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PLAN AHEAD

By Katie Wells



BAVARIA

Tollwood Winter Festival, Munich

NOV. 24–DEC. 31, 2025

“A Feast for the Senses,” and an alternative Christmas market, this month-long winter event will quell any winter blues or boredom. Shop fairtrade handicrafts from all over the world at the Market of Ideas, see a fire show and enjoy 100 percent organic food from sweet *baumstriezeln* (chimney cake) to Indian *thali*. The Witches’ Cauldron is a stage area where 60 bands will perform over 30 days and admission is free. The Performance Stage also features shows, the majority of which are free and include theatre, music, international productions and kid’s entertainment. This year’s theme for the **Tollwood Winter Festival** is “Circus Festival.” There will be three contemporary circus shows: Circa, Circo Zoe and the 7 Fingers, each from a different continent. For those interested in winter sports, there will be four curling rinks to experience. For kids, make a circus mask or listen to a bedtime story at the Children’s Tent. The festival ends with the **Tollwood New Year’s Eve Party**—a magical midnight waltz on the Theresienwiese.



KAISERSLAUTERN

Saarbrücker Christkindlmarkt

NOV. 17–DEC. 23, 2025

Less than an hour from the KMC area, **Saarbrücken’s Christmas Market** is worth the visit; however, it requires a small amount of extra planning if you want to see the flying Santa. Every day, on St. Johann Market Square, Santa soars above your head in his sleigh pulled by his reindeer. He tells the story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in German. My spouse and I visited a couple of years ago and while the story is told in German, it was still fun to sip a hot cocoa (with a splash of Bailey’s), watch and listen as everyone looked to the sky in wonder. Santa flies by overhead with his reindeer each day at 5 and 7 p.m. On Children’s Wednesdays, he also flies by at 2 p.m. Additionally, get a Christmas photo taken at the Knips-Mich-Hütte free of charge or ice skate at a small rink. Saarbrücken also has a Christmas Light Garden open the first weekend of Advent, Nov. 29, 2025.



STUTT GART

Ravenna Gorge Christmas Market

NOV. 28–DEC. 21, 2025

Twinkling lights, the sound of a train whistling above head and a sparkling blanket of snow create an enchanting atmosphere at the **Ravenna Gorge Christmas Market**. The market is nestled under a towering stone aqueduct in the Black Forest and allows a limited number of guests to enter each evening. Within the forest, there is an illuminated nativity trail. Kids, or adults, can send a letter with their Christmas wish to Santa at the Christmas Post Office. Plan early as this magical event is only on weekends and tickets sell out fast! First, sign up for the newsletter which will get you access to ticket sales one hour earlier than the rest of the public. www.hochschwarzwald.de/service/newsletter. The link for ticket purchase comes out a few days prior to the sale date in mid-October. To get there, you can hike by lantern from the winter hiking trail through the Löffeltal from Hinterzarten in about 45 minutes or you can schedule a free bus ticket in advance from Hinterzarten, Himmelreich or Titisee. There is parking onsite; however, it must be booked and is limited.



WIESBADEN

Hochheimer Markt

NOV. 7–11, 2025

On the weekend after All Souls’ Day, the entire town of Hochheim am Main is closed off and transforms into one of the largest folk festivals in Germany. **The Hochheim Market** is over 500 years old and is a combo of a folk festival, state fair and cattle market. On the opening Friday, at noon, guests and the mayor kick off the festival with five cannon shots. Over the five-day celebration, visitors can enjoy rides like the classic swing carousel. In the cattle market area, free pony rides are available each day and there are scheduled events like the District Horse Show, the traditional Cattle Market and the Historic Showman Tractor Exhibition. In the historic market area, you can sip mead and munch on suckled pig while shopping over 400 artisan and trader stalls. There is even a bathhouse if you’d prefer some R&R. To bid the fun farewell, Tuesday is Family Day with discounted prices, and the evening concludes with a fireworks show at 7 p.m. ■

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Hokkaido Pumpkins



By Kat Nickola

If you are looking for pumpkins at a German grocery store, think small and tasty. Hokkaido pumpkins, or *kabocha*, are hands-down the most popular winter squash and a favorite for cooks across the country. A type of *kuri* (acorn) squash, red Hokkaido's have very thick, dark-orange flesh and a nutty flavor. Green Hokkaido's have yellowish-orange pulp and a milder flavor. They make incredible cozy, autumnal dishes like soups and stews. While they can be used for super cute jack-o-lanterns, their density makes them pretty difficult to carve. ■



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The Witches of Idstein

By Tamala Malerk



Witch Trials

While not as well-known as the ones held in the U.S., Europe also held quite a few witch trials in the 16th and 17th centuries. Idstein, about a 20-minute drive from Wiesbaden and 90 minutes from the KMC, found itself swept up in witch-fury between 1676 and 1677.

