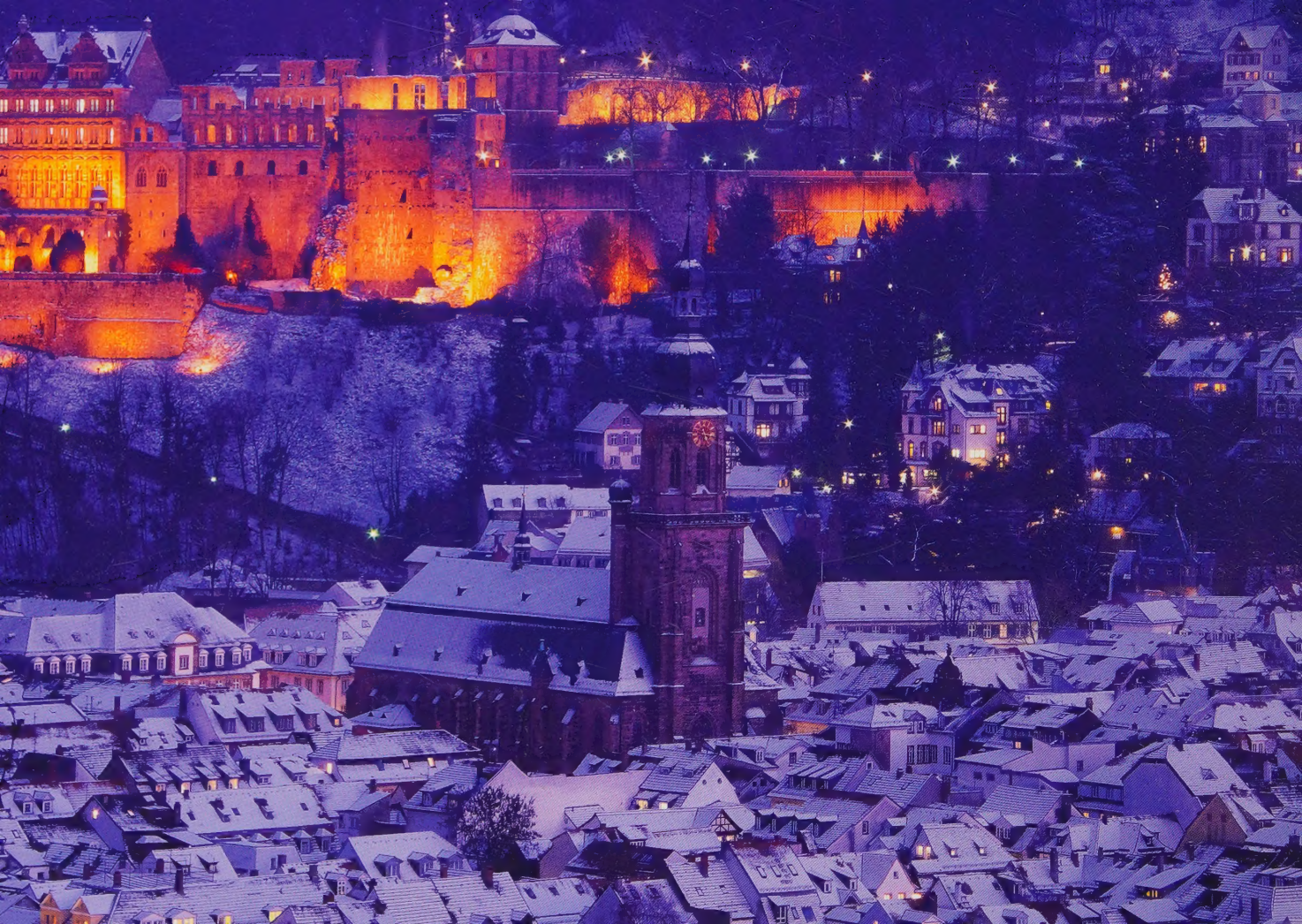




European Christmas Enchantment


Traditions, Specialties and Xmas Markets





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Welcome to Yuletide Europe

Christmas comes but once a year and it's not only children who feel the growing excitement as the festive season draws ever closer. For everyone, Yuletide has its own particular meaning, associations and memories that make it a very special time of the year. A time of nostalgia and anticipation, of giving and receiving, of celebration and reflection; a time when we at last have time for our family, our friends and ourselves.

Everyone has their own idea of the 'spirit of Christmas,' but word has long since got around that one of the best ways of discovering it is to take a vacation in Europe during Advent. And no wonder: many historic cities are transformed into a Yuletide won-

derland by seasonal illuminations and decorations, as well as by their quaint and delightful Christmas markets, some of which have a history stretching back several centuries. As the saying goes, 'practise makes perfect.' And this is especially true in German-speaking countries.

This book not only presents a number of the loveliest Christmas markets in and near Germany, but also contains all you need to know about the traditions, specialties and customs associated with everyone's favorite festival. And when you return home, it will serve as the perfect souvenir to bring back happy memories of your Advent visit. Who knows, it might also inspire you to return again next year.



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‘In the Bleak Midwinter’

In terms of atmosphere and romance, German-style Christmas markets are simply beyond compare. Indeed, who can resist the idea of being warmly packed in your winter woollies, braving the chilly twilight to enjoy the nostalgic charms of Christmas trees and quaint stalls gaudily draped with tinsel and fairy-lights, with the tempting fragrance of spicy cookies, roast nuts, mulled wine, cakes and sizzling sausages wafting on the breeze that’s carrying the sounds of a brass band blaring your favorite carols.

The increasing numbers of visitors who seek out Europe’s classic Christmas destinations during the days of Advent soon discover that Germans and their neighbors don’t merely have a baffling range of characteristic seasonal specialties and delicacies that you won’t want to miss. Rather, the local traditions associ-

ated with Christmas and related festivals are very different to those known in English-speaking countries.

While the differences are interesting for their own sake, they may also lead us to reflect about what we know about our own traditions. Or, as often as not, what we don’t know. The following pages offer an informative and entertaining grounding in all of the main traditions relating to Advent and the Twelve Days of Christmas, which end with the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. They also focus on all of those things that make Christmas in Europe so special, ranging from carols to cribs, from *Christstollen* to cookies (with recipes to try for yourself), from marzipan to the most charming Christmas markets between Cologne and Vienna. So, sit back and enjoy becoming an expert on Yuletide traditions!





Advent – A Time of Joyous Anticipation

The term ‘Advent’ is derived from the Latin word *adventus* meaning ‘coming’ or ‘arrival.’ Since the time of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), it has been established in the Christian calendar as the preparatory season for the feast of Christmas. It includes the last four Sundays before Christmas, beginning with the one that falls nearest (before or after) to St. Andrew’s Day (November 30). The first Sunday of Advent also marks the beginning of the church year. In the early church, the four weeks symbolized the four millennia since the creation of man – a period determined from taking the chronology of the Old Testament literally. In past centuries, it was actually a time of fasting, rather like Lent (originally 40 days, starting on November 11): this ascetic tradition fell into disuse about 90 years ago.

Even without fasting, Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation. Many traditions are designed to keep the forthcoming feast in mind, gradually heightening expectation before the climax of Christmas itself. In Germany, special Advent wreaths are made for indoors or are hung on house doors, while window decorations announce the festive season. Children have the daily excitement of opening a door of an Advent calendar, while many churches have cribs showing Christ’s nativity. Of course, this is also the season of Christmas markets throughout Europe, which attract millions of visitors in search of the ‘spirit of Christmas.’ Some of these markets have traditions going back centuries, and the delicious seasonal fare on offer ensures that every visit has its memorable culinary highlights and fair share of ‘good cheer.’



Important Saint's Days and Traditions During Advent

November 25: St. Catherine. This day just before Advent is traditionally thought to indicate how severe the following winter will be. It used to be a holiday before the fast days of Advent.

November 30: St. Andrew. The Sunday closest to this day is the first Sunday of Advent.

December 4: St. Barbara. This early martyr was locked up in a tower (her symbol) by her father for becoming a Christian. There is a tradition of cutting small branches off certain trees and shrubs (such as forsythia and cherry as in the photo) on her feast day and placing these in vases of water. If one is lucky, these may then be in flower on Christmas Day. *Lebkuchen* are called 'Barbara bread' (*Barbarabrot*) in parts of Austria and Bavaria.

December 6: St. Nicholas (see pages 23 to 27). Children who put out boots and stockings are rewarded by presents from *Nikolaus*. In Holland, this is the main gift-giving day of Yuletide, as *Sinterklaas* with his companion, *Zwarte Piet*, is more important than the *Kerstman* (Father Christmas).







Important Saint's Days and Traditions During Advent

December 13: **St. Lucy.** The Sicilian Lucia brought food to fellow Christians in hiding – because her hands were full, she wore a garland with candles on her head. As these are the longest and darkest nights of the year, Lucy is regarded as the bringer of hope and light in times of sorrow. She was martyred in about 300. An old tradition that is rarely kept today is to plant a handful of wheat on Lucy's feast day, in the hope that the first shoots will appear at Christmas.

December 17: In some Catholic communities, the church bells are rung on this day to announce that Christmas is only one week away.

December 19: A particularly charming Advent tradition is the so-called *Lichterschwimmen* in

Zürich, during which 800 boats with candles float down the River Limmat from the *Rathausbrücke*.

December 21: **St. Thomas.** This saint's day falls on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. This is the first of the twelve *Raunächte*, the 'hard nights' during which it was once thought that evil spirits were at large. There used to be masked processions to frighten off the demons, while incense was often burned indoors to keep them at bay. For housewives, this is the last chance to bake a last few Christmas specialties, especially *Hutzelbrot* (see page 31).





