



Germany Travel Planning Podcast

Ep 34 – Essential Tips for Exploring Germany's Best Christmas Markets

Transcript is autogenerated

This is the Germany Travel Planning Podcast, the show that helps you plan a super fun trip to Germany. My name is Cate and I'm your Germany Destination Specialist. I'm here to help you plan the trip of a lifetime. If you ever dreamed of visiting Germany during the holiday season, this episode is for you. I recently joined my friend Tracy Collins on her podcast, the Global Travel Planning Podcast, and she invited me on to talk all about Germany's magical Christmas markets because you know Germany has the best markets in the entire world.

We talked about everything from how to choose where to go, which markets to go to, what to eat, drink and buy at the markets because there's some really neat things there to buy, especially if you like Christmas ornaments and Christmas decorations. We also talked about what to pack so you're comfortable at the markets, how to avoid common tourist mistakes, and I shared some of my favorite Christmas market treats and memories.

Now this episode is a little bit different from the episodes that I typically do on my podcast because Tracy was really kind enough to allow me to share the podcast I did for her on my podcast. So it'll be a fun conversation. I think you'll really enjoy it. And if you're curious about what makes German Christmas markets so special, this episode will give you the perfect place to start and the perfect place to begin planning your own Christmas market trip. Okay, let's dive in.

Hi Cate, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us where you're from and what it is that you do? Hi, Tracy. So excited to be here. So yeah, I'm Cate and right now I'm in the United States where I'm from, but we spend a lot of time in Europe, especially in



Germany. So we, my husband and I run a website and a boutique travel planning business called My Germany Vacation.

You do? You do. And you also have a podcast as well, don't you? Yes. Yes, we do. It's Germany Travel Planning and you just go to your favorite podcast player, should be able to search and find it.

Perfect. And it'll be alongside the UK Travel Planet podcast too. Listen to both of those podcasts, because if you got to the UK, got to Germany, we have the best podcasts and information for you. Now we are going to jump into talking about Christmas markets in Germany, which I have to say are my favorite. I did mention in the intro, Doug and I were very lucky enough to visit the German markets in Berlin last December and they were fabulous. Now, Cate.

We do have an episode about that on our podcast if anyone wants to listen to that because we had you as a guest on our podcast talking about your experience in Berlin at the Christmas market. So link that up in the show notes so everyone can listen to that.

That's true. Thanks for reminding me about that. I forgot all about that one Cate. Yes, we did. We came out and chatted all about it.

But now Cate, for someone who's never been to Germany in December, how would you describe the Christmas market atmosphere?

Ohmy God. It really is magical. They're just, you know, if you're not from Germany and you haven't really been to any other Christmas markets, you just can't even imagine what they're like. They're just, they are so beautiful. Especially if you go at night, that's the best time to go. And especially as the sun is setting and the lights are just starting to turn on and they start, you know, the twinkling lights and there's a lot of like white lights and decorations and sometimes there's music or sometimes there'll be



entertainment. And all the food booths and the vibe is just so festive and fun and yeah, it's the best. I've been going to them for 35 years and I never get tired of it.

I have to agree. I honestly believe and I've experienced this that the German markets leave all the other Christmas markets in Europe standing. They really do. They definitely do. Now, when do the Christmas markets usually start and finish? And how long do they run each day? So you mentioned that obviously they run into the evening and I agree the atmosphere is fantastic, especially in the evening. But do they start in November? Do they finish in January or they definitely have kind of just a December thing?

Yeah, usually they start at the end of November and most of them close on the 23rd or 24th of December. But now there are some that do stay open until like around January 1st, but still not very many. There's a few, maybe Berlin, Cologne, ou know, a few places like that.

Okay, now you mentioned some of them closing before Christmas Day, Boxing Day. Are any of them actually open on Christmas Day, Boxing Day, or do they?

