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# HOME & AWAY

MAY/JUNE 2009



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in the Tropics*

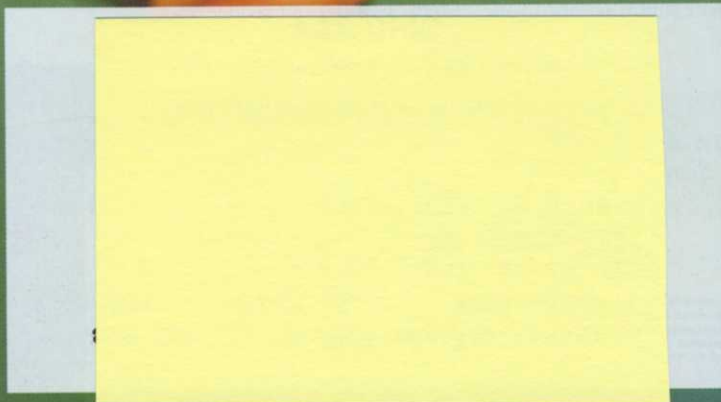
## Costa Rica IS ADVENTURE

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Brave the Bavarian cold for sleigh rides, glügwine and Christmas cheer.

# ALPINE ADVENT

**When I told my friend Allison about my plans to travel to Germany, Switzerland and Austria for the Christmas markets, she said, “Non-stop beer, tons of sausage and Christmas everywhere you look? That sounds like my version of the afterlife.”**

Who needs the North Pole when central Europe has everything necessary to make the season merry, bright and memorable? Insight Vacation's nine-day Winter Wonderland tour took me through scenes of Old World charm, including the quaint Oberammergau, where residents will perform their famed Passion Play in 2010, and shopping markets throughout the area. It was well worth springtime planning.

Having experienced Christmas mainly in the states, I naturally associate it with cookies, shopping and presents—lots and lots of presents. It's not unusual to see people here leaving shopping malls loaded down with so many bags they

BY BARBARA  
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can barely wrestle them to their cars. A European Christmas is different. Every December in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, towns set up outdoor stalls to sell ornaments, candles, cakes, outerwear, crèches and scores of other things. I saw fried bread bowls filled with sauerkraut, fingerless gloves, sheepskin slippers in a rainbow of colors and Santa hats with Viking braids, but I never saw a shopper carrying heavy bags.

Most carried no bags at all. Shoppers' purpose for coming to the markets was to browse, connect with friends and warm themselves with hot sausages and steaming mugs of mulled wine. There was a sense of joy I've never felt in a stateside shopping mall. It showed me a whole different side of the season.

## SEASON TREATS

The Winter Wonderland tour kicked off in Frankfurt, which had the most packed Christmas market of any I encountered. Every inch of space between vendor stalls was full of people, so many so you could not walk without being pressed up completely against others front, side and center. Yet, a holiday mood prevailed, so I let myself be pulled along by the crowd, enjoying the scent of roasting meat mingled with warm wine and looking at tasty pastries glinting from display tables and shop windows.

“Christmas as a secular custom really began in Germany,” guide Sue Mason said. “They originated the tradition of trimming and lighting a tree to symbolize the Garden of Eden. Gradually, people decorated their trees with cook-



PASSION PLAY OBERAMMERGAU 2000

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Christmas scenes unfold every December in Germany, attracting shoppers to the outdoor markets and spectators to Oberammergau's passion play, (left), which was first performed in 1634.

ies, fruit and candles, and of course, ornaments. The Germans originated the Advent calendar as well."

In Germany, Christmas is certainly a delight for the tastebuds as a wide range of seasonal treats becomes available. In the markets, don't miss the lebkuchen (gingerbread), stolen (fruit bread) or schneeballen (dough balls). Marzipan treats made with almonds and sugar are tasty and beautiful. Because many of the delicacies vary by region, be sure to try things that appeal to you as they may not be available in the next town.

By far, the biggest draw is glühwine, which is warmed wine served in a ceramic mug for which you pay a deposit that gets returned when you've finished drinking. I found it quite sweet, and the toasty mug was the perfect hand-warmer when strolling the markets, which are all outdoors.