23 Frobes Fest 24



It has long been a tradition in Germany to hang up a special calendar for Advent. A couple of hundred years ago, this was nothing more than 24 sheets of paper (later with pictures), one of which was ripped off every day to indicate the increasing proximity of Christmas. Usually showing a religious subject, most modern Advent calendars have 24 doors, and one is opened every day, starting on December 1. The last and biggest door usually conceals an image of the Nativity. The first printed *Adventskalender* of this type was produced by Gerhard Lang in Munich in 1908. While the open doors often show seasonal motifs, children now prefer those that contain candy or chocolate. Some 'calendars' consist of a string of small sacks containing various goodies, while others are made of colorful material with small pockets for gifts.

A more recent development to be seen at many Christmas markets is to use an appropriate building to create a vast Advent calendar: for example, the 24 windows of the City Hall of the town of Gengenbach in the Ortenau region of the Black Forest are used for this purpose, and the town lays claim to having the largest such calendar. According to the Guinness Book of Records, though, this distinction goes to Leipzig, whose Advent calendar has an area of over 9000 square-feet! In terms of sheer beauty, the City Hall in Vienna is still the loveliest of the architectural calendars. In Bavarian Augsburg, on Fridays and weekends of Advent at 6 p.m., 'angels' appear at each of 24 windows of the fine Renaissance City Hall and play Christmas melodies. In other towns, a Christmas story is read each day from the window that has just been opened on the calendar.





The Advent Wreath and Similar Customs

Throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the first Sunday of Advent sees the lighting of the first candle on the *Adventskranz*, a circular wreath usually made of interlocking conifer sprigs. This has four large candles, which are lit on each successive Sunday of Advent, so that all four are lit on the last Sunday before Christmas. In some areas, a special Advent wreath is made of spicy *Lebkuchen* (see page 31) with a chocolate topping.

The story goes that the first Advent wreath was made by a Protestant priest, Johann Wichern, the founder of a home for poor orphans in Hamburg. Seeing a candle burning in a window on a cold November evening in 1833, he was touched by the feelings of hope and comfort that this aroused in him – just what the inmates of his home

might wish for in the days before Christmas. His original wreath was made by wrapping fir branches around a wagon-wheel and had 24 candles, but this was reduced to just 4 in succeeding years. However, it was only after the First World War that the *Adventskranz* became popular throughout the whole of Germany. Most churches have a large Advent wreath, too.





The Advent Wreath and Similar Customs

Wreaths are hung on doors in many areas of Germany. These used to be made of mistletoe, but this is less common nowadays, because this parasitic plant is now protected in the country; however, imported sprigs are sometimes used. As with Christmas trees, advent wreaths take over the ancient symbolism of eternal life being associated with evergreen plants. Their circular form also denotes eternity and the perfection of the divine plan fulfilled by the birth of Christ.

Sometimes children sing a short song while the candle(s) are being lit:

*Advent, Advent, ein Lichtlein brennt,
Erst eins, dann zwei, dann drei, dann vier,
Dann steht das Christkind vor der Tür.*

*Advent, Advent, a little light is burning,
First one, then two, then three, then four,
Then baby Jesus will be at the door.*



Christmas Stars

During Advent, a popular plant is the so-called *Weihnachtsstern* ('Christmas star'), a succulent (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) originating in Mexico, whose topmost layer of leaves or bracts (they are not flowers) are bright red and have a star shape. At a time when few plants offer much in the way of color, these poinsettias are a welcome sight in the living-room, and their star form has an appropriate Christmas symbolism.



St. Nicholas is the patron saint
of pawnbrokers, sailors, travelers,
farmers, bakers, brewers and traders.
He is also the national saint of
Russia, and is also, incidentally,
the patron saint of the city of
New York.



December 6: The Feast of St. Nicholas

The world's best-loved saint, St. Nicholas, is said to have been archbishop of Myra in what is now southern Turkey. Although some claim that he attended the crucial Council of Nicaea in 325 presided over by Constantine the Great, historians regard him as a purely fictitious figure to whom a number of very charming legends have accrued. The first biography of the saint was written by John the Deacon only in the 9th century.

The key feature of Nicholas seems to have been his generosity. The son of wealthy parents, he gave away all of their money when they died. Perhaps the incident that led to the emergence of the concept of a gift-giving Santa Claus relates to the poor father who had three daughters but not enough money to give them each the dowry

needed to find a respectable husband. On hearing of this, Nicholas threw a bag of gold through the man's window on three successive nights. These three gifts were seen as a parallel to those brought by the Three Kings. The story accounts for pawnbrokers having three golden balls as their symbol.

Nicholas' association with children stems from a legend that he unmasked an evil innkeeper who had killed three children and served them to his guests for dinner. By making the sign of the Cross, the saint restored the children to life.





Santa Claus and St. Nicholas in Europe

The figure of Santa Claus as we know him today is a rather modern invention. The portly, jolly figure with a white beard and red outfit originated in an issue of *Harper's Weekly* in 1862. The final touches in the form of white fur trim were added in an advertising campaign for Coca Cola in 1932. Before this, St. Nicholas (or *Nikolaus*, as Germans call him) was depicted in a traditional bishop's cloak (usually brown in color) and mitre. Indeed, this is how he appears in the first-ever depiction of him north of the Alps dating from the 13th century. Even today, the bishop's outfit still crops up in places. More traditional images of St. Nicholas show him with either a donkey or a white horse; in fact, Dutch children always leave a carrot or turnip outside for his four-legged companion. The reindeers and sleigh idea stems from a poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, by Clement Clark Moore published in 1822.

Traditionally, St. Nicholas brings gifts to children on his saint's day, December 6, a tradition traceable well back into the Middle Ages. However, his exclusive role as the distributor of presents was ended by the Reformation: Martin Luther rejected many of the 'Catholic saints' including St. Nicholas, and he therefore suggested in about 1530 that gifts should be brought by Jesus (called the *Christkind*) himself. Soon after this, the idea of putting boots outside the door before December 6 emerged, so that the feast of *Nikolaus* now provides a foretaste of the pleasures of Christmas. It is also the time when the first batch of seasonal cookies is served up.



The goodies put in children's stockings often include a cookie made as a figure of St. Nicholas. For example, this is known as a **Klausenmann** in South Germany or a **Mannala** in Alsace. In Austria, children are often given a **Zwetschgen-Krampus**, a figure of Nicholas' eerie companion made from dried damsons and a walnut.





Santa Claus and St. Nicholas in Europe

Interestingly, the *Nikolaus* of the German-speaking world has retained certain elements long since lost elsewhere. In particular, he not only carries a sack of gifts but also has bundle of rods (a so-called *Rute*) in one hand. In earlier times, children were quizzed about whether they had been well-behaved and hard-working in the past year – and the *Rute* was warning of what might happen if they incurred *Nikolaus*’ disfavor. Attitudes about bringing up children have changed, but the *Rute* is still a standard part of the ‘gear’ of a German Father Christmas. He also often has a book, in which he looks to see what is written there about how children have been behaving.

In a similar vein, *Nikolaus* is often accompanied by a servant or helper whose character seems to be almost the reverse of his own.

Depending on the area, he (or she) might be shown with a frightening mask, animal fur, horns, whip or rattling chains. The best-known of such figures are *Knecht Ruprecht* (*Knecht* means ‘slave’ or ‘servant’) and *Krampus*, but women like *Frau Holle* and *Frau Perchta* are no less unnerving.

Again, in older times, such scary personages were seen as a way of coercing children to do as they were told; indeed, the *Bumann* of North Germany literally means ‘bogeyman.’ The slave-like role of *Nikolaus*’ companions may thus symbolize the triumph of Christianity in the form of this good-natured saint over the evil forces of pagan belief. This would explain why, for example, *Nikolaus*’ servant is called *Düvel* (‘devil’) in the Rhineland or *Belzebub* (a devil) in the Eifel region south east of Cologne.





The Best Advent Cookies and Confectionery

For those with a sweet tooth, German Christmas markets offer a cornucopia of tempting Yuletide delicacies. While fragrant roasted nuts, chestnuts, toffee apples, candyfloss and various confectioneries can be found everywhere, there is a baffling range of local specialties that you will most definitely want to try. The list below is by no means exhaustive, but it should help you pinpoint the best cookies and cakes, some of which make excellent gifts for taking back home.

ADAM-UND-EVA-GEBÄCK:

In North Germany, these cookies cut out in figure shapes are made for Christmas Eve. 'Adam and Eve biscuits' are made with flour, sugar and eggs and flavored with *Kirschwasser* (cherry brandy) and aniseed.

The name recalls the traditional name for December 24, 'Adam and Eve Day.'

AGNESENPLÄTZCHEN:

These rich, round Christmas cookies are made with butter, sugar and flour, brushed with jam, and then sandwiched together.

BETHMÄNNCHEN:

To make these marzipan delicacies, simply roll marzipan into small balls, brush with water, press three halved (lengthways) almonds into the marzipan, leave overnight, and then bake for a few minutes until slightly crisp and golden.

CHRISTSTOLLEN (WEIHNACHTSSTOLLEN):

This loaf-shaped cake made with fruit, nuts and





The Best Advent Cookies and Confectionery

candied peel and then generously powdered with icing sugar was originally intended to resemble a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and was thus a symbol of Jesus himself. Its white color was also a reminder of the innocent children slaughtered at King Herod's command. This explains why it used to be a custom not to cut the *Stollen* before the Feast of the Innocents on December 28. This cake is particularly associated with Dresden. (Recipe page 69)

ENGELSKÜSSE:

'Angel's kisses' are small, sweet meringues made with egg whites and preserving sugar.