No, No, they close at some point on December 24th. In Germany, you celebrate Christmas on the evening of the 24th. So a lot of them start closing in the afternoon. Some of them just aren't open at all on the 24th. And then they're closed on the 25th. And the 26th is also considered a Christmas. Yeah, basically Boxing Day in Germany too. So they're typically closed on that day as well. I mean, when I'm planning my visits, I only plan to go up until the 23rd or 24th. Because you can go after Christmas through New Year's, but for me, the vibe is just gone once it's after Christmas. So I really like going before, between that time of like late November to Christmas Eve. And they used to be really strict about when they opened and when they closed. And they've kind of loosened up on that. So each market has its own dates now. And the other thing to be aware of is that some markets are only open on certain days, usually smaller ones or if they're more specialized.



So you cannot assume that all the markets will be open all the time. And there are several markets in, especially in larger cities, there will be several markets open, they kind of, sometimes they stagger the opening or they might only be open on the weekends or just a couple of evenings. So you really have to look at the dates.

Okay, that's good information. And now they also have so many Christmas markets, like even in Berlin, just think about Berlin, there were so many to choose from. So how should first-time visitors choose where to go?

Yeah, that can be really tough because there's so many great places. So my first answer to that is wherever you are in Germany, you will find a market. I mean, they are literally everywhere. It doesn't matter whether you go to a big city, medium-sized town, or a village, there will be a Christmas market, more than one Christmas market near you. And every single Christmas market can be interesting.

So I would say if you're already planning to go somewhere in Germany at this time, see which Christmas markets are going to be around where you're going to be and go visit those. If you're going to Germany just for the Christmas markets, then I recommend, I thought about this before when I was preparing for this, I had such a hard time narrowing it down because there's so many great places. But Cologne is really good, Stuttgart, Munich. Berlin has some good ones. Dresden is good. Nuremberg has a very old one. Some people love it, some people don't love it as much. Regensburg also has some really nice ones. And Rothenburg ob der Tauber, that one also, I really liked that one. Surprisingly, I was really surprised at how much I liked that one. So those are the ones that I think about right off the bat. But like I said, they are everywhere in Germany.

Sometimes going to the ones that are less popular can actually be a better experience because you're more local, you're with locals. And I really like those



because that reminds me of the way the Christmas markets used to be before they got super popular.

Okay, and I agree with the fact that wherever you're going in Germany, you're gonna find Christmas markets because they're just so popular. We went to Berlin in December. We didn't do a lot of planning beforehand about which Christmas markets we were going to go to, but we did get a little bit overwhelmed with the choice of Christmas markets to go to in Berlin. So I think that is also really important to be aware that you might be going to Berlin, but you're going to have a choice of where you want to go. And also even just walking down the street, actually, you might not know about this market, then you just walk and there's a Christmas market, the stalls all around you.

So how would you suggest somebody, for example, like we went to Berlin, how would you prepare for that in terms of would you, I know you have articles and a planner, I think, is it right for the Christmas markets? Which is very, really useful, I have to tell you, because you do get a bit overwhelmed with it.

Absolutely. I mean, we spent last, all of Christmas market season last year, we went all over Germany and every single day we were visiting as many markets as we possibly could. And this is after decades of visiting. I've been to hundreds of markets all over Germany now. And it really can be overwhelming because when you're in Facebook groups, I mean, I'm in these Facebook groups and everyone's talking about all these amazing markets and you look at lists on websites and it's so hard to know which ones are worth going or actually which ones are worth going for you. Like which ones are you drawn to? Because it's different for everybody.

So you look at these long lists and you're like, okay, well, where are those? Like you said, like you can be walking down in Berlin and you don't realize you're actually seeing like seven different markets. So you can actually visit a lot of markets in one go and you don't realize, because they kind of go from one to the next to the next.



You're like, well, this one looks a little bit different than this other one, but kind of seems like one giant market. So what we are working on right now is a Christmas market guide and a map so that you can see where these markets are on a map rather than just seeing a list. And then you can take a look at the photos because I find like seeing the photos, you see like, that's the market I really wanna see, right? And then we also are giving some insider information on like which market to go to if you're looking for this or that. And so it'll really help people narrow it down.

