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PLAN AHEAD

By Katie Wells



BAVARIA

Tegernsee Valley Montgolfiade (Hot-Air Balloon Festival)

FEB. 1–8, 2026

What could be more peaceful than watching a clear lake reflecting colorful hot-air balloons floating high above it? This special, annual festival is having its 25th anniversary celebration in 2026. The festival kicks off with a ceremonial christening by Princess Elisabeth, Duchess of Bavaria. After demonstrations in the sky, daily passenger rides will be offered if you are feeling brave. Warm, mulled wine and plenty of regional gastronomy are offered, typically from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Once the sun sets around 6 p.m., visitors can enjoy music and food from nearby restaurants as they have a view of the glowing tethered balloons.



KAISERSLAUTERN

Ice Skating in Lautern

**JAN. 23–MARCH 8, 2026
(TENTATIVE)**

If in the months of January through March you're missing the winter magic from Christmas markets, no worries, Mr. F. Ice World sets up a covered ice rink at the Messeplatz fairgrounds, where visitors can enjoy ice skating, listen to music and sip hot cocoa with friends and family. There are often themed nights with a live DJ and an event program is available. You can bring your own skates and have the blades sharpened, or rentals are available to borrow for five euros. For beginners, there are some very cute penguin skating aids that you can rent for two euros per hour. Or, if you've been inspired by the Winter Olympics, try your hand at curling which will also be offered at select times throughout the day. For more information, visit mrf-erlebniswelt.de.



STUTTGART

Holiday on Ice – Cinema of Dreams

JAN. 21–25, 2026

Watch the fantastical world of cinema come to life on ice. "When the ice rink becomes a screen, a journey into a world of dreams begins: Three friends discover an abandoned cinema, renovate it, and begin producing their own films." Holiday on Ice is a special annual production of highly skilled ice-skating, dancing stunts and tricks combined with artistic lighting, theatrics and spectacular music. It originated in the United States in the 1940s and first premiered in Germany in Frankfurt am Main in 1950. It has been an annual tradition for over 80 years. Enjoy stunning performances by true experts who rehearse for nine hours a day, including some World and Olympic champions! Even a few famous musicians like Phil Collins have contributed to the songs. Each year the show has a new theme. For the early bird special, purchase your tickets before December 25, 2025.



WIESBADEN

Honey Yellow – The Bee in Nature and Cultural History

THROUGH FEB. 8, 2026

Depending on how long you have lived in Germany, you may have noticed there are various bee species here, and they are often more docile than the ones in the United States. At the **Museum Wiesbaden**, the "Honey Yellow" exhibit takes visitors on a journey to learn about 14,000 years of bee history: the intricate ways bees communicate through dance and sound, their social behavior, cultural and archeological behavior, and, of course, honey. Additionally, there is a version just for kids with simpler text that guides them through the exhibit. It is also interactive; kids can enjoy microscope stations, hands-on stations, drawing tables and more. The entire exhibit is offered in English alongside German, and if you plan ahead, on every first Saturday of the month, entry is free. ■

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STARS AND STRIPES



SPOT
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Paradeisl

Story and Photo by Kat Nickola

A festive and symbolic medieval holiday decoration, the *Paradeisl* (paradise tree), originates in German-speaking cultures. It likely became popular around the 1100s when Christian 'paradise plays' were enacted as a way to teach illiterate commoners stories from the Bible. Because Dec. 24 is the feast day of Adam and Eve, their stories were intricately performed together with that of Jesus' birth, celebrated on Dec. 25. Since it was winter, evergreen trees with apples on them were used in the plays to represent the "paradise tree," from which Eve and Adam eat forbidden fruit.

The paradise tree became a popular symbol of Christmas, so people in the Middle Ages created their own stylized versions as decorations: the *Paradeisl*. In some places, they became known as a *Klausenbaum* for St. Nikolaus, whose stories of gift-giving intertwine with Christmas traditions. They remained popular well into the 20th century and are still seen occasionally today.