EIERMARZIPAN, EIERZUCKER:

Other names for *Springerle*.

HONIGKUCHEN:

A rather dry version of *Lebkuchen* made with a lot of honey and sold as a rectangular loaf.

HUTZELBROT:

A mainly Swabian specialty whose principal ingredient should be dried pears, along with prunes, almonds and hazelnuts. It is traditionally baked on St. Thomas' Day (December 21) and then eaten on December 26. Another name is *Kletzenbrot*, while a similar fruit loaf is called *Beraweckla* in Alsace.

LEBKUCHEN:

These classic Christmas cookies flavored with many different spices are a particular specialty of Nuremberg (Recipe page 51). The origins of the name are a subject of learned debate. While the idea of a cake





The Best Advent Cookies and Confectionery

that brings 'life' (i.e., *Leben*) or pleasure and refreshment (*laben* roughly means to refresh) has its adherents, others insist that the first part of the name derives from the Latin *labium* (from which comes the German word, *Leib*), i.e., a loaf. The first mention dates back to the end of the 14th century. Almonds and walnuts may be part of the ingredients, but the particular quality of *Lebkuchen* lies in the mixture of spices and honey it contains. There should be at least seven spices – allspice, aniseed, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and vanilla – but purists even demand a total of nine. Originally, the dough was made several weeks before Christmas, which gave it time to begin fermenting before it was actually baked. *Lebkuchen* comes in every imaginable shape, and may be used to make a Hansel and Gretel-type house with colored icing.

MAGENBROT:

Rather lighter and softer than *Lebkuchen*, this chocolate-glazed spicy 'bread' also has a nuttier flavor, in which spices like cinnamon and cloves are less dominant.

MARZIPAN:

This has been a specialty of the North German city of Lübeck since the 16th century. At that time, when the port was under siege, bakers were running short of flour, and so they made 'bread' with ground almonds and sugar that were in relatively abundant supply. Incidentally, the name 'marzipan' seems to stem from the Latin, *marci panis* ('bread for St. Mark').

PFEFFERNÜSSE:

Associated with the town of Berneck since 1750, these 'pepper nuts' are small, spicy and round





The Best Advent Cookies and Confectionery

cookies with a white sugar glaze. Although *Pfeffer* does mean ‘pepper,’ don’t be put off: it seems that, centuries ago, this was a generic word meaning simply ‘exotic spices.’

PRINTEN:

A variation on *Lebkuchen* originating in Aachen. The name originates from the pattern molds that were used to create ‘printed’ cookies. (Recipe page 37)

SPEKULATIUS:

These crisp, spicy cookies stem from the Low Countries (called *Spekulaas* there). They are baked in forms so that they have figures and shapes printed on them that are sometimes related to St. Nicholas and legends associated with him. (Recipe page 39)

SPRINGERLE:

These cookies are characterized by their strong aniseed flavor. The name is derived from the word ‘to spring,’ perhaps because the dough rises rapidly when left to prove. (Recipe page 65)

WECKMANN:

Cookie or small cake made in the shape of a bishop with a pipe (originally a curved staff).

ZIMTSTERNE:

Star-shaped butter cookies flavored with cinnamon. A ‘must’ on every platter of Advent biscuits offered to guests. Like most of the specialties listed here, these cookies keep very well when stored in an airtight tin.



Cologne Christmas Market

With five separate markets scattered throughout its historic center, Cologne is an Advent 'must' for lovers of German Christmas traditions and Yuletide fare. To the south of the Cathedral, there's an ice-skating rink near the so-called Gürzenich, while many attractive handicrafts stalls are grouped around the historic merry-go-round by the Old City Hall (*Rathaus*). However, as twilight falls, make sure that you are on Roncalliplatz on the south side of the Cathedral to enjoy the magical moments when the illumination of this mighty Gothic edifice 'catches fire,' creating an extraordinary greenish silhouette against the fading sky. This spectacle is best enjoyed with a cup of mulled wine and an oversized grilled sausage, although visitors with a sweet tooth may enjoy some spicy *Aachener Printen* cookies.

Recipe – Aachener Printen

300 g golden syrup, 200 g honey, 100 g sugar, 600 g self-raising flour, pinch salt, zest of 1 orange, 2 tsp ground aniseed, 1 tsp (each) ground cardamom, ground cloves, ground cinnamon; crushed rock sugar (according to taste), melted chocolate to brush on one side of the Printen.

Gently warm the syrup and honey in a saucepan, add the sugar and spices, stir well, and remove from the heat. Allow to cool. Sieve the flour before adding the syrup mixture. Work together to make a firm dough. Knead in the rock sugar before leaving the mixture to stand overnight in a cool place. Roll out the mixture on a floured surface until about ½ cm thick, and cut into rectangles (about 10 x 4 cm each). Put the cookies onto a baking tray covered with greaseproof paper, and bake in a hot oven pre-heated to 220° C for about 15 minutes. When cool, brush with melted chocolate.







Trier Christmas Market

TGermany's oldest city is over 2000 years old, and its remarkable Roman remains are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trier's ancient Market Square centering on a cross dating from 958 is a magical setting for its Christmas market, which also lines some of its pedestrianized High Street and extends to the magnificent Romanesque Cathedral. About a hundred stalls offer a wide range of handicrafts, ornaments and gifts. As Trier is an important wine city, many local vintners from the Moselle, Ruwer and Saar valleys present their best vintages. Unusually, it is possible to enjoy white mulled wine (red is the standard variety) here. One thing to watch out for is the mechanical crib with life-sized figures, while small children (and many adults, too) are delighted by the greeting extended by enormous teddy bears.


Recipe (from 1896) – Spekulatius

750 g self-raising flour, 100 g ground almonds, 250 g brown sugar, 10 g Spekulatius spices (or mix your own from ground cardamom, cinnamon and nutmeg), zest of ½ lemon, pinch salt, 125 ml milk, 375 g butter

Stir the sugar, ground spices and salt into the cold milk until dissolved. Melt the butter gently, and stir into the milk mixture. Now turn in the flour carefully. Allow the mixture to rest in a cool place for 2 to 3 days. Press the dough into thin cookie forms (or roll out and cut into festive shapes), turn onto a baking tray covered with greaseproof paper, and bake at 200° C for 12–15 minutes until golden brown.



Heidelberg Christmas Market

 ver the past years, Heidelberg's Christmas Market has expanded into quite a sizeable affair. A visit might begin at Universitätsplatz, where the historic merry-go-round brings a nostalgic twinkle to everyone's eye. A walk eastward along the bustling Hauptstrasse brings one to Marktplatz, where a vast rotating 'Christmas pyramid' dominates the stalls enjoying a scenic setting between the historic City Hall and Church of the Holy Spirit. Several stalls offering freshly roasted nuts, chestnuts, crepes and various sausages fill the air here with irresistible aromas. Continuing east, the Kornmarkt with its lovely Madonna is a favorite with small children thanks to its crib with real donkey and sheep just waiting to be petted. Karlsplatz with its ice-rink offers the best views of the impressive illuminated Castle above.



Rüdesheim Christmas Market

Although a relative newcomer, Rüdesheim's 'Christmas Market of the Nations' enjoys enormous popularity. Over 120 stalls lining the town's narrow lanes present gifts and specialties from 12 different countries, with many craftsmen demonstrating skills like candle-making, wood-carving, glass-engraving and so on. Thus, the market is a great way to solve all of your Christmas-present problems at a stroke. The nativity crib with life-size figures on the Market Square is said to be the biggest in Germany. While traditionalists will prefer a glass of mulled wine to keep chills at bay, the market also offers opportunities to try the excellent Rieslings grown in the surrounding vineyards. A creamy *Rüdesheimer Kaffee* with a warming shot of brandy from the local Asbach distillery is also an ideal winter pick-me-up.





Mainz Christmas Market

With a tradition going back about two centuries, the Christmas market in Mainz is one of Germany's Advent classics. Most of the stalls enjoy a memorable setting between the north side of the massive Cathedral of St. Martin and the historic houses flanking Marktplatz. A highlight here is an enormous revolving 'Christmas pyramid' about 35 feet tall. The large crib with life-size wooden figures is a further attraction. When twilight falls and the Cathedral is illuminated, long streamers of fairy-lights transform Marktplatz into a truly enchanting Yuletide scene. Further stalls and a nostalgia-invoking carousel nestle beneath the Cathedral's imposing eastern apse. In addition to the usual mulled wine, several stalls offer excellent vintages from local wine-growers. Handicrafts and local sausage and ham specialties are also particular favorites.





Frankfurt Christmas Market

About two centuries ago, Germany's greatest author, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, included a description of the Christmas market of his place of birth in his autobiographical work, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Then as now, the *Frankfurter Christkindchens-Markt* was a charming collection of stalls on the Römerberg square, which is flanked by several half-timbered houses, the former City Hall and the medieval Nikolai Church. This enclosed and atmospheric setting has contributed to this becoming one of Germany's most-visited markets, with special weekend events (e.g., steam-train rides along the Main riverbank and ringing of all the city church bells) drawing vast crowds. The local specialty not to be missed is *Frankfurter Brenten*, which are rather like *Aachener Printen* (see page 37) but made with marzipan instead of honey.