Well, I could have done with that last December, Cate, but I'll definitely get that because I'm sure we'll be going back to the Christmas markets at some point because they are just such a draw. Now, are there any personal favorite Christmas markets for you or one that's maybe a little bit of a, like a hidden, I hate the word hidden gem, but you know what I mean, some that people don't necessarily know about, but you absolutely love?

Yeah, I actually did think of a few. Again, it was so hard to narrow it down because there's so many, but there's a few that I can mention. So one is in Esslingen and that is near Stuttgart. And they have a medieval market. It's so much fun. They have people walking around in medieval clothes. They have like fire in different places. They have children's rides like medieval rides that kids can go on and games and food and entertainment. I just have always had so much fun whenever I go there.

Another one is in Cologne. It's called the Angels Market. And it's a newer market and it's just beautiful. Like they just really thought about like the aesthetics of it. Just it's just gorgeous. And it's not a huge market, but they have these beautiful lights and all the stands are kind of uniform. And it's just so relaxing. Like I love the vibe of it. It's just a relaxing, beautiful vibe.

And then another one, as I mentioned before, Rothenburg ob der Tauber. I did not think I would like that one. And then surprisingly, we really, really enjoyed it.



We went on a Saturday and it's right in the old town, which is like in a pedestrian area. And Rothenburg ob der Tauber is like a very well-preserved medieval town. And it's pretty touristy and it gets very busy. So some people love it, some people hate it. I've gone there many times. I actually really, really like it. I know how to avoid the crowds, so I really enjoy it. But the market was so much fun. Like I said, we were there on a Saturday night. So everyone was very excited to be there and everyone's just walking around because it's in this old town pedestrian area. And it had all the standard stuff, like all the food and the music and everything. But just being in this beautiful old town with all these old buildings around it, it was so much fun. We had such a great time.

Two more. So another one is in Regensburg. And we went to this little tiny market, I can't remember the name, but you walk across the bridge and then you turn left and there's this little market that's right along the river. And they had little fire pits and some local specialties and food and drink. And it just seemed very, very local. And it was just very low key. People were standing around or sitting around the fire pits and it was not very big, but it had local things to buy to like you could tell it was just all very local. So I really enjoyed that one. I love the like relaxing kind of low key vibe of that one and people just hanging out.

And then the last one that I'll mention because I could talk for like an hour about all the markets that I really like. But the last one I'll mention is in Munich and it was outside of the city center. And it was a glühwein festival. So glühwein is the mulled wine. And it was a small market but they had these really big tents and they had like, think at least 20 or more different kinds of Gluwein. So we went out and tried, you know, various kinds and it was just fun to like try different combinations of flavors and sit in a cozy tent and just enjoy the atmosphere.

Oh, they all sound magical. They really do. And I can't, mean, being able to just travel around and visit all these Christmas markets in Germany. That just sounds fantastic. Now beyond the stalls, because we kind of know that you're going to see all the stalls



when you get the Christmas markets. But what else can visitors expect when they go to a Christmas market in Germany?

So yeah, there's the ornaments and the things that you can buy. There's also all of the food. So you definitely have to have a lot of food. One of the things to do when you're going to a lot of markets is think about like have one thing at each market. Like don't just eat all of the food immediately at the first market because you'll get really tired of it.

And if you think okay, these are the things that I want to eat, like in our guide, we're gonna have a list of the things you're going to want to eat at markets. And there's a lot of things. So you can look at that ahead of time and say, okay, these are the things I really want to try. I do this, I have kind of a mental list, or I put it on my phone. And when I go to a market, I think, okay, tonight, I'm going to have a bratwurst. And I'm going to have some Liebkuchen, the gingerbread. And then I go to another one and I'm like, okay, this one I'm going to have potato pancakes and I don't know, cinnamon roasted almonds or something. And that way you don't burn out because you can easily burn out on Christmas market food. And also it makes the markets more memorable because if you go to a lot of them, they kind of all run together. And so you can remember, yeah, that market is where I had this food. So there's all the things you can buy. There's food.

