

ROUTES OF FAITH

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EUROPEAN CHRISTMAS MARKETS BLEND HOLIDAY TRADITIONS, LOCAL CULTURE

BY TODD PROBUS

Since the Middle Ages, the four-week period of Advent has served as a time of anticipation for Christians as they eagerly await the celebration of the arrival of Christ. For over 500 years, Advent has traditionally served as a time for something else as well: Christmas markets. Typically found in large cities and small villages throughout Europe, most of these markets include the same essential components: a central location, perhaps in the town square; a traditional Nativity scene; vendors offering food, drink, and seasonal gifts; and festive music and dancing.

While most Christmas markets have been adversely affected in 2020 by the global pandemic, they will undoubtedly be popular for millions when travel reopens. With that in mind, *Routes of Faith* reached out to three FTA tour operators whose itineraries include these beloved Christmas destinations. Each of them shared about the markets in their specific country of expertise, and explained why travelers should add them to their holiday travel bucket lists.

GERMANY

We begin in Germany, the site of what many consider to be the first true Christmas market, *Striezelmarkt*, which is held in Dresden and began in 1434. And while FTA member The German American Connection has not been in existence quite that long, the company has offered tours of German Christmas markets regularly since 2007. Its earliest tours of the markets were set itineraries, with planned departure and return dates. However, nearly a decade ago, the company switched to completely customized tours for smaller parties of two to 15 travelers.

"All our tours are customized, meaning we plan and prepare the entire trip step-by-step together with the group leader," says Ute Melhorn of The German American Connection. "Our Germany specialist is a bilingual native who lives in Germany, plans the trip, and serves as the guide, translator, and licensed driver for the group. The small nature of the group allows there to be a personal relation to our travelers."

Melhorn continues. "It's about the details. With smaller groups we have the liberty to choose authentic local taverns and country inns, including those that don't have a menu in English. And we are very flexible and can therefore combine the Christmas market experience with oth-



Striezelmarkt in Dresden, Germany

er interests, such as Luther sites, German ancestry, etc."

While this personalized approach allows the company's travelers to choose their areas of interest, there are some essential stops that The German American Connection always recommends. Melhorn says these include "a small-town Christmas market in one of the former mining towns in the Ore Mountains, a visit to a workshop to experience the making of Christmas tree ornaments, a

scenic drive through the countryside, and a Christmas music concert at a church, often featuring an organ or choir performance. Of course, we always choose local restaurants serving traditional specialties, and we always allow enough time to explore the individual Christmas markets at a leisurely pace."

Melhorn recommends that eight to 12 days be dedicated to a tour of German Christmas markets, and she has one word that best summarizes what makes German Christmas markets so special: variety.

"In addition to the well-known Christmas markets like the one in Nuremberg, there are countless smaller Christmas markets all over Germany, each with its own charm, reflecting regional traditions and specialties," Melhorn says. "And many of these are less touristy, allowing visitors to mingle with the locals."

That same variety is the reason why Melhorn believes that the markets in Germany are definitely worth a repeat visit. "Each one, especially those located in small towns, has its own character, charm, and location: some in the mountains, some inside a castle, some surrounding a windmill."

AUSTRIA

Directly to Germany's south is another country known for its famous markets. Although Dresden, as mentioned above, is credited for having held the first official Christmas market, a "December market" held in Vienna dates all the way back to 1298. Since then, cities and towns in Austria have continued the tradition of celebrating the season with four weeks of warmth and cheer.

Appina Travel has offered tours of Austrian Christmas markets since its founding in 2002. The

company has many staffers who have lived in the country and have firsthand experience in guiding travelers. Denise Buchanan of Appina Travel notes that the company prides itself on "providing guests with unique experiences and advice on how to maximize their tour and have a well-rounded experience."

And what makes an Austrian Christmas market tour special? Buchanan raves about a few highlights in particular.

