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GERMANY

Brew pubs in Germany are halls of fame

From Cologne to Munich to Bamberg to Bremen, we seek out the best beers in the country during Oktoberfest.

By Rosemary McClure, Reporting from Munich, Germany

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The last thing I expected as I slid my fingers through the handle of my first tankard of beer in Munich was 10,000 voices erupting in a ragged rendition of . . . "Hang On Sloopy." There was no mistaking it, even when sung with a German accent.

I was in a cavernous beer tent at Oktoberfest, Munich's salute to its favorite liquid, and like everyone around me, I was determined to squeeze the last drop of fun from the world's biggest kegfest.

But "Hang On Sloopy"? Why not "Danke Schoen"? Why not "Beer Barrel Polka"?

That wasn't the half of it, though. They followed "Sloopy" with "New York, New York" and then did a foot-stomping, hand-clapping rendition of "We Will Rock You." With each English-language pop song, I felt more at home. Of course, drinking all that beer didn't hurt.

I had come here to raise a toast to Germany's beer halls, national treasures that don't get nearly the publicity (maybe "buzz" is the more appropriate word) they deserve. Scenic wonders are crammed into every corner of Western Europe's most populous nation: snowcapped Bavarian Alps, wind-swept North Sea islands, lush Black Forest and castle-dotted Rhine. But if you haven't explored the country's cavernous beer halls, you haven't lived.

My mission was clear: Chart a trail that others could follow; develop a beer hall crawl through the heart of Germany.

Like most travelers, I had limited time and funds -- only a week to see and savor the nation's finest; far too little time to devote to a country that considers beer and bread the world's oldest sources of nourishment. So I knocked on the door of the German tourist board: Could it help me identify the best of the best? With its help and input from Deutschland distillers, I made a list of cities with great beer traditions: Cologne, Munich, Bamberg and Bremen. (If your favorite didn't make the cut, there's always next time.)

Off to Cologne

Germany is awash in beer. As tourist posters phrase it: "Want a beer? We can give you 5,000." The country has 1,300 breweries. Exports account for some of the 2.5 billion gallons produced annually, but Germans drink their fair share -- an average of 37 gallons per person. In some areas, that number doubles. "People call us the town of the pregnant men because there are so many big bellies," said a guide in Bamberg, where the average is 76 gallons per person.

As luck would have it, I arrived in Germany during Oktoberfest, the biggest and boldest of Germany's many beer festivals. Don't let the name Oktoberfest fool you: It actually begins in mid-September and ends early in October; this year it's Sept. 19 to Oct. 4.

Munich wasn't my first stop on this beer hall crawl. I flew from L.A. to Frankfurt, where I met a friend, Jordan Nye. We hopped a train and buzzed one hour northwest to the ancient Roman city of Cologne, one of Germany's oldest towns.

Cologne (Köln, in German) has recently become a cosmopolitan superstar known for its art, culture and excellent museums.

We had time for only a quick stroll, but impressive sights flashed by: Cologne Cathedral, one of the most famous Gothic structures in Germany; a bevy of Romanesque churches; colorful houses on Fischmarkt; intriguing clusters of museums and art galleries. Unfortunately, other culture had to take a back seat on this trip; Jordan and I were overdue at the local pubs, where we planned to toast our trip with Kölsch, Cologne's best-known brew.

We began at Malzmühle (6 Heumarkt), where waiters in long aprons dashed back and forth serving Kölsch to patrons at sturdy wooden tables. As soon as one glass emptied, a full one took its place. The light-yellow Kölsch is brewed with lots of hops and served at room temperature in *Stangen*, straight, narrow glasses that hold only about 6 ounces of beer. Along with the brew, patrons consumed plates of hearty German foods, such as boiled pork with sauerkraut and mashed potatoes, and Heaven-and-Earth, which is fried blood pudding with mashed potatoes and apples. The dishes cost about \$10 each.

