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The eagerly-awaited Christmas market season in Germany is upon us, I try to attend as many of them as possible. I love the holiday markets not so much for all the goods that tempt the eye, but rather for the ambiance—the scents, the bright lights and the joy of gathering with seldom-seen friends over mugs of mulled wine.

Here is a certain booth I flock to every year—not to browse—but to buy. The products there are natural, healing and one-of-a-kind. German honey, I’m making a beeline for you!

First-timers to the beekeeper’s stand are in for a revelation. For beyond the bee’s most basic gift of honey are found dozens, if not hundreds, of products to soothe, pamper and delight. Pillar candles made of thinly pressed sheets of beeswax, rolled into cylinders and embellished with press-pins of tiny bees. Hand and foot creams. Lip gloss. Soap. Honey gummy bears. Pollen supplements for extra vitality.

Honey liqueurs are a special treat, and if I’m in luck, the burly bearded gentleman is on hand to pour me samples into tiny plastic cups. Honey lemon schnapps, honey whiskey, honey rum—I could do this all day.

Sampling the honey itself is a no less spectacular experience. It’s fascinating to explore how the nectar gathered by the bees influences the taste of the final product. These range from the light floral honeys—lavender and rapeseed—to the darkest, strongest varieties—chestnut, fir and pine. Somewhere in the mix is my particular favorite, linden blossom honey.

The bee-keeper with whom I keep my annual date hails from the Odenwald, a thickly forested region north of Heidelberg. But he’s not the only one making business from beeswax. Many Christmas markets, even smaller ones, offer stands selling products made by members of the German Association of Beekeepers (Deutscher Imkerbund). A gold and green symbol of a beehive, flowers and trees on the product’s label assures the consumer it’s the genuine article.

Should Christmas markets be forced to take a hiatus again in 2021, there are other ways into the honey pot. Beekeepers are regulars at many farmer’s markets. Supermarkets specializing in natural products sell genuine German honey. One can always place an order online. There’s also the option of visiting a beekeeper’s very own shop in the countryside. For a list of places to visit, see https://deutscherimkerbund.de/258-Honigmarkt.
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When you arrived in Germany, it probably didn’t take long to hear about the town of Bad Dürkheim—the central hub of the German Wine Route and home to one of the largest festivals in the region, Dürkheimer Wurstmarkt. But when you want to experience the essence of German wine country, Bad Dürkheim is far from your only option. Situated 6 kilometers from this larger city sits Freinsheim, a small, charming town surrounded in medieval walls, and is just as devoted to its wine and festival culture.
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RICH HISTORY

Walking around a walled city immediately takes you back in time, and Freinsheim is no exception. There is evidence of human activity in this Palatinate town from the 6th century, as it was first mentioned in writings from around 773. Living under various rules, the town’s fortifications were first completed in the 15th century. During the late 1600s, much of the wall was brought down during the Nine Years’ War. It was then reconstructed in the 18th century—much of it still standing today—representing a well-preserved, history-meets-modern life balance. One of the most striking parts of the wall is the “Eisentor” or Iron Gate, which you are sure to walk through on your way in or out of town. While walking through the gate, keep an eye out for Freinsheim’s coat of arms, which includes a bunch of grapes—always a good sign for a thirsty traveler.

FOOD AND FESTIVALS

Within the city’s walls you will find many options to indulge in Palatinate food specialties and local wines. Freinsheim has historically been a wine-growing village and today there are at least 20 different wineries in this town of 5,000 people. You can wander around the village tasting different wines along the way or get cozy over a bowl of warm soup at one of the many restaurants. It’s also a charming city for shopping, whether it’s clothing, household goods or jewelry. Keep your eyes out for the shop selling Pfalz wine and Oktoberfest themed jewelry—perfect for a day out in the vineyards or at a future fest. Public city tours are available on certain days of the week; you can inquire with the local tourist office to arrange and ask questions about tours.

Freinsheim is probably most well-known for its many wine festivals and culinary hikes. One of the first festivals of the year is the Red Wine Trail ("Rotweinwanderweg") on the fourth weekend of January, taking guests through the many vineyards to different stands for wine and food. The Old Town Festival (Freinsheimer Altstadtfest) then occurs on the first weekend in June. In July comes the Town Wall Festival (Stadtmauerfest) on the third weekend, celebrating their historic gate. Lastly, the final celebration of the year is the Culinary Wine Trail (Kulinarischer Weinwanderweg) on the fourth weekend of September. For being a small town, they welcome in hundreds of festgoers throughout the entire year. Driving or taking the train are great options for participating in one of these festivals.