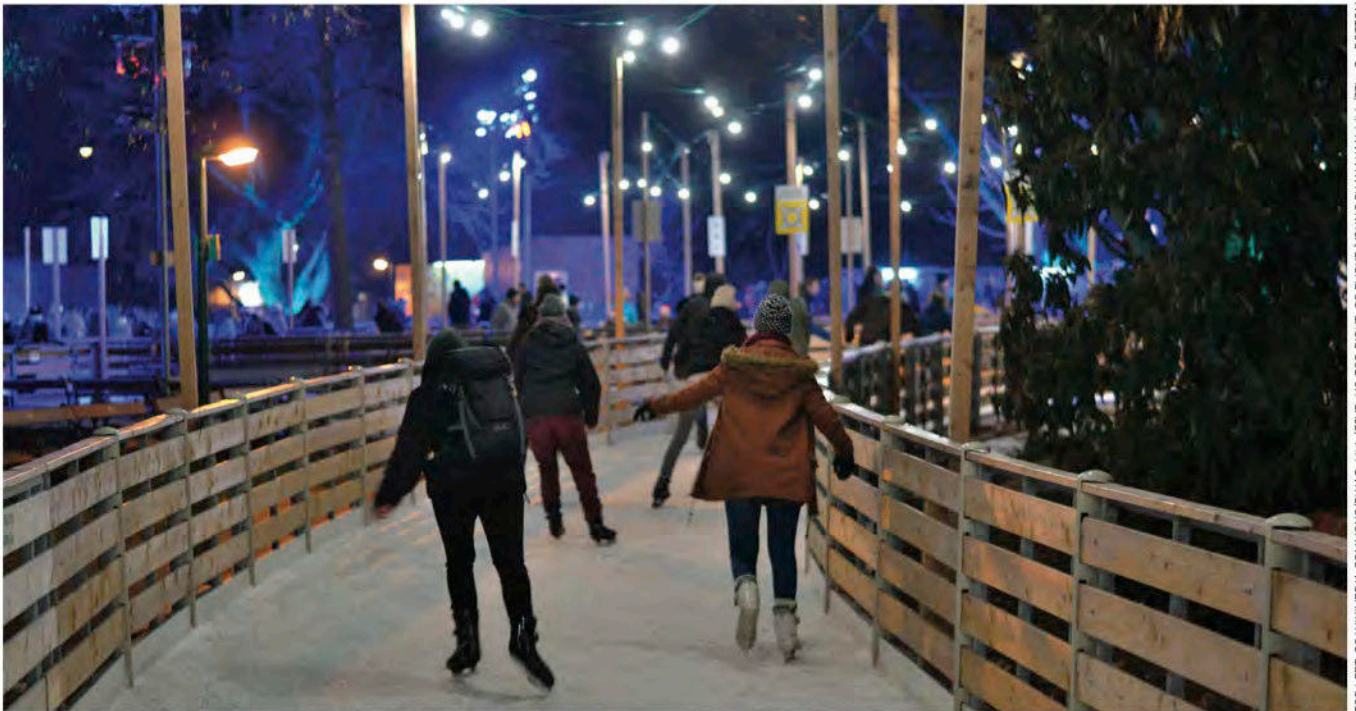
"The smell of delicious local food, mulled wine, and beautiful handcrafted gifts are just the beginning!" she says. "While browsing the meticulously handcrafted gift stalls and nibbling on cinnamon stars, you will feel why the Austrian Christmas market experience is so special. You can even combine Christmas market tours

with a visit to traditional Austrian Kaffeehaus for a taste of a chocolaty Austrian specialty, *Sachertorte*, as well as the world-famous apple strudel (known locally as *apfelstrudel*)."

As mouth-watering as Buchanan's description of the markets may be, food isn't the only highlight.

"There are so many things Austria can offer in the winter to complete your enjoyment of the culture," she says. "Of course, the world-class museums and arts scene are waiting for you, and visitors shouldn't forget to pick up a hand-carved Nativity scene."

When asked about a couple of must-see stops on an Austrian market itinerary, Buchanan first points to Vienna's *Christkindlmarkt*. The historical market, situated in front of a neo-Gothic town hall, has a num-



Christkindlmarkt at the Rathausplatz in Vienna, Austria

ber of fun activities—such as ice skating—for travelers. She also recommends including the city of Innsbruck, which holds its market under its most famous symbol, the *Goldenes Dachl*, or Golden Roof, and lesser-known Rattenburg, which is the smallest city in Austria with an authentic Christmas market.

Buchanan adds that Appina Travel also offers unique experiences for its guests, such as “torch-lit hikes and winter walks on lantern-lit trails, Advent cruises on lakes that are surrounded by lights, and a visit to the famous

Christmas market at Fuschl Castle.”

Though Buchanan recommends that a trip to Austrian Christmas markets last between seven and 10 days, she feels that they definitely warrant repeat visits.

“Every Christmas market is different and has food, crafts, and drinks that you wouldn’t see in other regions,” she says. “If you have been to one Christmas market, you certainly don’t know them all! Also people come back time and time again to do their Christmas shopping in a beautiful setting and to find unique handmade gifts.”