Christmas Nativity Cribs

As early as the year 360, it was tradition to display a crib in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The humble circumstances of Christ's birth had both a rustic charm and served as a reminder against pride. For this very reason, St Francis of Assisi set up a crib in a forest in 1223. The fashion for such decoration in the days around Christmas seems to have grown as the Middle Ages progressed, but the earliest surviving examples in Germany are from the Baroque period. For example, one of the oldest cribs in the country is that displayed in the Church of St. Mary (*Marienkirche*) in Munich, which was first mentioned in 1607 and is probably somewhat older. The figures are from Venice, and their clothes have been replaced by careful copies. The world's most extensive collection of cribs can be seen in the Bavarian National Museum (*Bayer-*



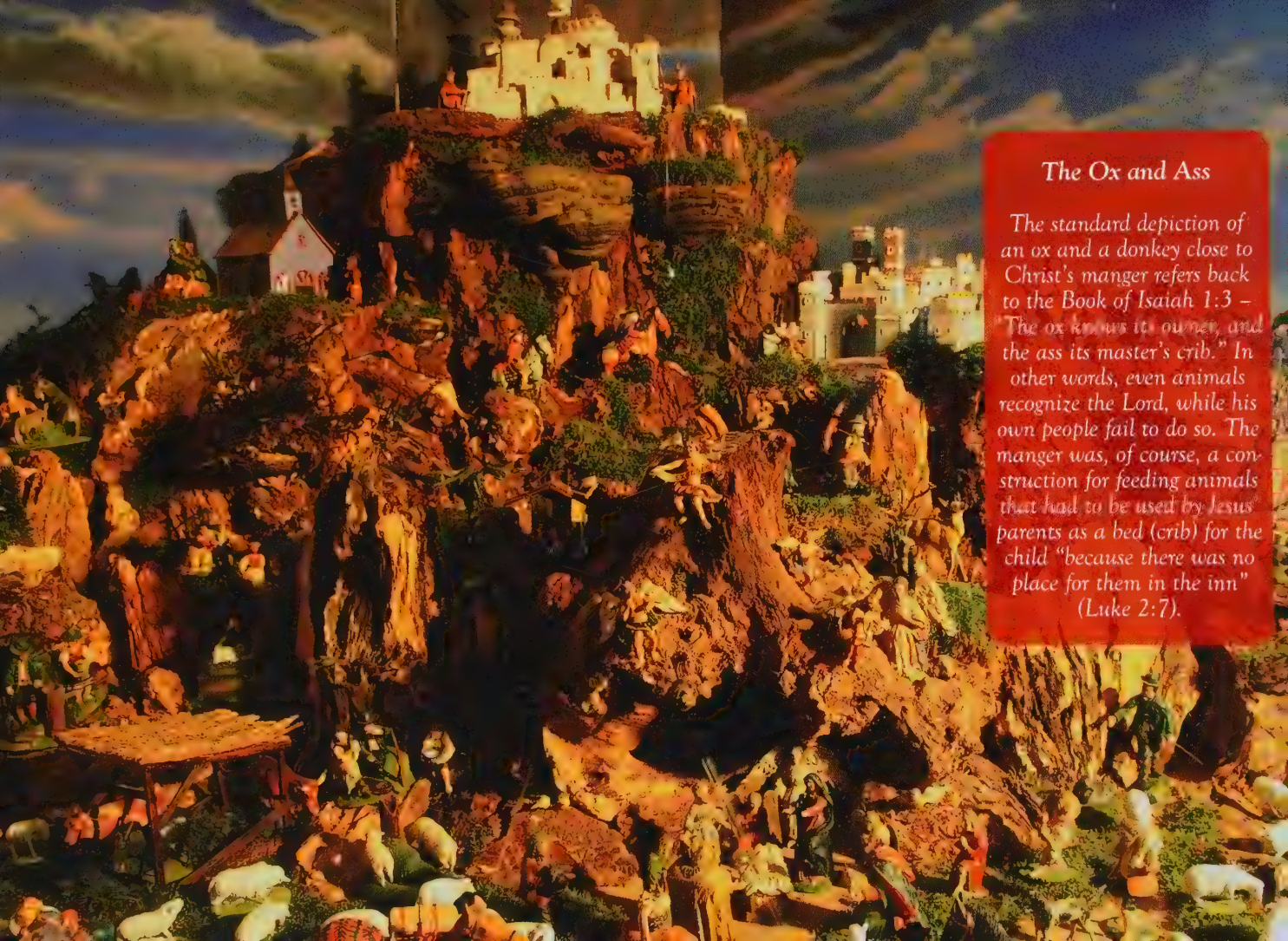


isches Nationalmuseum) in the same city. The world's largest crib, though, is to be found in Einsiedeln in Switzerland; this is a semi-circular diorama about 40 yards long with nearly 500 figures placed against a background showing Bethlehem and its environs. A particularly charming Crib Museum with over 400 exhibits from 40 countries is located in the village of Glattbach close to Aschaffenburg on the River Main. Incidentally, outside of Germany, Naples is considered to be the 'crib capital' of the world.

While many cribs are made of carved wood, all manner of materials have been used at various times. Figures might be made of paper, cardboard, wax or a simple dough mixture containing salt (*Salzteig*), which becomes rock hard and is surprisingly durable. The Crystal Museum in

Viechtach in the Bavarian Forest has a spectacular crib made of local glass and crystal. While some cribs are on show throughout much of Advent, many churches only set up a nativity scene in time for the special services on Christmas Eve.





The Ox and Ass

The standard depiction of an ox and a donkey close to Christ's manger refers back to the Book of Isaiah 1:3 – "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib." In other words, even animals recognize the Lord, while his own people fail to do so. The manger was, of course, a construction for feeding animals that had to be used by Jesus' parents as a bed (crib) for the child "because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

Bamberg Crib Trail

The historic city of Bamberg is a particularly worthwhile destination during Advent, because about 30 churches and museums have lovely cribs on show. This fascinating 'Crib Trail' is a wonderful way of capturing the Christmas spirit while enjoying walking from one architectural highlight to another. A visit might begin at the Cathedral itself, where a carved altarpiece by Veit Stoss from about 1520 offers a delightful depiction of the Nativity. Among the many crib 'stations,' the neighboring Diocesan and Historical Museums have a broad range of exhibits, while the Maternen Chapel has a fascinating selection of tiny sculptures. In complete contrast, the *Obere Pfarre* has a vast crib, whose figures are changed around as the season progresses. Straubing on the Danube also has a well-known Crib Trail.







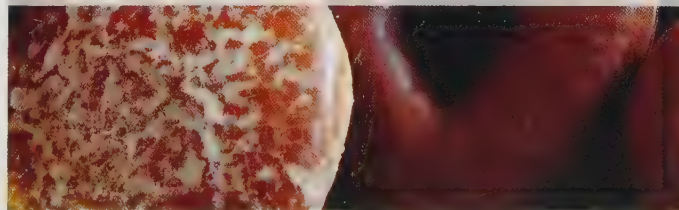
Nuremberg Christmas Market

A city with a long toy-making tradition, Nuremberg has one of Germany's oldest and best-known Christmas markets, the *Christkindlemarkt*. A description from 1697 shows that things have not changed much in the intervening years: "Almost all of the square is covered by wooden stalls which are quickly erected and in which are sold all manner of things that may be of use to and give pleasure to children and adults, too, highly desirable and conceived with great fancy." The fragrance of delicious small fried sausages (*Nürnberger Bratwürste*) and spicy *Lebkuchen* wafts amid the tightly packed stalls clustering near to the exquisite and ornamental Gothic 'Beautiful Fountain.' The perfect souvenir of a visit is a *Zwetschgenmännle*, a small figure in traditional costume made of nuts and dried plums that will keep for years.

Recipe – Lebkuchen

500 g sugar, 4 eggs, 1 tsp (each) ground cinnamon, ground ginger, ground cloves, ground nutmeg, a good pinch (each) ground cardamom, ground allspice, aniseed (optional), few drops vanilla essence, zest from 1 lemon, 700 g self-raising flour, 100 g honey (a thin, runny variety is best), 200 g sugar, 2 tbsp lemon juice, 4 tbsp water

Mix the sugar and spices with the eggs, and beat until frothy. Stir in the flour and honey, mix well, and knead for a few minutes. Roll into a ball, cover, and leave to rest in a cool place for at least a whole day. Roll out the dough on a floured surface to a thickness of about 1 cm. Cut into rectangles (3 x 8 cm), arrange on a baking tray covered with greaseproof paper, and bake at 175° C for 10–15 minutes.





Rothenburg Christmas Market

The Christmas market in the unspoiled medieval city, Rothenburg ob der Tauber, is called the *Reiterlesmarkt* (*reiten* = 'to ride') and is always opened by a figure on horseback, a tradition of uncertain origins. Starting with a large Christmas tree and stalls in front of the Old City Hall, the market is crammed into quaint lanes extending toward the Church of St. James. While sausages and other Franconian specialties are well to the fore, one really should try a seasonal *Schneeball* ('snowball'), a ball of layered pastry that is deep fried and sprinkled with icing sugar, although some variations have a chocolate or sugar glaze or may be rolled in nuts. For a nostalgic interlude, one might visit the Doll and Toy Museum (Hofbronnengasse 11–13) to see the sort of gifts that have delighted children in the past couple of centuries.