Whether you’re craving the festival atmosphere or just looking for a day trip to the German Wine Route, consider Freinsheim for a wine-filled jaunt through history.
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The days are short and the nights are long, but winter weather doesn’t stop the fun in Denmark. Towns are dressed in their finest holiday wear and are dazzling like something straight out of a Hallmark movie. Step into a winter wonderland like no other when you visit this Nordic country in northern Europe. The festive mood permeates the atmosphere and the smell of mulled wine tickles your senses. Pack all the cold weather layers and get ready to explore everything Denmark has to offer this winter.

By Jessica Zen
TRAVEL INSPIRATION

COZY IN COPENHAGEN

Christmas time in Europe isn’t complete without a market or two. You simply can’t miss the Copenhagen Christmas markets. Head to the city center (Tivoli Gardens), a pedestrian-only area filled with lovingly decorated stalls selling artisan crafts, handmade ornaments and delicious treats. Be sure to try some “glogg,” a mulled wine that is garnished with almonds and raisins. Another market staple is “aebleskiver” which are little pancakes topped with fresh jam and powdered sugar. To keep the merriment going, try some festive outdoor ice-skating at Frederiksberg Gardens.

To warm up, the Bastard Café is one of a kind and the only place in Copenhagen that entertains its patrons with board games. Play over 3,500 different games with your friends and family, from simple games for kids to card and dice games for adults. You’re sure to be entertained for hours here! Have a beer or some coffee along with bar snacks for the perfect break.

If the romance of a snow-covered castle calls to you this holiday season, Kronborg Castle is the place to be. It dates back to 1420, but has since been burned and rebuilt. The rooms are decorated with Renaissance and Baroque themes and are a testament to the lavish lifestyles of past residents. There are also crypts and catacombs hidden deep beneath the castle. This castle is perhaps most famous for William Shakespeare’s drama “Hamlet,” which takes place in the chambers of Kronborg.

SNOW-FILLED FUN

No winter vacation is complete without some outdoor adventures. For something truly unique, head to Helgoland Bathing Institution on Amagerstrand or the urban Islands Brygge Havnebad for some winter bathing, which is, unfortunately, exactly what it sounds like. Jumping into the freezing cold waters, this experience is sure to wake you up and be a one-of-a-kind experience. The locals claim it is good for the body and releases adrenaline, serotonin, cortisol and dopamine, amongst other benefits. For something a little less extreme, try skiing at Østerlars (Bornholm). Though this ski resort is by no means the ultimate skiing location, it will allow you to get out on the slopes. It’s great for kids and has two lift systems.
A LITTLE HISTORY

No trip to Denmark is complete without learning about some Viking history. Ribe, the oldest town in the country, is a prime location to soak up some Viking knowledge. Here, you’ll find Ribes Vikinger, where you can learn about the Vikings and the town of itself. A little fact: there was a big fire in 1580 that destroyed over 200 houses! You’ll see the 16th-century houses that were built after the fire and can admire the beautiful doors and half-timbered architecture. Be sure to wander towards the water and see the “Men at Sea” statues. The four statues tower at almost 30 feet and can be seen by any ships coming or going from Esbjerg harbor.

If you want even more Viking history, the city of Roskilde is brimming with it. Perched on the Roskilde Fjord is the Viking Ship Museum, giving insight into the fascinating world of Vikings. Here, you’ll find not only incredible displays, but also opportunities to live the Viking life. The inside of the main hall of the museum features five original Skuldelev Viking ships from the 11th century. The Glendalough Sea Stallion is the museum’s longest ship and is open for boarding. Outside, you’ll find the boatyard where vessels were erected. Here, you can experience the culture of the Vikings while you view boats in full scale. Board a merchant vessel that is outfitted with war equipment. Dress up like a Viking or visit Tunet, a common place for the Vikings to gather. You can see what types of crafts were created during that time, such as metal, wood or rope work.