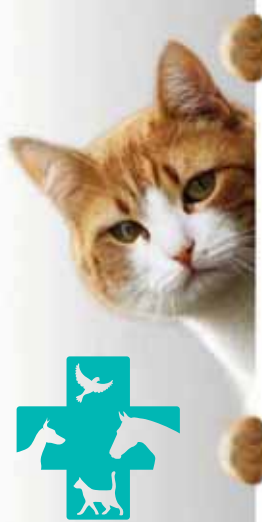
A table-top *Paradeisl* pyramid is made by connecting four apples with six equal-length sticks; they can be decorated with greenery, nuts, fruits or candles that can be lit during the weeks of Advent. ■



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THE MYSTERY of the BAVARIAN CHRISTMAS PICKLE

..... By Katie Wells

What's the dill with Weihnachtsgurke?

Perhaps one Christmas, you found yourself reaching into a gift bag only to find a not-so-festive green, warty, oblong ornament, clueless as to why someone would gift you it other than as a gag gift. Fast forward a few years, and as you sit around a cozy fire sharing memories, hanging family ornaments, you pull out that strange bauble and try to recall where it came from and who even gifted it to you many Christmases past. Or the same ornament might light up your face with good cheer, knowing all about the bizarre tradition of the **Weihnachtsgurke**.

According to legend, hiding a Christmas pickle is a centuries-old Bavarian Christmas tradition. The rules are simple:

1. The Christmas pickle must be the last ornament hung on the tree, usually after the kids go to bed. Pickles are perfect because they are hard to spot within the green needles of a Christmas tree.
2. The next day, the family races to see who is first to find the pickle.
3. The winner receives an extra Christmas present, good fortune for the coming year or both!

A brine new day!

So where did this tradition come from? There are a few iterations, but the most popular one involves a Civil War German-American soldier, John C. Lower, and an example of human compassion. Lower was a prisoner of war close to starvation, and on Christmas Eve he was so ill that he begged for a pickle to eat before his last breath. Maybe it was a touch of holiday spirit or Christmas magic, but the guard on duty that night granted Lower's Christmas wish and saved his life.

Because of this kindness, when Lower returned to Germany, he hung a Christmas pickle on his tree in gratitude. Since then, a **Weihnachtsgurke** has decorated German Christmas trees as a sign of good luck.



Were they gherkin our chain?

As lovely as this story is, the Christmas pickle tradition had become popular amongst Americans, but most Germans had never heard of it. It turns out that in the 19th century, German glassblowers were making vegetable and fruit ornaments en masse. After discovering them on a trip to Germany, F.W. Woolworth began importing them to the United States to sell. It's likely that the pickle was leftover stock because of it being green and not standing out on a tree, and that the German-American soldier story was made up as a marketing ploy. Regardless, the quirky, crunchy little decoration is tied to a lot of tradition and is even spreading back to its believed origins. Many Germans have started participating in the fun, and, well, Christmas is all about believing, right?

While there isn't an exact location tied to this story, pickle ornaments can be found at plenty of Bavarian Christmas markets. INGE-GLAS®, a family-owned glassblower company out of **Neustadt bei Coburg in Bavaria** makes a glass **Weihnachtsgurke** that has been a bestseller for years at the **Nuremberg Christmas market**.

Nowadays, some family hunts for the Christmas pickle kick off with a poem. Some are pink or decorated with glitter. There are even emotional support pickles to help "dill" with life, just as a pickle once brought John C. Lower back to life. What is your tradition? ■

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HANDMADE IN GERMANY

Gifts for everyone on the list

By Kat Nickola

Shopping for a special gift? What about something crafted by hand right here in Germany? Here are some items still made by trained artisans.





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TOYS

There are all kinds of toy gifts that are still handmade in Germany. The Steif company specializes in crafting **stuffed animals**, and you can visit the factory and museum in Giengen, near Ulm. In Hesse, Nanchen Natur makes sturdy **cloth dolls** of all sizes, in a huge variety of skin and hair combinations, and for every age.