There's ice skating rinks. Some of them will have rides like there might be a giant ferris wheel. There was one in Stuttgart last year. Some of these will be kids rides. Stuttgart also had this really cool little train, like a large model train, and kids could ride on it. There's entertainment. So a lot of times you'll hear choirs or there will be different kinds of entertainment depending on the market. Sometimes you'll see St. Nicholas and yeah, I'm sure there's a few things that I'm forgetting, but those are some of the highlights.



No, very excited. Now you've kind of pivoted into food, which is great. I always love talking about food. And we did try some amazing food. Doug loves German food anyway, he was in his element. But are there any absolute must try Christmas market foods that you would say you really should be trying when you go to them?

Yeah, how long do we have? So many things. So my favorite food that I always eat at every market is Lebkuchen. That is the round gingerbread and it's kind of soft and it has different kinds of chocolate or iced glaze on it. Potato pancakes, I love those as well. Nutella crepes, I always have a new top, you can get lots of different kinds of crepes, but the Nutella ones are so good.

Anything bread related, you can get lots of different types of you know, like baguettes and I can't even think of all the things but like lots of different, you Germany does bread products really well. The roasted cinnamon almonds, that's always a good one. Glühwein, always good. You can get hot chocolate. Actually, for anyone who is a meat eater, you can also get like these big like meat on a stick. You know, like roasted like freshly roasted meat on a stick or you get like a big turkey leg type thing. A of times at medieval markets, but so you can find everything. The last one, the last one that I really like mushrooms. They have these huge skillets and they'll cook these mushrooms and a lot of times you can get them in like a creamy sauce or like a creamy garlic sauce. Those are so good too.

Honestly, yeah, I could eat my way around the German markets. We actually had this pancake with cherries, black cherries on it. And we loved it so much. We went the next night back to that market and it sold out. We were absolutely gutted. no. Because they were so, so good. So actually, if you see something and you think, I want to try it, try it because if it's popular, you'll go back and it's all sold out. We were so sad about that.

Absolutely. That is such a good tip because if it's your first time, you're not going to know what standard Christmas market food and what is regional.



And there were a few times I was trying to space things out and I didn't eat something and then I regretted it because I realized, oh, that was a regional specialty and we are not going to find that anymore at the other markets we're going to.

Yeah, that's a good point. Yeah, don't eat before you go. That's the other thing I'd say. Now you've mentioned about Glühwein. How do you order that and enjoy it? Because I know some places you get the mug, you pay for the mug and you get it and some you don't.

Give us a few tips for ordering some Glühwein. Yeah. Well, actually now there's multiple kinds of Glühwein. A lot of places have it, like we had it with blueberry, we had blueberry Glühwein, cherry Glühwein. A lot of times they'll be like, they'll use local berries and then you can also get like a non-alcoholic version. So that's really good too.

So you just order like, you know, you say one of Gluwein, they'll ask you sometimes if you want it, Mitschus, which is like an extra shot of alcohol. So you can get that in it as well if you want. And then you'll get it in some sort of mug or sometimes it's a glass, usually it's a mug. And each Christmas market has different kinds of mugs. And so a lot of people now like to collect all of the mugs from the different markets.

And it's funny, even if you don't want to collect them. I used to have an extensive Christmas market collection. I collected them for years. And then I realized I never used them. So I got rid of all of them. And now I just have a few from the last market, from our last market trip. But when you order it, you get the mug and then you pay for the glue line, but you also pay a deposit for the mug. So it's going to cost a little bit more than you think. And it might be another five euros for the mug.