Count Johannes of Nassau ordered Protestant preachers to warn against the evils of witchcraft and encouraged the trials that ravaged Europe. In Idstein, 35 women and eight men were executed for witchcraft in that one-year timeframe. Today, a plaque in their memory sits at the foot of the **Hexenturm** (witch's tower).

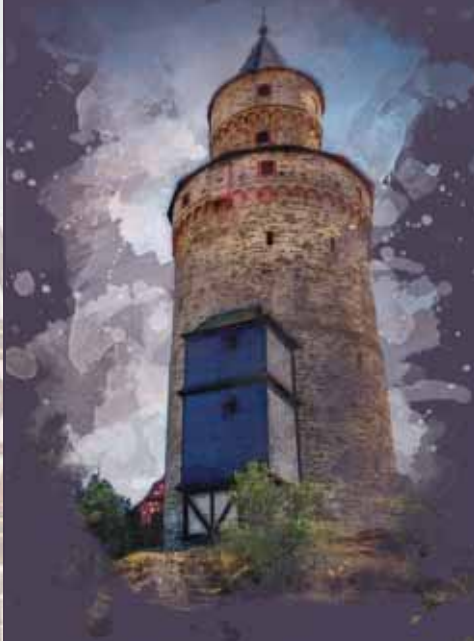
The tower was originally constructed in the 1100s but went through several reconstructions and renovations through the 1800s. Between the 1400s and 1700s, the tower was used as a lookout for fires or oncoming enemies. Ironically, the tower was not named until the 1800s and its name does not come from the witch trials but rather regional naming trends.

The Witch's Tower

By walking over to the Tourist Information Center, you can trade a deposit (such as your car key) for the key to the Hexenturm and make the climb up the tower yourself.

With the key, you are expected to let yourself into the tower, lock yourself in, climb the stairs and see the sites, and come back down in about 45 minutes. Wear your good walking shoes for exploring this 42-meter-high tower.

If climbing up a tower isn't for you, you can simply walk around the grounds of Idstein Castle. If just reading about castle and tower adventures is more your speed, make sure to pay a visit to the Hexenbuchladen (witches' bookstore) a mere three-minute walk from the Hexenturm.



While in Town

We arrived in Idstein right around my-tummy-is-rumbling-for-lunch-time, so our first task was finding food, and the **Taunushof Restaurant and Hotel** did not disappoint. I can personally recommend the French onion soup as well as the baked Camembert cheese with cranberries, salad and toast. My spouse highly recommends the Alfredo schnitzel. Or at least I think he does; he just kept repeating, "We need to make this at home" between bites.

In the heart of town, a majority of the buildings are intricately decorated, beautiful half-timbered houses that date back as far as the 15th century. There are hidden faces throughout the designs, and you can make it a family challenge to see who can find the most faces. These buildings house residents, hotels, restaurants, ice cream shops, graphic designers, art galleries, shops, toy stores, wineries and more. Keep your eyes peeled for **Das Schiefes Haus** (the Crooked House). The name says it all for this blue house with yellow window frames.

For the beer connoisseurs reading this, don't worry, Idstein has you covered. The Idsteiner Brewery, **Alte Feuerwache**, not only has a variety of brewed in-house beers but also some amazing seasonal food. They feature a menu item that I have never seen in Germany before: **Brizza**, a pizza dish with a mustard and cream sauce, cheese and sausage on top of a pretzel (Brezel) crust. I also indulged in dessert which was a chocolate-lava cake served with vanilla ice cream and berries. All I can say is, leave room for dessert. You can also purchase beer and souvenirs to take home with you. ■

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HEXENTANZ

Germany's Witchy Heritage

By Kat Nickola

It is that time of year: When we celebrate the shadowy, mysterious side of life and start conjuring ghosts, warding away spirits and magicking our way into longer, darker nights. It's also the time when we think of witches sitting around watching fires burn and cauldrons bubble.