There are numerous wooden toy companies and the **play figures** created by Ostheimer are still carved and painted by hand. You can even visit their workshop near Stuttgart for a tour. The Fridlin company makes colorful **motor-skills toys** for toddlers that are so well-respected they are on exhibition at the Friedrich Fröbel Museum, which is dedicated to the inventor of the first kindergarten. For older kids, the wooden **blocks** and **marble runs** from Baumkinder are sure to feed the inner engineer.



HANDMADE IN GERMANY

Gifts for everyone on the list



Scan for a map of artisans specializing in handmade items.

WOODEN HOLIDAY DECORATIONS

The **Weihnachtspyramide** (Christmas pyramid) is a staple at Christmas markets and originates in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) of Saxony along the Czech border. They were first crafted in the Middle Ages as an artistic way to combine the traditions of bringing both light and evergreen wood into the home during wintertime.

Other holiday decorations like **Schwibbogen** (candle arches), **Rauchermen** (incense smokers) and **Nutcrackers** are also from this area; they originally depicted people and mining scenes from the region's mining heritage. Specialized woodworking villages like Seiffen in the Ore Mountains have numerous workshops selling hand-made Christmas décor and wooden toys.

In southern Bavaria, the village of Oberammergau is also known for its wooden Christmas décor. Here, the specialty is **religious figures** and **nativity scenes**. It is fun to wander in and out of the many workshops where craftspeople carve figurines alongside their products.



CUCKOO CLOCKS

While it is unclear who invented the **cuckoo clock**, this quintessential German handicraft was perfected in the Schwarzwald (Black Forest) area. The first mention of a clock with a mechanical cuckoo bird chirping every quarter hour is in a 1629 description by a traveling merchant.

For the ultimate gift, travel the Deutsche Uhrenstraße (German clock route), a nearly 300 km loop through the Schwarzwald past towns like Trieburg, where numerous clock makers have shops, and Furtwangen, where you can see the German Clock Museum. Schönwald is another village worth checking out, since it is where the first Black Forest cuckoo clock was made; visit the August Schwer workshop, one of the oldest in the area.





CUSTOM MADE SHOES

High-quality shoes are a German staple, and a gift of a handmade pair is a must for any footwear aficionado. The well-known Birkenstock is partially handmade, but many companies specialize in handcrafted and **custom-made shoes**. Use the keyword *Maßschuhe* to find local, custom shoemakers near you.

The town of Pirmasens, not far from the KMC, is known as Germany's shoe town. Historically, it was the footbed of shoe manufacturing and is still home to numerous factories and shoe outlet shops. For handmade or custom shoes, visit the Zarini shop. 20 minutes away, the German Shoe Museum operates out of an old shoe factory.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Germany has been a hotbed for musical innovation since the earliest classical operas emerged, and today it continues to elevate music through modern sounds.

In the early 1800s, German horn players invented the first valve for brass instruments, making complex sounds a possibility. Both Thein Brass, in the northern German city of Bremen, and Voigt Brass, based in the eastern German village of Markneukirchen specialize in handmade **trumpets** and **trombones**.

For **rhythmic instruments** of all kinds – from cymbals and chimes to cajons and frame drums – the Schlagwerk company offers a large variety of handmade traditional and new percussion.

Death metal meets German engineering at one of the many small workshops across the country creating handmade **electric guitars**. The Zeal Guitars workshop in Kaiserslautern offers three models in numerous customizable styles. For those of you in Bavaria, Schwartz Custom Guitars in Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz, has seven customizable electric guitar styles and two **electric basses** to pick from.



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EYEGLASSES

With world-renowned precision optics and a history of perfecting eyewear, Germany is the perfect place to purchase **handmade glasses**.

From luxury brands like Maybach and the unique styles of Mykita, to the timeless looks of Lunor and natural materials of Hoffmann, there are options to fit everyone. To see a large selection of handmade glasses in person, visit the Funk Eyewear factory store in Kinsau, about an hour north of Garmisch.