Kölsch has little carbonic acid and just 5% alcoholic content. "You can drink it like water, but it does the trick," said Andre Fischer, a sixth-generation Cologner who raised a few glasses with us. The beer was fruity and refreshing, qualities that make it beloved by millions and disliked by just as many.

I liked the light taste and wanted to try more varieties of it, so we moved on, visiting a couple of brew pubs in the city's Old Town and then finishing our evening near the cathedral at Früh (12 Am Hof), Cologne's most famous brew pub. The brewery, more than 100 years old, draws locals and tourists alike. The beer is light and easy to drink, and this time we toasted Kölsch and Früh.

The next morning I told myself I didn't have a headache as we walked to the train station, pulling our bags behind us, then dozed off quickly as the

fast, quietly efficient TGV train barreled 4 1/2 hours southeast to Munich, Bavaria's capital.

As we drew closer, the car became noisier. Teenage drinkers (16-year-olds can legally drink in Germany) were guzzling beer and raising a ruckus. I wondered aloud whether I'd hate the rowdiness of Oktoberfest. The woman seated next to me surprised me by answering. Edith Fuess, a doctor in Ludwigshafen, Germany, said I'd probably like the friendliness of the event despite the uproar.

"The German people are not so friendly at first," she said. "But with one beer, they are very friendly."

Bustling Munich

When Jordan and I emerged from the train, we found a city bursting at the seams; we'd been lucky to find accommodations. Munich, one of Germany's largest cities, also is one of its major tourist attractions, full of imposing buildings and interesting shops and museums, so we meandered through the city center.

But we managed to home in on our subject. We dropped in for some information at the Bier und Oktoberfestmuseum, which traces 5,000 years of beer history and also has tasting samples (2 Sterneckerstrasse, www.bier-und-oktoberfestmuseum.de).

Among the things we learned: German beer is still brewed as the law has stipulated since 1516 -- from malt, water, hops, yeast and nothing else.

"Its purity is the reason why it's such an outstanding product," said Lukas Bulka, the museum director. "No preservatives, no artificial color or flavors."

The next stop I'd planned was Hofbräuhaus (9 Platzl), Munich's world-famous beer hall, but like the city, the brewery was overflowing. Jordan took a pass, but I squeezed in. Hofbräuhaus, established as a court brewery in the 16th century, holds about 2,300 revelers inside and seats more in its beer garden. Tourists drink, listen to oompah bands and watch leg-slapping Bavarian dances. That day, the din of the crowd was nearly deafening, and I finally gave up when I couldn't order a beer.

I hoped we'd do better at Oktoberfest. Free tickets are available for the festival in advance (www.oktoberfest.de/en/navitem/Tents/), but getting them can be complicated. We had decided to take our chances and wait in line to get in, a bad idea on weekends or evenings, when lines are long. But we arrived on a weekday afternoon and in less than an hour, we were seated in the Schottenhamel tent, one of 14 huge temporary beer halls that house celebrants during the event. Costumed servers appeared as soon as we sat down, and 1-liter glass mugs quickly materialized full of Spatenbräu beer, a special copper-colored Oktoberfest variety that has a fresh taste and a malty flavor.

Many partiers wore traditional Bavarian clothing, with men sporting lederhosen (leather breeches with suspenders) and women clad in dirndl; all were wearing smiles. Before long, we were singing in unison with the people at the tables around us. We swayed in time to the music, mugs in hand and toasts on our lips.

As the hour grew later and later, we tore ourselves away, hating to leave but recognizing that duty called.

Symphony in B

By the next afternoon we were on a train headed north to lovely Bamberg, a UNESCO World Heritage city built on seven hills, much like ancient Rome. The hills provide superb views of a beautifully preserved Old Town crisscrossed by branches of the Regnitz River. Some consider the city's Domplatz to be one of Europe's loveliest squares, and many of the city's buildings, including the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. George, are magnificent.

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