But, what, really, is a witch?

Old hags sowing hate from their brooms?

A powerful sorceress fighting evil?

A nature-worshiper dancing around a fire?

Someone who can magically heal with herbs?

Well, yes! Any of these may be a valid representation of a witch, depending on what definition you use.

Ronald Hutton, esteemed historian of paganism and professor at the University of Bristol, literally wrote the book(s) on witches: "The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present." For his research, Hutton uses four definitions of witches that have built up over time. The oldest use of the word **witch**, from thousands of years ago, was for a person who used magic to harm other people.

Nearly as old is the idea that a witch is simply any magic-user, meaning there are both good and bad witches. It wasn't until more recently that two additional definitions came along. A modern witch may be a feisty woman who challenges the patriarchy, or a practitioner of a nature-based or pagan religion. Hutton says all definitions can be true at once.









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In Germany, a witch is a "hexe."

That German word for witch shares origins with the English word for spells: hexes. Witches, or **Hexen**, have been looped into modern Halloween celebrations, likely because the holiday has its roots in the Celtic pagan festival of Samhain and the beginning of wintertime.

But in Germany, the winter celebrations were different. So, instead, witches became associated with a wild festival at the opposite side of the calendar celebrating the beginning of summer. The evening of April 30 was a time for pre-Christian people to gather together and dance around bonfires to celebrate all the warmth, abundance and fertility that summer would bring. It continues in the tradition of "Tanz in den Mai," on May 1 when German town festivals find people dancing around maypoles and lovers giving decorated birch saplings to each other.

In the Middle Ages, as Christianity was adopted and witches became a negative symbol of paganism, the nighttime celebration became known as "Hexennacht." On this night, supposedly evil witches continued to celebrate the old beliefs, spreading mayhem and meeting with the devil. It became popular to pray to Saint Walpurga for safety from the witchy curses on this night. The saint, after all, brought Christianity to Germany and was canonized on May 1, 870. In many places, the night is also known as "Walpurgisnacht" because the saint's day intertwines with the old beliefs. It is still celebrated as a night for bonfires and a bit of mischief-making with yard ornaments being stolen and toilet paper decorating trees.

The Harz Mountains are famous for witchy gatherings.

With thick forests and dramatic rocky outcroppings, it's no wonder the Harz Mountains are steeped in myth and legend. This misty limestone upland became a safe haven for Germanic pagans during Charlemagne's eighth-century Christianization campaigns. The lingering heritage means that each stream, cave or cliff has a specific story about the fairy that protects it, a gnome who lives nearby or a witch's coven that still meets.

The most famous witchy location in all of Germany is atop the highest moun-

tain in the Harz: the high, rounded Brocken. It is here that the largest witch gatherings were said to have taken place, and that idea was even more engrained in the local lore after Goethe penned a Hexennacht scene for his famous play "Faust."

The Brocken, and surrounding villages like Thale, Schierke and Wernigerode continue to host Hexennacht/Walpurgis celebrations today. Thousands of visitors dress up in their own witch attire for the many parties, parades and bonfires.



The most famous witchy location in all of Germany is atop the highest mountain in the Harz: *the high-rounded Brocken.*





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Witchy sites in the Harz

Tourist sites across the Harz Mountains cash-in on the witch craze by using “hex” in the names of everything from hotels to alpaca farms. But the following three options offer deeper experiences.

BROCKEN

You cannot miss the chance to head to the top of this famous peak. It is accessible by train year-round via the **Brockenbahn** route from the town of **Wernigerode**, or via hiking and mountain biking trails. At the top, you can take in the views that draw witches to their dances every year. Unless, of course, the spooky fog has rolled in, bringing the “Brockengespenst,” or Brocken specter – a creepy halo that haunts your shadows and photos. Don’t miss visiting the **Brockenhaus** visitor center, feasting on a meal at the **Hexenklause** restaurant, or even staying in the high-altitude Brockenhotel. The peak also has some interesting rock formations like the “witches’ altar” and the “devils’ pulpit.”

THALE

The village of **Thale** is a perfect home base for visiting the cheesiest and most entertaining witch-themed sites in the Harz. Downtown are all manner of shops and **small museums** dedicated to the dark arts. There is also a forest full of kitschy witch-inspired attractions. There are witch-themed rides in an area called **Fun Island**, a mountain coaster, animal park, restaurants and plenty of places to buy witch-themed souvenirs. The **Seilbahnen** cable car takes you up to the **Hexentanzplatz** (witches’ dance place) where local witches partied or mounted brooms for a quick flight to festivities over on the Brocken.