The world's leader in **optical technology**, the Zeiss company is also the oldest optics manufacturer in the world. Their ultra-modern museum is a great day trip for the scientifically minded; it's located in Oberkochen, just over an hour from Stuttgart or Ansbach.

PENS AND PENCILS

A handmade fountain pen is the perfect gift for the writer or artist in your life (hint, hint). Traditional **fountain pens** come with a few components such as the barrel to hold an ink cartridge, and the metal nib that feeds the ink onto the paper as you write.

Special pens with replacement ink cartridges are still very popular in Germany today; **ballpoint** styles are even used by school children. Companies like e+m craft wooden handmade ballpoint and fountain pens in addition to **refillable mechanical pencils**. For modern styles and metal casings, the Diplomat company also handicrafts ballpoint and fountain pens. ■



Homemade Hot Chocolate

By Tamala Malerk

As I was marveling at the Grand Ducal Palace with my mom and spouse, I had to escape the sudden onset of heavy rain on a cold day in Luxembourg City by running into the first open door I saw. To my surprise, we stumbled into the **Chocolate House of Luxembourg**. While they offered a medley of chocolate treats, what interested me the most was warming up my soul (and my slightly wet self) with one of their hot chocolate spoons from a giant wall of choices.

As the consumer, you make your choice and hand it to the barista/chef on site. Then, they bring you a giant cup of molten chocolate topped with whipped cream and a giant marshmallow. I chose a white hot chocolate, while my spouse went with a Bailey's hot chocolate and my mom picked a dark chocolate blend.

It was this trip that inspired me to bring my experience home. Why not re-vamp your hot chocolate all winter long at home?



Start with a solid base

- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk of choice (whole milk for full flavor, but feel free to use soy, almond, cashew, oat, nonfat, etc.)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cream of choice (heavy cream, half-and-half, evaporated milk, non-dairy substitute)
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons cocoa or carob powder (carob powder provides a more caramel flavor)
- Powdered sugar to taste
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 3 oz chopped chocolate (70 percent dark chocolate is recommended to keep it authentic, but feel free to use milk chocolate, unsweetened chocolate or white chocolate)
- 1 oz chocolate shavings (to top)
- Whipped cream or whipped coconut oil for a vegan option (topping)

Keep it simple

While it may seem tempting (especially for the kids) to pile in all of the ingredients possible, one to three add-ins will make for the tastiest treat.

Potential add-ins

Peppermint, coffee, orange zest, marshmallow, Irish cream, liqueurs, white chocolate, berry syrup, caramel, nutmeg, hazelnut syrup, Biscoff® spread, ground cinnamon, vanilla, coconut, cayenne pepper, crushed cookies, mint, chai, ice cream, Nutella®, espresso, flavored liquor, dark chocolate, gingerbread spice, pumpkin spice, chili peppers, etc. The possibilities are endless.

Go fancy

You can use a blow torch to roast the marshmallow, a candy cane as a stirring device, high-quality chocolate or heavy cream and milk instead of water if you are using an instant hot chocolate powder (or a non-dairy alternative such as whipped coconut oil or almond milk).

Make a day out of it

Grab some ceramic paints and a plain white mug and have everyone decorate and personalize their own hot chocolate mugs. ■

Recipe adapted from kitchenconfidante.com.



PHOTO BY

Jessica Lynn



Photographer Jessica Lynn was lucky to spot a herd of reindeer roaming the ice-packed roads outside of **Rovaniemi, Finland**. Reindeer are an important part of Sámi culture in Finland and symbolize a connection to deities and spirits (white reindeer, especially, are associated with the sun goddess, Biewe). Traditionally, Sámi people follow the seasonal migration patterns of their reindeer herds and move across landscapes with them. They provide warmth, transit and nourishment in the tough arctic climate. To preserve their culture, the Sámi still practice reindeer herding traditions today and offer educational and cultural events for visitors. ■



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