

Story and photos by Michele Peterson

Magical Memories Old and New

Cruising Germany's Christmas markets

Cinnamon-scented gingerbread houses, snow-topped pine boughs and shiny red nutcrackers — it's not often a person has the opportunity to relive childhood memories of Christmases past. But on a recent cruise through Germany's Christmas markets, it was easy to do just that.

So many of my holiday memories were created with my mother — from stringing popcorn to baking cookies — that a Christmas cruise seemed an ideal choice for a midwinter mother-daughter vacation. We chose *Christmas in the Heart of Germany*, a tour offered by Avalon Waterways, a leading European river cruise operator that is part of the well-known Globus travel family.

History of yuletide traditions

Although Germany has more than 150 Christmas markets, there is no better place to begin than Frankfurt, site of the country's very first market. Signaling the beginning of Advent, this medieval event began in 1393 and, in terms of visitor numbers and size, has become one of Germany's most important Christmas markets. From our perspective, it was certainly one of the most beautiful. A light snow was falling as we arrived at Römerberg, the square at Frankfurt's historic heart. The market was in full swing with more than 200 gaily decorated wooden stalls, a huge Christmas tree and the sound of church bells ringing. We browsed the booths festooned with bright lights and before long were snacking on *Brettmännchen*, a regional pastry of marzipan and almonds that's a local favourite.

Our guide noticed we were cold and quickly steered

us to a *Glühwein* stand. A steaming mug of the mulled red wine redolent with Christmas spices soon warmed us. Given the option to get our deposits refunded or keep our mugs, we kept them as souvenirs.

With time left before boarding the ship, we headed to the Twinkling Star Christmas Market in Wiesbaden. Located 30 minutes by train from downtown Frankfurt, this renowned spa town is home to one of Germany's most elegant Christmas markets. Entering through one of four gates decorated with illuminated lilies, we were soon strolling the fashionable streets around Schlossplatz Square, watching children merrily riding the old-time carousel and enjoying the romance of wind-up music boxes. There was even time for a dip in the therapeutic waters at the Kaiser-Friedrich-Therme, a refined spa offering hot springs dating back to Roman times.

Floating room with a view

Then it was time to begin our five-night cruise along the Main-Danube Waterway. We boarded the MS Affinity in Nuremberg. Built intentionally small to enable it to pass through the Main-Danube Canal's 38 locks (and with fewer than 70 cabins), the brand new vessel felt more like a floating boutique hotel than a cruise ship. Our stateroom on the Royal Deck featured large beds topped with European-style white cotton duvets, a stylish bathroom complete with a pair of plush robes and floor-to-ceiling glass doors that opened onto a French balcony.

Beyond the ship's spacious lobby was a lounge featuring





Shop for glasswork at its finest.

a Christmas tree that could have come from the pages of a fairytale. Panoramic windows offered views of Bavaria's snowy riverbanks, and an outdoor deck was the perfect spot to take pictures of the icy, serpentine river. Aft lay a serene lounge area and hair salon. With so much comfort packed into such a compact space, it was easy to see why river cruises are becoming increasingly popular: Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) reports that river/coastal cruises are one of the top cruise choices among Canadians.

Our ship's intimate size made it easy to get to know the other passengers. Dinner was informal — the ship's policy calls for no assigned seating or formal wear — and a glass of wine later, we were chatting with newfound friends over a locally inspired menu.

The enchantment of Christmas

The next morning we woke to snowflakes, eager to explore Nuremberg, home to one of Germany's most atmos-



Shop the Christmas market stalls at Rothenberg.

pheric Christmas markets and one of the included, optional excursions. Considerately, for my 79-year-old mother and others, passengers were divided into groups (colour-coded according to stamina levels and desired pace), supplied with headsets and an experienced guide.

Although extensively bombed during the Second World War, Nuremberg has been restored to its original splendour. Many of Germany's original Christmas markets were held around their city's main church to attract churchgoers — and Nuremberg's was no different. The soaring gothic spires and charming half-timbered houses within the old city's fortified walls made a Christmas card-worthy scene.