HARZER HEXENSTIEG

For a slower pace, the **Harz Witches’ Trail** traverses the mountains from west to east along 150 kilometers worth of trail, with shorter variations to allow hikers options for routing. There are campgrounds along the way, but the trail also passes near quaint half-timbered towns that offer hotel accommodations and their own witch trial history. One highlight of taking to the mountains on foot are the numerous fantastical rock formations along the way – almost all have a magical story or witchy legend behind them. For a souvenir, you can earn badges by collecting stamps at special locations along the trail. ■



GREECE ON A BUDGET IN THESSALONIKI

By Betsy McLaughlin

From Santorini to Crete to Athens, people seemingly flock in droves to the well-known country of Greece. However, the picturesque white domes speckled across blue seas and ancient historical monuments can come with a hefty price tag, leaving even the most well-budgeted traveler longing for some reprieve. If searching for the thrill of Greece without breaking the bank, consider a trip to Thessaloniki which offers views, food and history for half the price (and half the crowds)!

The second largest city in Greece, Thessaloniki sits along the Aegean Sea. With easy to navigate public transportation, the downtown can be directly reached from the airport within forty minutes. There, a bundle of clothing and shoe stores await the shopping enthusiast. For the history buffs, a Roman forum dating from the 2nd century AD can be easily viewed. Nearly every street corner seems to house cathedrals and there are fifteen UNESCO World Heritage Paleo Christian and Byzantine monuments in the city, offering plenty to explore.

For a birds-eye view of the sea, onlookers can walk the winding steps of the **White Tower of Thessaloniki**, overlooking the snow-capped Mount Olympus: the tallest mountain in Greece. For some water adventure, there are plenty of pirate-themed ships that offer a quick ride upon the sea for reasonable prices.

For the curious, the **Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki** offers a wide variety of statues and history regarding the land of the gods. For

those not interested in paying for the indoor tour, the outdoor gardens of the museum can be accessed for free.

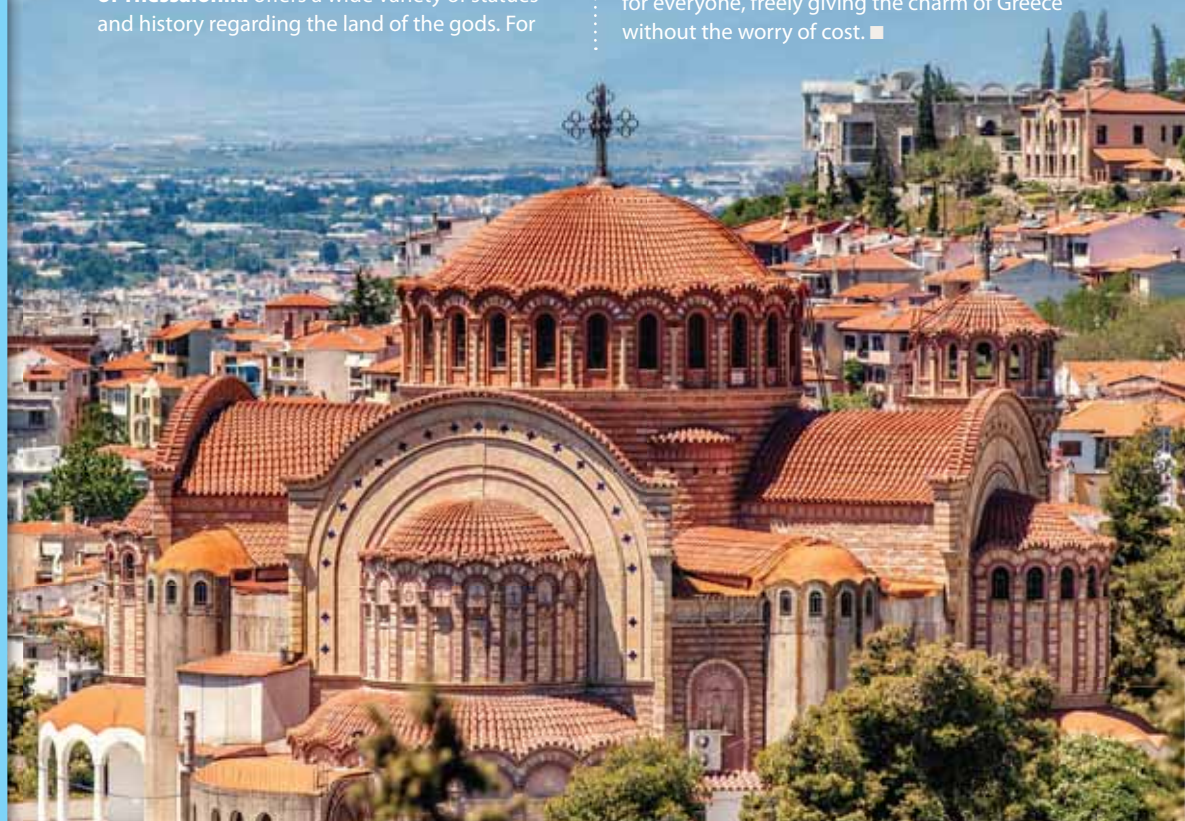
A lively outdoor **farmers' market** sits within walking distance of the Archaeological Museum. While wandering through the tents, each stall will offer samples of their products, including cheeses, honey and oil. For small jars of honey that are suitable for airline carry-on restrictions, be sure to purchase from Bee Care, a company that offers sweet and unique blends of flavors including flower, pine, chestnut and linden honey.

