-sized container, this is a large cache. Inside are various items to trade. We grab a bouncy ball and place one of our cactus clips inside. Then we dig out the logbook, sign it and seal the case back up, hiding it again for the next person.

This is geocaching, and looping in a few finds during our travels has taken us to amazing places.



Geocaching Basics

There are geocaches all over the world. They range from micro-sized items that can barely hold a minuscule roll of paper to large containers as big as dumpsters. The fun is in the secretive nature of navigating to and finding a cache.

The primary goal in geocaching is simply to find the hidden container and sign the logbook.

In urban areas, this can be tricky, sneaky fun, since it's a major faux pas to be spotted uncovering a cache by regular folks walking past (muggle in cache parlance). Urban caches are often super-well camouflaged as well, mimicking bolts, magnetized to signs and often blending into the landscape so well that they are hiding in plain sight. In wilderness spots, navigation may be the biggest challenge. A phone GPS cannot always be relied on, and you may need to go off trail, delve into caves or even rappel to find the toughest wild caches.

All geocaches are registered at www.geocaching.com and you must make an account in order to play. Registration is free and a great way to start. You can use the website to discover caches you'd like to find, but I highly recommend using the Geocaching App since it allows you to search for caches near you, log your finds on-the-go and can help with basic navigation. If you get really into it like my family, then a paid membership gets you access to more, premium caches and helpful resources like filtering and downloading details.

On the App, you can use a map to choose a cache to go find. Each cache has a star rating out of five on how difficult it is to find, how tough the terrain is, and its size. You'll also find a small description and a hint if you are having trouble; in Europe these are often in the local language, so be prepared to translate. There is a "Navigate" button that offers a basic straight-line distance gauge and compass. Lastly, there is the "Log cache" button for you to click once you've completed the mission and signed the log in the container.



Always bring a pen, and you may want to carry a small collection of tiny treasures like the cactus clips my family offers. Caches larger than the micro size may have tradeable swag; these are usually small items you can take if you leave a replacement. This aspect is especially fun for kids! ■



“
The
primary
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geocaching
is simply
to find the
hidden
container
and
sign the
logbook.”

Try These Geocaches Near USAG Bavaria!

Wald der Märchen | GC8KAAZ

Near Grafenwöhr, this is the first cache in a series of 22 fairy-tale themed geocaches along a 4km hiking trail that loops through the forest. It is an easy walk and perfect for families.

Vier-Berge-Tour | GCKBQP

West of Vilseck, this is a multi-cache, meaning it is like a scavenger hunt with 15 stages along the way in which you gather information needed to find the final cache. This highly rated multi takes in an eight-mile trail past cool rock formations, caves and medieval buildings.

Fairy Glen | GC4N6TM

East of Grafenwöhr, this traditional single geocache is in a beautiful spot with a “secret” entrance and glittering stones.



**YOUR
SNAPSHOT**

PHOTO BY

Stephanie Logue



Photographer Stephanie Logue took the thrill and adventure of theme parks to new heights by jumping out of a plane and sailing over the Swiss Alps. This daring photo captures the moment her parachute opened.

Interlaken, Switzerland is known for skydiving and paragliding. Not only does it have breathtaking geography to behold on the way down, but it also has ideal conditions for aerial activities. The mountain peaks provide a protected microclimate that creates abundant and predictable thermals (rising columns of warm air), allowing for smooth flights. ■



We're curious about spooky local haunts and scares you've experienced in Europe. Bonus points if there is a ghost story behind your photo. Send us Your Snapshot for a chance to be featured in a "What's Up" magazine!



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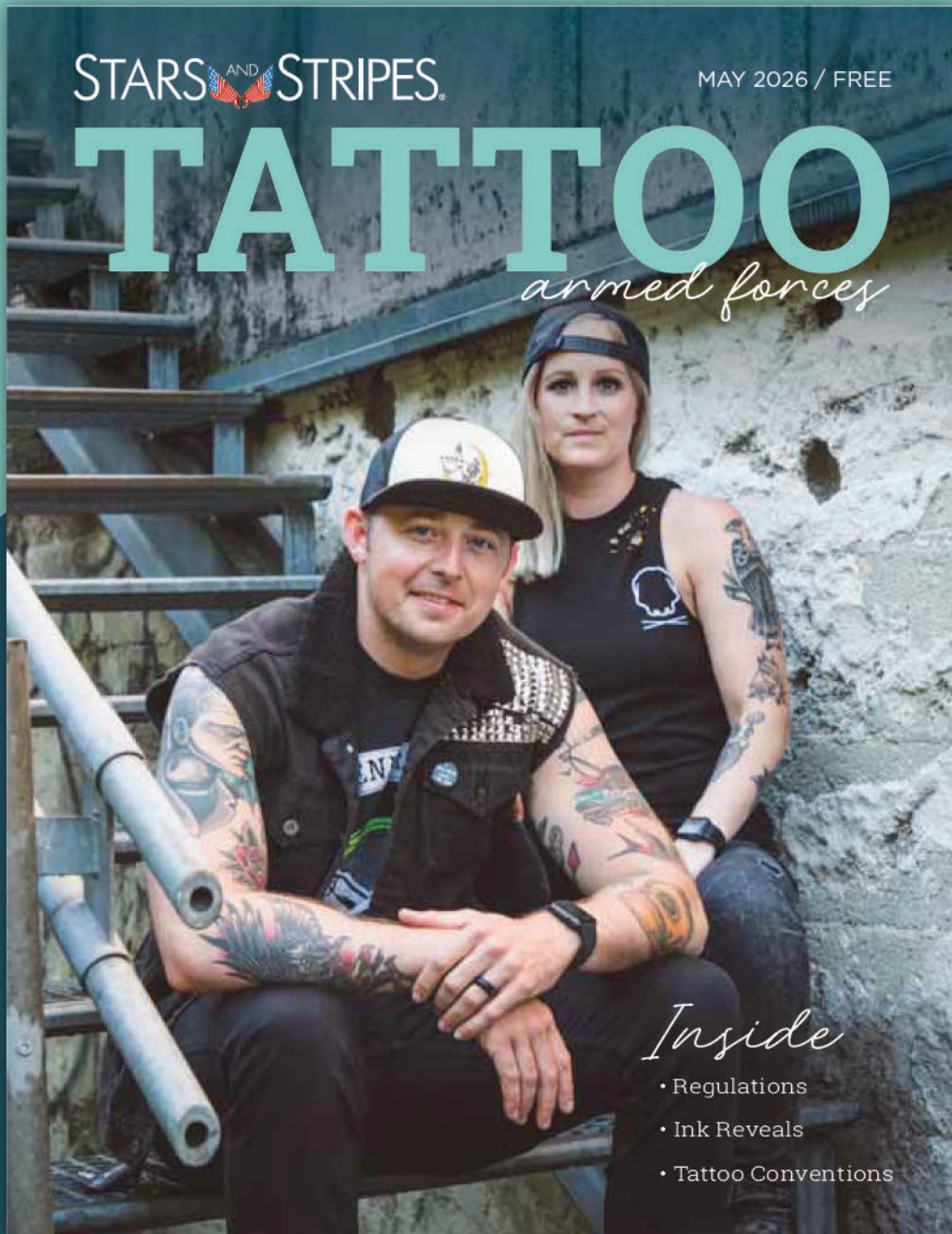
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