For your Denmark adventure, be sure to pack items like waterproof and insulated boots, wool stockings and a heavy coat. You don’t want to get chilly while exploring all the incredible things this country has to offer.
Up Close and Personal with Nyhavn

by Mary Del Rosario

Billing itself as the entertainment district in Copenhagen is the colorful waterfront neighborhood of Nyhavn. Meaning “new harbor” in Danish, Nyhavn is the part of Copenhagen everyone must spend some time in—not just for Tivoli Gardens and the Little Mermaid statue—but also for a vibe that can’t be experienced anywhere else in Denmark. If you happen to visit this corner of Scandinavia, get up close with this trendy area.
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During your stay in Denmark’s capital, the sites you have surely crossed off your bucket list are Tivoli Gardens, Christiansborg Palace, Amalienborg, Stroget and the Little Mermaid. However, since Nyhavn is on the water, a must-do activity is taking a canal tour to see the best of Copenhagen—Stromma Canal Tours is a highly recommended company that charges around 99 Danish krone (13 euros) for a one-hour canal ride. While on the water, be sure to keep your eyes peeled for the restaurant on a boat, Vandvid. Beautifully located on the Copenhagen harbor, you’ll get an intimate feel of waterfront dining with, of course, delicious food. The Veteran Ship and Museum Harbor and Nyhavn 18, where Hans Christian Andersen once lived, are other popular highlights.

Known as “the longest bar in Scandinavia,” Nyhavn is home to some of Copenhagen’s best bars and restaurants. Nyhavnskroen is the answer to the question, “Where should we eat dinner tonight?” This cozy restaurant features traditional Danish cuisine, and some dishes you can expect to find on the menu are fish fillets with fries, marinated herring and Bikesmad—Scandinavian hash. However, to keep with the nautical theme, Cap Horn is the place to be. Though known for its seafood, this restaurant makes the best roast beef sandwiches. For those who like to enjoy the nightlife, head to Fiskens Pub, a quirky, nautical-themed bar. Other popular bars in the area include McJoy’s Coice, Nyhavn C and Nyhavn 17.

Your Bucket List

During your stay in Denmark’s capital, you will want to visit Christiansborg Palace.

Fun Facts About Nyhavn

Though Copenhagen has its fair share of interesting history, Nyhavn provides some of its own fun tidbits:

- King Christian V brought Nyhavn to life by using Swedish prisoners to dig up the canal.
- In its early days, this area was famous for its beer, sailors and the debauchery they brought.
- House number 9 is the oldest one, dating back to 1681.
- Hans Christian Andersen moved around during his time here. Before moving to building number 18, he lived in building number 67.
- The best sunsets can be found at Nyhavn.
- To get a glimpse at the lives of the rich, pay a visit to the district’s south side, where mansions dot the canal.
- The best time to visit Copenhagen is May through August. Although it is high tourist season, that is when the weather is at its best.
- You can find the best Hummer (lobster) at Nyhavn 63A.
- Denmark uses the Danish krone, which is a bit more expensive than the euro.
During December, Strasbourg draws tourists from around Europe for its “Marché de Noël,” or Christmas market. Twinkling star lights are draped between buildings, a gigantic Christmas tree dominates Kléber Place and plenty of steaming mugs of “vin chaud” are consumed while perusing wares in small wooden chalets. Even if you choose to forgo the crowds at the market, the entire city is enveloped in holiday cheer. Take a stroll through La Petite France, the well-preserved medieval quarter filled with charming half-timbered houses and buildings that feel as though you’ve stepped into the middle of a fairy tale.

If you’d rather stay warm indoors, head to one of Strasbourg’s magnificent museums. Built in the 18th century, the Palais Rohan was once the seat of nobility and clergy. Today, it serves as a museum of art and archeology. Once you’ve explored the Palais, make your way over to the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. Filled with stunning pieces of art, you can find works by Kandinsky, Monet and more. If you’ve had your fill of art, head back across the river to Cathédrale Notre Dame de Strasbourg. Situated in the city center, this breathtaking cathedral is known for its impressive astronomical clock and ornate stained-glass windows; it’s well worth visiting.

If the shopping and wandering have worked up your appetite, you’re in a fantastic spot for delicious eats. Strasbourg draws its culinary influences from its French and German heritage. From the freshly baked brioche pastries and spiced gingerbread, there is no shortage of delectable Alsatian treats. “Kugelhopf” (or Gugelhupf) is a local favorite. Baked in a special Bundt pan, this light cake is a perfect late morning or early afternoon snack. Local patisserie Au Pain de Mon Grand-père on Rue des Hallibardes is a favorite among residents.

For a more savory dish, pop over to Le Clou on Rue du Chadron near Kléber Place. This quaint bistro offers traditional French, German and local Alsatian fare. Diners can find everything from escargots in garlic butter to bratwurst and sauerkraut. Or for a lighter, less expensive meal, head to one of the “tarte flambée” vendors. Consisting of a flatbread, rich creme fraiche, smoky bacon and lightly caramelized onions, you won’t leave hungry.

While you can easily spend more than two days in Strasbourg, you won’t regret a quick getaway during the holidays.
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