Rothenburg's Christmas Shopping Paradise

Whatever the time of year, an absolute 'must' during a trip to Rothenburg is the Käthe Wohlfahrt Christmas Village (Herrengasse 1). Offering countless Yuletide ornaments and decorations, this store itself lovingly captures and showcases many of the sights and sounds that make Christmas so special. A good number of the gifts on sale are handmade specialties from the Erz Mountains and from other traditional handicraft centers. In addition to beautiful tree ornaments, one will want to check out the range of wooden nutcrackers, the revolving pyramid roundabouts, the *Schwibbogen* arches for candles and dinky smoking figures called *Räuchermännchen*. Since 2000, the adjoining building has housed a Christmas Museum, in which a large and fascinating selection of exhibits covers almost two millennia of changing Yuletide traditions.







Christmas Tree Traditions and Xmas Decorations

In pagan times, evergreen plants were seen as a symbol of eternal life. Rituals involving the cutting of branches of conifers and plants like mistletoe seem to have been widespread in northern Europe during the time of the winter solstice (December 21), the shortest day of the year. While the triumph of Christianity in Germany in the years around 800 led to the suppression of many ancient customs and practises, these were often so deep-rooted that it was wiser to adapt them to Christian functions, especially when the pagan symbolism fitted well into the church's teachings. As December 24 was the day on which the church remembered Adam and Eve, the idea of using an evergreen tree to symbolize the Tree of Life was close to hand. One should also remember the medieval legend that Christ was crucified on parts of a tree derived from cuttings from the Tree of Life!

Perhaps fir or pine trees were also used in so-called mystery plays that dramatized incidents from the Bible such as Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise.

The earliest known decorated Christmas tree is one mentioned in Freiburg (on the south-west fringes of the Black Forest) in 1419. In that year, baker's apprentices adorned a tree with fruit, cookies, nuts and paper flowers. Tailor's apprentices are said to have decorated a tree similarly in Basel, Switzerland, in 1597. By this time, Strasbourg had become the venue of a Christmas market, where a large tree was hung with food and gifts, and poorer people allowed to help themselves. With time, the amount of edible (perishable) decorations was reduced in favor of purely ornamental items that





Christmas Tree Traditions and Xmas Decorations

could be brought out year after year. By the mid-17th century, most towns in German-speaking countries had a large Christmas tree on their main square, and families gathered at the tree for the exchanging of gifts. During the 18th and 19th centuries, vast numbers of German immigrants into the United States brought this tradition with them.

Tree decorations were originally made of anything colorful that came to hand. Fruit and particularly apples were popular; again a reference to the fruit of the Tree of Life. An early form of decoration that is still popular is a star made of straw (*Strohstern*) – cheap, attractive and very long-lived, these are also a symbolic reminder of the fact that Christ was born in a stable. Putting a star or angel figure at the top of the tree appears to be an

old tradition. Adorning trees with toys and figures is thought to have originated in Berchtesgaden in southern Bavaria, where the painter, Anton Reinbold, first did this in 1912. The area around this town is now famous for its handmade tree decorations. Colored glass balls as we know them (i.e., not transparent) were first created in 1870, when Justus von Liebig succeeded in coating the inside of such ornaments with silver. Some of the finest specialty glass decorations are still produced in Thuringia (for example, in Lauscha) as well as in Upper Bavaria, where Rosenheim is an important center of such handicrafts. Candles have long been a popular tree decoration (Fulda used to be the world's biggest candle producer), but a safer alternative – electric candles – appeared for the first time on the massive Christmas tree erected on Madison Square in New York in 1912.



Christmas Tree Traditions and Xmas Decorations

An edible tree decoration that is easy to make is *Baiserkringel*: these meringue-like rings are made from beaten egg whites and sugar. The mixture is piped onto greaseproof paper on a baking tray, sprinkled with colored sugar granules and then baked until hard.

Traditionally, decorated trees stand at least until the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6). In some regions, the first Monday after this day is the time when Christmas trees are finally taken down.







Christmas Tree Traditions and Xmas Decorations

The variety of traditional Christmas decorations to be found at Christmas markets is part of the fun of a visit. Many of the best wooden items come from the Erz Mountains (*Erzgebirge*) in the southern part of East Germany. Things to look out for include:

Fenstersterne – stars to put in your window during Advent (see page 60).

Lichterhäuser – ceramic houses (see page 8) with window openings that ‘light up’ when a small candle is lit inside.

Nussknacker – nutcrackers in the form of a soldier or Turkish figure, whose lever mouth is used to break nutshells. The world’s largest is 20 feet high, and there is a special museum devoted to them in Neuhausen in the Erz Mountains.

Räuchermänner – figures that ‘smoke’ when you light special pellets inside them.

Schwibbogen – an arch with candleholders usually decorated with carved trees, angels, houses or reindeers (see page 20).

Weihnachtspyramide – a ‘Christmas pyramid’ was originally an alternative to a Christmas tree, i.e., for those with too little space to have one indoors. The first simple constructions consisted of three leaning poles supporting a revolving central axle. On top, there might be candles or a plate with gifts or other decorations that could be rotated. Nowadays, they tend to consist of three or more compartments containing figures, and these are topped by a number of angled propeller blades driven by rising warm air from a candle.



Munich Christmas Market

The capital of Bavaria has good claims to having Germany's oldest Christmas market. The first documentary mention of such a fair dates back to the 14th century, when it was held in a meadow, the so-called *Haberfeld*, the site of the present Church of St. Michael. Now mainly concentrated on Marienplatz, the large square in front of the City Hall, the market offers the perfect setting for purchasing very special gifts, including hand-carved figures and beautifully fashioned Christmas cribs. Toys and traditional decorations from Upper Bavaria also figure prominently. On the food front, the sweet specialty here is *Münchener Marzipan*, the local variation on *Springerle* (see recipe). Delicious *Weisswürste* with sweet mustard and a pretzel are tops, and they are best washed down with a local *Weissbier* or *Hefeweizen*, although mulled wine is popular, too.

Recipe – Springerle

2 eggs, pinch salt, 250 g sugar, zest from ½ lemon, 1 tbsp ground aniseed (or according to taste), 1 tbsp Kirschwasser, 250 g self-raising flour

Separate the eggs. Beat the whites with a pinch of salt until they form stiff peaks. Continue beating while adding the sugar (or icing sugar, if you prefer) a little at a time. The resulting mixture should be very stiff before you stir in the yolks, lemon zest, aniseed and Kirschwasser (or some other fruit schnapps). Sieve the flour before turning it into the mixture and stirring well to make a smooth dough. Wrap this in tinfoil, and leave in the fridge for at least an hour. Roll out the mixture thinly on a lightly floured surface. Either cut into rectangles (about 3 x 7 cm) or press into floured molds. Place (or turn out) on a well-greased baking tray, cover with a cloth, and leave overnight in a cool place. Bake in a very moderate oven at about 165° C for about 20 minutes. During this first phase, jam a spoon in the top of the oven door, so that it does not close completely. After 20 minutes, close the door properly, raise the temperature to 200° C, and bake for a further 15-20 minutes. Allow to cool before glazing with a mixture of icing sugar and water.



Regensburg Christmas Market

Thanks to several Christmas markets, the historic city of Regensburg on the Danube is well worth a visit during the Advent season. Its *Christkindlmarkt* grouped around the 'New Parish Church' (*Neupfarrkirche*) is a charming and evocative setting to enjoy a glass of warming punch with a classic *Knackersemmel*, a roll containing a halved fried sausage with sweet mustard, horseradish sauce and slices of gherkin. For arts and crafts, the *Kohlenmarkt* and *Haidplatz* have dozens of craftsmen's stalls with toys, dolls, ceramics, hand-painted silk and puppets that can be browsed while nibbling some *Lebkuchen* or a delicious crepe. For even more romantic flair, the Christmas market in the illuminated courtyard of Thurn and Taxis Castle (entry charge) recaptures a bygone age of aristocratic elegance and splendor.





Dresden Christmas Market

The *Dresdner-Striezelmarkt* was first mentioned in 1434. Even at this time, its best-known specialty, the *Christstollen* (sometimes called a *Striezel*) was well-established, because records show it being produced in 1457 by the cook of Hartenstein Castle near Torgau. Nowadays, the *Stollenfest* held on December 6/7 sees a vast specimen carried through the streets in a colorful procession. A richer variety is the *Dresdner Stollentaler* that contains rum and marzipan. Of course, the market is notable for handicrafts from Saxony and Thuringia, but a popular and inexpensive souvenir is a *Dresdner Pflaumentoffel*, a chimneysweep made with dried plums. More recently, the part of the city between the Xmas markets on Prager Strasse and the Hauptstrasse has evolved into a veritable 'Christmas mile' of attractive stands, stalls and seasonal decorations.

Recipe – Dresdner Christstollen

1 kg plain flour, 1 tsp salt, 40 g fresh yeast, 250 ml lukewarm milk, 250 g butter, 150 g lard or margarine, 150 g sugar, 2 egg yolks, zest of 1 lemon, 200 g chopped almonds, few drops almond essence, 125 g candied lemon peel (finely chopped), 500 g raisins, 150 g melted butter, 150 g sieved icing sugar

Sieve the flour and salt in a bowl. Make a hollow in the middle, pour in about half of the milk, crumble the yeast into the milk and stir in a little of the flour. Cover, and leave for about 30 minutes until the yeast goes frothy. Meanwhile, melt the butter and lard, and mix into the remaining milk. Pour into the hollow of yeast mixture, add the sugar, egg yolks and lemon zest, and stir well to make a firm dough. Roll into a ball, cover, and leave in a warm place to prove for about an hour. Now roll out the dough into a round, fold over, and shape to a flattish loaf form. Leave to prove for a few hours or overnight, if possible. Put the Stollen on a baking tray covered with greaseproof paper, and place in the lower half of an oven preheated to 190° C for about 1¼ to 1½ hours. The cake is ready when a skewer can be pushed through it and comes out clean. Place on a grid, and brush with half of the melted butter while still warm, and then sprinkle with half of the sieved icing sugar. Wait 5 minutes before brushing on the rest of the butter and covering with the remaining icing sugar.