Nuremberg is also famous for its sausage specialties. *Nurnberger bratwurst*, a minced pork sausage no larger than a pinkie finger, was designed, according to legend, to fit through a fortress keyhole. Smoked over beechwood charcoal, it's traditionally served on a bed of sauerkraut. Also popular is gingerbread, a fragrant pillow of spices too tempting to resist.

Our next excursion was Bamberg, beloved by Christmas aficionados for its nativity scenes. Created by local residents, they range from elaborate, life-size outdoor sets to small hand-crafted villages tucked inside many of the town's churches. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its well-preserved medieval core, the snow-capped roofs of Bamberg's pale yellow buildings make a charming Christmas vision.

Later that afternoon we sailed to Wurzburg, "Pearl of the Romantic Road" and delightful for its vineyard setting and spectacular Bishop's Residenz, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rothenburg was next, and its snow-laden trees and historic buildings glowing in the winter sun offered instant Christmas spirit.

The shoppers in the group didn't waste any time heading to the Kathe Wohlfahrt Christmas Village, an internationally known boutique offering high-quality Christmas trinkets such as cookie tins, nutcrackers, smokers (comical characters that puff incense) and delicate glass decorations. Later we fuelled our energy levels with the regional specialty *Schneeball*, a ball of deep-fried pastry dough covered in snow-white icing sugar.

Enriching experiences

Resting back on the ship, it was easy to feel part of the action thanks to a camera on the bow of the ship that relayed images of the passing snowscape to a flat screen television above our vanity table/desk. This allowed us to follow the ship's course from our stateroom as we rolled down the river to the next destination.

Evenings, we relaxed with the Affinity's many onboard activities. One night we enjoyed a concert by the string trio La Strada and another night, an expert lectured on the engineering marvel of the Main-Danube canal. Our favourite activity? Joining the ship's crew in a rousing chorus of international Christmas carols.

Traditions continued in the lovely villages of Miltenberg and Wertheim, where highlights included half-timbered houses, castle ruins and the Wertheim Glass Museum, with its range of sparkling blown-glass such as whimsical dillpickle ornaments and delicate Christmas garlands.

As the journey drew to a close, we enjoyed a farewell dinner and shared memories with our shipmates. Packing our bags, we realized that my mother and I had gathered mugs from four different Christmas markets and had the beginnings of a set — proving that it's never too late to begin a new holiday tradition. 55



Nutcrackers are a popular sight in Rothenburg.



Avalon's fleet is the newest on European waterways.

If You Go

How to get there

Lufthansa offers regular direct flights from Toronto to Frankfurt. Airport transfers are included on scheduled brochure dates if the airfare is purchased from Avalon.

Getting around

Avalon Waterways offers Christmas in the Heart of Germany, a festive-season holiday between Prague, Czech Republic and Frankfurt, Germany (or alternate way) that features a deluxe eight-day, five-night cruise along the Main-Danube Canal, stopping at Nuremberg, Bamberg, Wurzburg and Wertheim-Miltenberg. Superior hotels (Prague), meals, local wines, receptions, guided sightseeing and all excursions, including a bus excursion along Germany's Romantic Road to the Christmas market at Rothenburg, are included. In 2011, prices begin at \$1,788 land/cruise (excluding air).

If you travel with Avalon, you can also add on another festive season cruise such as Christmastime in Alsace and Germany, a five-day journey from Frankfurt through France to Zurich, Switzerland

Avalon's fleet of ships is the newest on European waterways with an average age of two years (compared to the industry average of seven years). We travelled on the M/S Affinity, built in 2009. In 2011, the ship will be the Panorama, a luxurious all-suite ship that launched in May 2011. Visit www.avalonwaterways.ca or call 877 797-8791 for more information.

Wiesbaden's Twinkling Star Christmas Market is a 30-minute ride by high-speed train from Kostablerach station in central Frankfurt (www.wiesbaden.de; www.frankfurt-tourismus.de).

When to Go

Dates for Germany's Christmas markets vary by location but most open during the last week of November and close around December 22 each year. For more information, visit the Official German Tourism website at www.cometogermany.com.



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