For those interested in biblical history, the **Church of Saint Paul the Apostle** can be accessed for free and is easy to reach via the Cultural Line bus (number 50) from the city center. It is believed that the apostle Paul preached here, helping with the creation of the early Christian church around 50 AD. The church sits atop the city, providing great panoramic views.

From there, meander toward the restaurant called **Kreonidis' Balcony**, where you can feast on the best gyro meat you've ever tasted while gazing at Mount Olympus. If timed just right, the sun may be setting, casting orange and pink hues in the sky, while sailboats bob along the sea.

For a vibrant night life, return to downtown Thessaloniki, where the party is just getting started. Restaurants line the sea, offering music, dance and food galore, with almost everything set at incredibly affordable prices. With the family, find some ice cream at nearly any corner and walk along the water's edge to recap your day.

From families to singles, romantic getaways, to girls' weekends, Thessaloniki offers something for everyone, freely giving the charm of Greece without the worry of cost. ■



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PHOTO BY

Adel Valdes

The **Boccaccio Ballroom** in Prague is a historically protected ballroom. Built in 1927, the baroque neo-classical interior quickly became the backdrop for high society gatherings, "Soirée Dansantes." It's a perfect place to don fancy clothes, listen to arias and have a meal. In the words of photographer Adel Valdes, "A visit to Prague is not complete without a Mozart dinner show with a three-course meal, balcony seating and a great performance." ■

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A Stars and Stripes Community Publication

Europe Office

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John Rodriguez

PUBLISHING & MEDIA DESIGN, MANAGER

Carrie Farrell

PUBLISHING & MEDIA DESIGN, LEAD EDITOR

Kat Nickola

WRITER-EDITORS

Tamala Malerk, Katie Wells

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Daniela Gammon, Ryann Joye, Mandy Mills

ENGAGEMENT MANAGER

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS COORDINATOR

Al Green

MULTIMEDIA ADVERTISING, MANAGER

Doug Dougherty

MULTIMEDIA ADVERTISING, CONSULTANTS

Sean Adams, Heidi Bayfield, Kandace Blevin, Nate Jamison, Jeff Teeselink, Caitlin Weaver

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Danny Padro

COVER DESIGN BY

Mandy Mills

ADVERTISING OFFICE

Unit 29480, APO, AE 09211

Postfach 1980, 67607

Kaiserslautern, Germany

+49 (0) 152-5672-5020

TO ADVERTISE, CONTACT:

Kandace Blevin

Kaiserslautern Multimedia Consultant

blevin.kandace@stripes.com

Tel: 0172-666-8134



@STARSANDSTRIPESEUROPE

Washington Office

PUBLISHER

Max D. Lederer, Jr.

CHIEF OPERATIONS OFFICER

Laura Law

REVENUE DIRECTOR

Scott Foley

ENGAGEMENT DIRECTOR

Chris Verigan

PUBLISHING & MEDIA DESIGN, DIRECTOR

Marie Woods

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