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Celebrating Christmas in Europe

The feast of Christmas was a relative late-comer to the church calendar. In the early church, numerous dates were put forward for Christ's birth, although the fixing of the Annunciation (when the Archangel Gabriel greeted Mary) on March 25 made it fairly logical to place the Savior's birth exactly 9 months later. However, it was only after the Council of Nicaea in 325, which asserted that Christ was both God and Man, that the touchingly human circumstances of Christ's nativity seemed to merit especial commemoration. However, some time would pass before the celebration of a 'mass for Christ' would acquire general acceptance.

December 25 was first officially celebrated as the birthday of Jesus Christ in the year 354. One reason why Pope Liberius chose this

date is because it was an important Roman feast day (from the 3rd century) dedicated to 'sol invicta' ('the invincible sun'). The days immediately following the shortest day of the year (December 21) were generally a time of festivity in the ancient world. The idea of light gradually conquering the darkness of winter was an obvious symbol. At this time, Romans let their hair down during the Feast of Saturnalia, when slaves were allowed to dress up as their masters. For the Egyptians, this period marked the rebirth of their murdered god, Horus. December 25 was also considered to be the day of birth of the Persian god, Mithras, who had a very strong following in the later Roman Empire, especially among legionaries. Thus, rather than being a 'spoilsport' and banning such holidays, it made sense for the expanding Christian church to take over existing days of festivity and realign them for its own purposes. It





Celebrating Christmas in Europe

also made sense that a day signaling a new era should immediately follow the day dedicated to Adam and Eve (December 24).

In Germany, the Synod of Mainz in 813 was the moment when Christmas was officially established for December 25. However, at this time it was called *Lichtfest* ('Festival of Light'). The current German name, *Weihnachten*, first occurs in the 12th century. The German verb, *weihen*, means to consecrate – in other words, to make holy – so that *Weihnachten* (a plural) basically means 'Holy Days.' Thus, Christmas Eve is called *Heiligabend* ('Holy Evening' or 'Eve'), and is the day when presents are traditionally exchanged. Perhaps with reference to the feast's earlier name, *Lichtmesstag* (February 2) still marks the final end of the Christmas season.

The giving of gifts around the day of 'Christ's Mass' can be documented back to the 14th century, with St. Nicholas being a principle figure. However, for Martin Luther and his followers, such legendary saints of the Roman Catholic Church were theologically unacceptable. Thus, in about 1530, Luther first specified that December 24/25 should be a day on which children receive presents from Christ himself, thus paving the way for the Protestant German tradition of the *Christkind* ('Christ Child') as the bringer of gifts. Nonetheless, the idea of the Christ Child fully replacing St. Nicholas only really took off in the early part of the 19th century. However, the image of the *Christkind* is vague and variable: sometimes he is really a baby, sometimes an angel-like figure with wings, sometimes a youth. In fact, while he is still mentioned, the *Christkind*'s role of giving presents





has been discreetly taken over by the *Weihnachtsmann* ('Father Christmas' but not St. Nicholas). In German-speaking countries, children receive their gifts not on Christmas Day but on Christmas Eve. Often, songs are sung around the tree before the first presents are opened.

Dule and Duletide

These terms that are also used in English to describe the Christmas season are derived from the Scandinavian word (probably of pagan origins) for the period leading up to Christ's birth, i.e., *Jul*, and the actual feast itself, *Julklapp*. Similar terms are used in North Germany, where Christmas Eve is sometimes called *Julklappabend*.

Although Christmas Eve is when the *Christ-kind* brings presents, the main feast of Christmas is reserved for the following day throughout Europe. In fact, until about 1900, it was customary to fast on Christmas Eve morning. Christmas dinner usually involves a roast meal, with goose being the most traditional option. The story goes that this tradition originated in England, at the court of Elizabeth I in 1588. Supposedly, it was while eating this meal that she received the good tidings of the crushing defeat of the Spanish Armada. Thereafter, goose was considered to bring good luck and to recall the country having been spared the horror of Spanish invasion. The traditional Christmas goose has a rich stuffing that usually includes apple and raisins. However, as roast goose is extremely fatty (it should



Celebrating Christmas in Europe

be cooked on a raised grid, so that the excess fat can drain away and be poured off), turkey and chicken are now preferred in many parts of Europe, especially as goose is a often eaten in Germany on St. Martin's Day (November 11).

In North Germany, a festive fish dish is often served. In medieval times, this was seen as an appropriate Christmas meal, because the letters of the Greek word for fish (*ichthos*) were regarded as an acronym for words meaning 'Jesus Christ God's Son Savior,' so that the fish has long been a symbol for Christ. The fish of choice for the festive season is usually carp (*Karpfen*). This is a very rich, almost fatty fish, which needs to be cooked thoroughly, preferably by deep-frying. *Carpe frite* is a specialty of the Sundgau region at the southernmost tip of Alsace directly

on the Swiss border. One old custom is to take a scale from the Christmas carp and keep it in your wallet or purse – supposedly, it will never be empty throughout the coming year!







Salzburg Christmas Market

While numerous parts of Salzburg's lovely Baroque center are adorned throughout Advent with Christmas stalls and decorations, the classic *Christkindlmarkt* on Domplatz and Residenzplatz is still the main magnet for visitors. The incomparable setting is worth the trip alone, but many stalls have a tempting selection of special gifts that include carved crib figures, handmade Advent wreaths and incense burners. Hot mulled wine and punch help to keep out the chill, as do sizzling sausage specialties and steaks. Of course, marzipan-filled *Mozartkugeln* are a sweet reminder of the city's most famous son. While here, don't miss the popular 'Advent Magic' in the courtyard of Hellbrunn Castle. Here, children like the 'petting zoo' and rides, while the castle itself offers a worthwhile exhibition of traditional Christmas cribs.





Vienna Christmas Market

Vienna's splendid City Hall provides an ideal backdrop for a charming market that exudes an irresistible nostalgia. Certainly, candyfloss, roast chestnuts and other old-fashioned goodies seem to taste better here than anywhere else. A special 'workshop' for kids allows younger visitors to try their hand at crafts under the guidance of experts whose work makes browsing the many stalls so much fun. In the nearby park, many trees are festively decorated and illuminated, and fairytale figures add an enchanting touch. Within easy walking distance (or a romantic *Fiaker* ride away), the Freyung is the venue of another magical market whose stands are strong on seasonal ornaments, while Karlsplatz has stalls with handicrafts. Magnificent Schönbrunn Castle has its own market and a Yuletide exhibition, too.



n q̄ sibi laus est eterna. galli dpositori



Ante secula dei filius

bilis interminis

fit machina celi et terre maris et in hys


qu

er que dies et hore labat et se

Christmas Songs and Carols

The word, 'carol,' would appear to be derived from Italian and French words for a ring-dance, suggesting that it is a song for all to join in. Poems and songs relating to Christmas were widespread even in the early days of the Christian church. For example, a poem by St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the 4th century, *Vene redemptor gentium* ('The Redeemer of the Gentiles Comes'), was translated by Luther in 1524 as *Nun kommt, der Heiden Heiland*, one of the best-known German Christmas carols. This is just one of a number of earlier song texts that Luther and others translated and adapted to the needs of the new Protestant faith. Among the most popular are *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* ('From Heaven Above, I Have Come') and *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* ('How Beautifully the Morn-

ing Star Is Shining'), which were later transcribed and varied by Baroque composers, especially Johann Sebastian Bach. Another very early song that is universally known is *In dulci jubilo*, whose 14th-century text was given its final musical form two centuries later by Johann Walter, a friend of Martin Luther.

 ne of the loveliest early Christmas songs is *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* ('There is a Red Rose'), whose melody is attributed to Michael Praetorius (1571–1621), although the text may be from around 1750. It refers to a legend that a monk named Lawrence chanced upon a beautiful rose flower even though it was freezing-cold mid-winter. This is a lovely symbol of Christ's birth offering hope at the darkest time of year.



Uer uatus est no bi

fi lius da nis est no

nius impe rium super humeru

uis et uoca bitur nomen e

Christmas Songs and Carols

One European Christmas song that is often mistakenly taken to be an English carol is 'O Come All Ye Faithful': in actual fact the original, *Adeste Fidele*, is based on a Portuguese melody written by Abbot Borderies in about 1700.

Wonderful though some of the earliest carols may be, the true heyday of Christmas melodies was the first half of the 19th century. Among the many carols that date from this time, two German creations have become classics of the genre.


To be heard at every Christmas Market, *O Tannenbaum, wie grün sind deine Blätter* ('O Fir Tree, How Green Your Leaves Are')

seems to have been based on a 16th-century melody published in a collection of 1820. It acquired its famous text in 1824 thanks to Ernst Anschütz, a teacher in Leipzig who endangered his job by taking the side of a child who had been expelled from his school – quite a risk for a government employee at that time. For him, the upright fir tree that remains green throughout the coldest months seemed a symbol for resolution in the face of adversity, and this gave him the strength to stand fast and eventually win his case. He then wrote the words to the melody, and the carol was first performed in his school.