Near Munich you won't want to miss the tour of "Mad" King Ludwig's over-the-top castle, nestled deep in

the heart of the Bavarian countryside. Bavaria's last king didn't much care for being around people. The castle has only one bedroom and the dining room has a special table that descends to a lower floor to be laid and cleared; King Ludwig didn't want to see any servants during his 10-course meals. The ornate gold leaf, marble, porcelains and tapestries throughout were a sight fitting with his admiration of the French Bourbon kings.

### THE TOWN PLAY

In nearby Oberammergau, a passion play has been performed every 10 years since 1633 and has become a huge tourist draw. The next performance will be in 2010. City officials expect more than 14,000 people to attend. Nearly every resident is involved in the five-hour play's production; men even begin growing out their hair and beards months in advance for that extra degree of authenticity.

Mason told us how the play got its start: It was a bargain the townspeople made with God to keep the bubonic plague out of their village. After the village was spared, the play has been performed, making it one of the oldest fulfilled promises in human history.

Austria was the next stop on tour, with visits to Salzburg and Innsbruck. Austria has a rich musical tradition as it's where the holiday classic *Silent Night* was written and composed, and where the movie *The Sound of Music* was filmed.

Salzburg is renowned as Mozart's birthplace, so I was determined to hear a Mozart concert while there. I found the Mozart Dinner Concert at Stiftskeller St. Peter, which presents the Salzburg-based prodigy's work in the manner it was heard back in his day. Talented students dress in period costumes and perform Mozart's works between dinner courses made from authentic 18th-century recipes. It was a delightful experience that helped me fully appreciate one of music's greatest composers, who penned more than 600 works in his short life.

## OVER THE FIELDS WE GO

In Innsbruck I enjoyed my first horse-drawn sleigh ride, courtesy of Fritz Ehrensperger, who yodeled as he led us into the snowy mountainside. Our



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group was inspired enough to burst into a round of *Jingle Bells* while huddling under blankets and taking in postcard-like views.

In Switzerland we spent two nights in Lucerne, which provided plenty of time to visit the city's department stores and museums. Press-shy celebrities such as Audrey Hepburn and Shania Twain settled in Switzerland because people there respect each other's privacy, to the point of not making eye contact on the street. Still, the attendant in

Lucerne's excellent Picasso museum let me in even though I was four franks short.

Christmas is a great time to explore the town as pretty lights are hung everywhere, the shops stay open later than usual, and it's really fun to warm up with steaming cups of hot chocolate or coffee once you start to feel the cold. If you're shopping for Swiss watches, army knives and chocolates, Lucerne has as wide a selection as you'll find anywhere.

Our group took a break from the shops to ride a panoramic gondola up Mount Pilatus, a 7,000-foot mountain in the center of the country. It was truly a winter wonderland up there, with pine trees heavily fluffed with snow and rosy-cheeked families sledding in colorful outerwear. Local legend has it the mountain is Pontius Pilatus' burial place.

While that has never been confirmed, it is known that Lenin and Queen Victoria are some of the historical figures who have made the trek to its summit.

If a European Christmas sounds appealing, be sure to pack light and leave plenty of room for purchases. Some of my fellow travelers bought additional suitcases to hold all their



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Seasonal baked goodies, holiday music and horse-drawn sleigh rides are just some of the delights that await holiday visitors to the Bavarian region.

loot. Also, Insight Vacations doesn't accept U.S. dollars for optional excursions because of recent volatility, so you'll need to exchange your dollars for euros when it's time to settle up.

Touring Europe in December really drives home the fascinating merging of both pagan and modern traditions that have made the holidays what we experience today. An Alpine Advent transcends nationality for a season that provides grace, cheer and hope. Surely Allison would approve.

## PLANNING YOUR TRIP

For additional information on the Winter Wonderland tour, visit [www.insightvacations.com](http://www.insightvacations.com). For trip-planning assistance, visit your AAA Travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel). **H&A**

■ Barbara Wayman is a regular contributor from Dublin, Ohio.