From the same period, *Stille Nacht* ('Silent Night') is perhaps the world's best-known Christmas song. However, its origins could



Eus in adiutorium meum
 intende. Domine ad
 adiuuandum me festina. **G**
 Gloria patri. **S**icut e-
 rat in principia et nunc et
Semper: **V**impu-
 salutis auctor qd nū
 quondam corpis ex illibata uirgine nascendo for-
 mam summisseris. **M**aria mater gratie mat-



Christmas Songs and Carols

hardly have been more humble, and it is almost a miracle that the circumstances of its creation have been satisfactorily cleared up.

Apparently, just before Christmas 1818, Joseph Mohr (1792–1848), the assistant priest of the congregation of Oberndorf near Salzburg, gave his text to the teacher and organist in nearby Arnsdorf, Franz Xaver Gruber (1787–1863), with the request to set it to music for two voices (tenor and bass) with guitar accompaniment. The resulting carol was performed for the first time on Christmas Eve 1818 in the small Chapel of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf. The guitar accompaniment suggests that it would have been sung after rather than during the church service. The song might easily have become another forgotten composition by Gruber (over 200

are known) if it hadn't been heard in 1825 by the organ-maker, Karl Mauracher, during a visit to work on the Oberndorf organ. He seems to have been delighted, and the song took first Germany by storm, and eventually the world. However, its origins were quickly forgotten, so that it was billed as an 'American folk song' during the World Exhibition in Vienna in 1873. Fortunately, enthusiastic researchers have since put the record straight, and the sensational chance find of the original hymn written in Mohr's own hand in 1995 clinched the argument.

While the original chapel in Oberndorf was demolished in 1906, the later *Stille-Nacht-Gedächtniskapelle* on the same site is now a place of pilgrimage for many visitors during Christmastide.

Weihnachtslied.

in A-Moll gesetzt von Laver Gruber.

4

1. Heil-ke Kraft. heilige Kraft. Al. heil'igste, einjam' ruffst mich das heilige heilige Kind.
 2. Gottes heil'igste! o mein heil'ig Kind und mein gottliches Kind.
 3. Du das Kind heil'igste Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 4. No. heil'igste Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 5. Das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 6. Gottes Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.

1. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 2. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 3. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 4. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 5. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.
 6. Ich bin das Kind, das Kind, das Kind, das Kind.

Christmas Songs and Carols

Joseph Mohr's birth-house in Salzburg (Steingasse 9) contains a museum dedicated to the carol. Mohr died and was buried in the town of Wagrain, but his skull was later transferred to the *Stille-Nacht-Kapelle*. Gruber was buried in the graveyard behind the Parish Church of Hallein, a town that now has a Gruber-Mohr Museum that is a center of research into everything associated with 'Silent Night.'

Incidentally, the *Büro für Weihnachtslieder* in Graz, Austria, has documented no less than 12,000 Christmas songs and carols.



Franz Xaver Gruber





Between the Years

In Germany, the period between Christmas Day and New Year is often referred to as 'between the years,' when people have some time both for reflection and to spend with their families. In Alsace, several Christmas markets remain open at this time. The following feast days fall at this time:

DECEMBER 26 Feast of St. Stephen, first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death with the consent of Saul (Acts 7:54–60). In parts of Germany, he is commemorated by a ceremonial ride of horsemen to a church dedicated to the saint (*Stephani-Ritt*) or by festive dancing. Chocolate-covered cookies called *Pflastersteine* ('cobblestones') recall Stephen's form of martyrdom. December 26 is simply called the Second Day of Christmas in German-speaking countries and has been a national holiday since the later part of the 19th century, when Bismarck's social reforms added it to the calendar of work-free days.

DECEMBER 27 Feast of St. John the Divine, a time when wine used to be consecrated in churches (the saint's symbol is a wine chalice). In past centuries, this was the day on which servant's contracts were renewed (or not). Married couples also used to eat out to prolong their 'contract' a further year.

DECEMBER 28 Feast of the Innocents. The Bible recounts that, after they had brought gifts to Jesus, an angel warned the Three Kings to return home without fulfilling their promise to inform Herod of the whereabouts of the king he knew they were seeking. The tyrant then ordered the slaughter of all babies and infants in Judea. The Holy Family's escape to Egypt is commemorated by the *Christstollen* cake (see page 69) that is meant to look like a child in swaddling clothes and which is traditionally cut for the first time on this day.





The capital of Alsace justly declares itself to be the 'Christmas capital of Europe.' Starting at Place Gutenberg with its lovely old merry-go-round, one should follow pretty Rue Mercière towards the awesome west façade of the Cathedral, beneath which huddle the quaint stalls of the *Christkindelmärk*. Having fortified oneself with perhaps roast chestnuts or a pretzel, walk north to Place Kléber, where a massive Christmas tree dominates the many stalls devoted to various charities. Other ports of call are Place Broglie and Place du Marché-Neuf with crafts stalls, while the Place du Château is a favorite thanks to its ice-rink. The Place de la Gare is the home of the *Bredle* Market, named after the local cookie specialty. By the ferris-wheel, Espace de la Couronne and Place d'Austerlitz are good for tasting the excellent local vintages.

Recipe – Bredle

600 g flour, 400 g sugar, 100 g ground walnuts, 6 eggs, 3 sachets vanilla sugar or 1 vanilla pod (cut lengthways and scraped out), 30 g ground aniseed

Mix together the eggs, sugar and vanilla sugar, and beat thoroughly using a mixer until very thick and foamy. Turn in the ground walnuts, aniseed and sifted flour, and mix together gently. Place in a piping bag with a fairly large (8 mm), smooth nozzle, and squeeze rounds with a diameter of about 2 cm onto a greased and floured sheet of greaseproof paper placed on a baking tray. Leave to dry overnight in a cool place. Preheat the oven to 180° C, and bake the Bredle for about 10 minutes. The mixture may be varied by adding either the zest of 1 lemon or a teaspoon of cinnamon.





Colmar Christmas Market

This charming Alsatian city has established itself as one of Europe's top Yuletide destinations. A visit might begin in the quaint 'Little Venice' (*Petite Venise*) end of town, where there is a market for children, with plenty of toys, candy and the usual rides. Passing some lovely half-timbered houses, one reaches the Place de l'Ancienne Douane, where about 50 stalls are prettily gathered around the ancient Chamber of Commerce (*Koifhuis*). Inside this, sculptors, glaziers, jewelers, book- and antique-dealers offer a range of unusual gifts. A walk along the beautifully decorated Rue des Marchands takes one to the Place des Dominicains, with its gorgeous setting of a soaring Gothic church and ancient houses. The nearby Place Jeanne d'Arc has local fare like *saucisson sec* and pungent *Munster* cheeses.





Mulhouse Christmas Market

Still something of an insider tip, Mulhouse has a very worthwhile market on its central Place de la Réunion, which is dominated by the rather gaudily frescoed City Hall and the imposing Church of St. Stephen. At twilight, the scene becomes enchanting when all of the surrounding buildings are lit up. Mulhouse has a long tradition of cloth-making, and many stalls offer exquisite fabrics and handmade products like cushions and tablecloths decorated with intricate embroidery. A food specialty that will keep for many weeks is the Alsatian bread containing dried fruits called *Beraweckla*. Instead of the usual Alsatian wine, one might enjoy a classic *bière de noel*, a dark, heady brew that comes in a corked bottle. A short walk away, the Place de la Concorde has a small market offering arts and crafts from other parts of Europe.





Freiburg Christmas Market

Freiburg's Christmas market enjoys a pleasing setting in front of the Old City Hall and along the adjoining Franziskanerstrasse. The many stalls include a high proportion of Black Forest arts and crafts. A traditional product that you won't find elsewhere is the *Strohfinke*, a little bird made of woven straw. The hand-carved and -painted wooden figures on offer include quite large puppets, such as spooky witches with pointed hats. Ceramics, aromatic candles and tree decorations are also well-represented. To keep hunger at bay, try some tapered potato noodles (*Schupfnudeln*) or potato patties (*Kartoffelpuffer*) that both taste best when dipped into apple puree. Mushrooms fried in a herb batter, excellent fried potatoes served with egg or Alsatian-style *Flammkuchen*, a pizza with bacon, onion and cheese topping, are also tempting.





Basel Christmas Market

Basel now lays claims to have 'Europe's Longest Christmas Street,' and its Old City and shopping precincts are indeed a festive sight during Advent. The market itself has two main focal points: Barfüsserplatz and Theaterplatz contain about 140 stalls offering quality products and gifts. With a cup of mulled wine in the hand, one can check out stalls packed with hats, gems and fossils, ceramics, spices, aromatic woods and candles, to name but a few. Sweet specialties that are an absolute 'must' include *Basler Herzchen*, which contain almonds, sugar, cocoa, cinnamon, cloves and a shot of *Kirschwasser*, along with, of course, the classic spicy cake, *Basler Leckerle*. Supposedly, these cookies were first created to please princes of the church who gathered here for the Council of Basel between 1431 and 1448.

Recipe – Basler Leckerle

500 g honey, 250 g sugar, 200 g chopped candied peel, 375 g chopped almonds, 625 g flour, ½ tsp ground cloves, ½ tsp cinnamon, 25 ml *Kirschwasser*, zest of 1 orange

Gently warm the honey in a saucepan before adding the almonds. Stir well, and add the sugar, stirring until it has dissolved completely. Now stir in the spices, *Kirschwasser*, peel, orange zest and half of the flour, and mix well before adding the rest of the flour and working into a firm dough. Knead well, and leave to prove for a couple of hours at least. Grease a baking tray, and sprinkle it with flour. Roll out the dough to a thickness of about 1 cm, and place it on the prepared baking tray. Put it into an oven preheated to 180° C for 15–20 minutes. Remove, and cut into triangles immediately. If you prefer, the *Leckerle* can be brushed with a glaze made with sieved icing sugar and water.



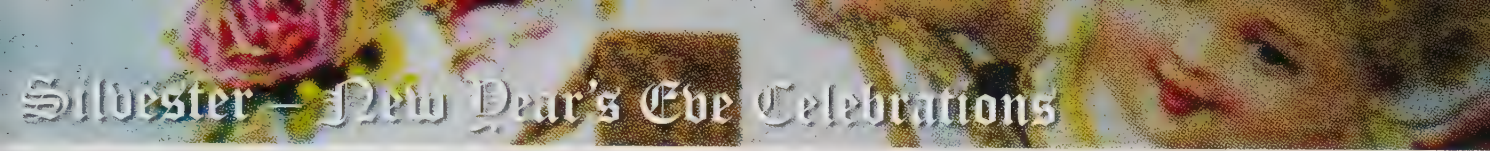


Christmas in Paris

While Paris is a delight to visit at any time of the year, it has a very special atmosphere in the weeks leading up to Christmas. For example, its classic shopping streets and malls attract even more visitors thanks to charming illuminations and imaginative decorations. Small Christmas markets are scattered throughout downtown Paris, but the most popular is the *Marché de Noël* on the Champs Elysées. Nearly 200 stalls offer a broad range of gifts and delicious fare, and an enormous slide is especially popular among younger visitors. A more intimate atmosphere can be enjoyed at the *Village du Père Noël* on the Place St-Germain-des-Prés by the church of the same name. Not far away, there is another 'Father Christmas Village' around the Church of St. Sulpice. In the modern La Défense suburb, the Christmas market with 250 stalls goes beyond Yuletide wares to embrace just about everything.







Silvester - New Year's Eve Celebrations

In German-speaking countries, New Year's Eve is a day of great festivity, with fireworks being set off at midnight, so that the New Year is literally greeted with a 'bang.' The day and the celebration are called *Silvester*, referring to the saint (Pope Sylvester I) to whom this day is dedicated. Sylvester became bishop of Rome in 314 and had the distinction of converting Emperor Constantine to Christianity. Legend says that Sylvester also cured him of leprosy. The pope died on December 31, 335.

During the evening of December 31, a number of traditions reflect the wish to know whether the year ahead is going to be a good one. In addition to the usual laying of cards, *Bleigiessen* is still popular. Here, one warms a small

piece of lead on a spoon and then turns the molten metal into a bowl of cold water. The resulting shape is then pored over for possible prophetic qualities. On TV, many Germans love to watch for the umpteenth time a short stage play from 1963 with a cast of two (Freddie Frinton and May Warden) actually performed in English. *Dinner for One* shows an old lady, Miss Lucy, throwing a party for persons long since dead who are impersonated by her hapless butler, James.

Food traditions for New Year's Eve vary from region to region. In North Germany (as in Scandinavia), fish soup is often on the menu, and carp is still popular in many areas. While roast dishes are common, many now prefer



Silvester – New Year's Eve Celebrations

buffet-style food that best accompanies the beer, wine, sparkling wine (*Sekt*) and champagne that flow freely on this occasion.

In Berlin, whose New Year celebrations focused on the Brandenburg Gate have been legendary since 1990, it is tradition to eat either pancakes (*Pfannkuchen*) or deep-fried doughnuts and fritters (*Krapfen*) that often contain apple puree. In the Rhineland, similar specialties are *Bollebäuschen*, which also contain raisins and currants, and are sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon. Hamburg prefers a festive apple cake with currants, cardamom, cinnamon, candied lemon peel and apples. In Bavaria and especially in the Bavarian Forest, New Year's Day is celebrated with a *Neujahrszopf*, a plaited currant loaf.

Another New Year's Eve tradition that one may have the luck to encounter is the making of *Feuerzangenbowle*. The vital perquisite is a so-called *Zuckerhut*, a cone of hard sugar about 6 inches high, which is suspended over mulled wine using tongs before being spectacularly flambéed.

Recipe – Feuerzangenbowle

Pour 2 liters of red wine into a copper bowl. This can be warmed from underneath using a candle. Mix together a handful of candied orange and lemon peel along with a few cloves and/or a cinnamon stick; wrap these in a small piece of muslin, and tie up well. Place this in the wine, which should now be warmed through. Now suspend the cone of sugar (available in shops at this time of year) above the wine, and pour rum over the sugar until it has soaked in well. Now add a touch of drama by putting off the light before igniting the rum with a match. If you have added enough (but not too much) rum, it will continue burning long enough to caramelize and melt all of the sugar, which will then drip into the wine. Stir well, and serve hot.





The early church celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany (from the Greek word, *epiphanias*, meaning ‘appearance’) – the appearance of the Savior on earth – on January 6. Only later was the date for Christ’s birth moved forward to December 25 by the Roman Catholic Church, and the vacant feast day was then assigned to the ‘appearance’ of the Three Kings. In the Eastern Church, though, Epiphany remains the traditional feast day for Christ’s birth. In Granada in Spain, the evening before the Feast of the Epiphany is called ‘Magic Night’ and is when children are given their Christmas presents. January 6 also traditionally commemorates Christ’s baptism, after which his teaching ministry began. Also, Christ’s first miracle of turning water into wine at the Marriage of Cana (a forerunner of the Holy Communion)

was thought to have taken place on this day. In some German states, *Heilige Drei Könige* (‘Holy Three Kings’) is still a public holiday.

The biblical account of the visit of these ‘Three Kings’ does not say that they were kings or that they were three in number. Only later was the fact that they brought three gifts assumed to mean that there were just three ‘wise men’ or Magi (from which comes the word ‘magician’), by which is probably meant astronomers or astrologers. As Christ’s word was later spread throughout the whole world, the wise men gradually became regarded as kings representing the three known continents of the time (Europe, Africa, Asia) as well as the three ages of man (youth, maturity, old age).





Epiphany and the Three Kings

Visitors to German-speaking countries tend to be puzzled by a tradition linked with the Three Kings. The lintels of many doorways have a year number (e.g., 2009) preceded by the letters C + M + B chalked on them. The letters are generally said to stand for Caspar (meaning ‘treasurer’), Melchior (‘my king of light’) and Balthazar (from a Babylonian name meaning ‘protect his life’): these are the names traditionally given to the Three Kings who visited the Holy Family soon after Christ’s birth. Alternatively, they may originally have been an abbreviation for the Latin phrase, *Christus mansionem benedicat* (‘Christ bless this house’). In the days leading up to January 6, young people often go from house to house singing carols. As a thank-you for receiving goodies or a donation to a charity, they chalk

the three initials plus the year over doorways, and this is thought to bring luck for the rest of the year. As it is considered bad luck to erase the writing, the ‘graffiti’ may persist for many months. Sometimes, the singers also sprinkle the threshold with consecrated water.

The astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), was the first to suggest that the Star of Bethlehem that attracted the interest of the Wise Men might have been a close conjunction between the planets Jupiter and Saturn. In the Middle East, Saturn was seen as a symbol for Israel, while Jupiter was the ‘king’ among the planets – hence the closeness of the two might seem to indicate the advent of the Messiah. Kepler calculated that such a conjunction did take place some time in the year





Epiphany and the Three Kings

7 BC. Since then, however, research has suggested that 4 AD would be a more likely date for Christ's birth. Other theories have posited the appearance of a bright comet or supernova at this time, although no other historical source makes reference to such an astronomical occurrence. The story may be regarded as the fulfilment of a prophecy by Balaam, "A star shall come forth out of Jacob; and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

In pagan times, January 6 was the day of the appearance of three goddesses. Also linked with pre-Christian traditions, the night before January 6 used to be a time when young men often wearing animal hides and horns ran through villages, frightening anyone foolish enough to be out and

about. These so-called *Berchten* were mainly active in Franconia (south-east Germany) and the Tyrol (Austria). In a similar vein, people in Upper Bavaria used to place a cake (*Bercht-Kücherl*) in front of their doors to keep away and placate evil spirits. Parades of costumed figures (*Perchtenläufe*) still take place on January 6 in some towns and thus provide a link to the upcoming Carnival (*Fasching* or *Fastnacht*) season that, in some areas, formally begins on January 6 and continues until Ash Wednesday.

As already mentioned, Christmas trees should stand at least until the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6). In some regions, the first Monday after this day is the time when they are finally taken down.



Conclusion

We hope that you've enjoyed this introduction to European traditions relating to the period before and after Christmas Day. In this book, we have tried to capture not only the history and traditions of Christmas in words and pictures: in addition, we hope that, leafing through its pages, you will have felt the joy and fascination of the festive Yuletide season. It only remains to wish you a delightful stay in Europe and a very Merry and Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.



Useful Links (QR Codes)

To allow you to find out more about the Christmas Markets that may be included on your itinerary, this double page presents a range of QR codes that provide a link to websites offering more detailed information and practical tips about the markets in question. To access this information, you will need a smartphone or tablet with a QR scanning device. Many of the links presented here are the official websites of the Xmas markets and the others have been carefully selected, but we can take no responsibility for any erroneous information or advertising that may be found on these links.



Cologne



Trier



Heidelberg



Rüdesheim



Mainz



Frankfurt



Germany



Bamberg



Nuremberg



Rothenburg



Munich



Mulhouse



Freiburg



Regensburg



Dresden



Basel



Paris



Salzburg



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Strasbourg



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au vîur pignon



European Christmas Enchantment

Your guide to the finer points of
European Advent and Yuletide:

- Fascinating traditions
- Selected Christmas markets
- Delicious seasonal specialties



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