So then when you finish your Glühwein, you bring it back and usually there's a designated place where you return your cup and then they give you your money back. And that's also now very common if you're going to get other things like if you



get a noodle dish or I don't know, some other, it kind of depends on what you get with like crepe. Usually they'll just put it on, you know, something that's either biodegradable or, I feel like we got something that you can actually eat too. Like I've gotten things like on like edible trays. Yeah. But if it's something that's a drink or some other types of food on a real plate, then you pay that deposit. And then you just take it back. Some people don't realize that and then they don't go back and get their money. So definitely go back and get your money.

Good point. Good point. Now we'll talk a little bit about the amazing things you can buy. So what kinds of gifts and decorations are the traditional things to buy at German Christmas markets? And like how can you avoid like the mass produced stuff and get the authentic items.

Yeah, so some really good things to buy are Christmas ornaments because Germany does Christmas, they do Christmas very well. So you can get lots and lots of really great like wooden and straw ornaments. Like almost all of our Christmas ornaments are from Germany and I've collected a lot of them from Christmas markets over the years. So Christmas ornaments, figurines, decorations, wooden pyramids. Those wooden smokers. You know, do you know what those are? Yeah, like you put the little incense in it. Yeah, those are really cute. You can get those. So there's lots of things like that.

You can also get wool items. And then at some of the bigger, very more touristy markets in the center of town, especially in bigger cities, they will have more mass produced stuff. And then you'll even see things like brooms and, you know, like cleaning products and stuff. So that can be a little bit disappointing. You'll see those at a lot of different markets throughout the year. So you do have to be very careful now because there are a lot of mass produced items. So you can ask, where is this made? If it's really cheap, it's probably not handmade. But you can always ask. And then you can go out to the markets that are smaller and are not in the city center. You know, like, sometimes you will find handmade stuff in the city center markets. But



I have found if I go to the markets that are a little bit more artsy, or are more local, then you're more likely to get local vendors. But, you know, you have to like if you want to get handmade, like really get handmade stuff, it can be harder to find now, you know, and it's expensive. It's expensive to buy that stuff.

There's so much to buy, honestly. It was the first destination we stopped at on our multi-country trip around Europe, and we did in December, and I wasn't allowed to buy anything, which is really hard, because there's some amazing, beautiful Christmas decorations I wanted. So I will be going back to buy some of those. I'm just thinking about somebody planning an itinerary to Germany, which obviously, you're the master at. What's the best way to fit Christmas markets into their itinerary?

So if you're going to Germany, anytime during the Christmas markets are open, it's very easy because they're everywhere. So you can either approach it where you decide which markets you absolutely want to go to. Maybe you want to go to the medieval market in Esslingen and then you want to go to Munich because it's not that far away and there's a bazillion markets in the Munich area. That's one way you can do that.

Or if you are going because you want to visit family or friends or there are specific sites you want to see, you can easily find markets that you can go to that are really near those locations.

Perfect. And obviously your planner that's coming out soon as well that will be an excellent tool as well to help with planning. Now, I know people are going to be asking this question, how cold does it get? What should people pack to stay comfortable?

Yeah, you know, it doesn't get as cold as it used to. I have so many memories of wanting to go to the Christmas market because when I was living there we would all just meet up at the Christmas market all the time and you just meet up for a bite to eat or some Glühwein and we always had to strategize like how can I dress as



warmly as possible and then you would drink a lot of Glühwein to stay warm but I don't really find that it's like Germany's not as cold as it used to be. So when we were there last year for the Christmas markets it was really only when we were in southern Germany at the beginning of December when it was cold.

And then as we continued around Germany, we went north, it just got warmer. I think it just kind of warmed up a little bit more at the end of the month. And we weren't even wearing gloves. Sometimes we put a hat on. it just can vary. You just never know. It's not consistently cold anymore like it used to be. So what I recommend is wear layers, bring, I mean, that's what we do. We just bring layers and then we can, you know, take things on or off as needed.

You don't need to have like this massive winter coat or anything like that. And we live in North Carolina, so we don't have that kind of stuff. So we just wear a lot of clothes. I do recommend bringing rain gear because you never know. It doesn't, like last year it didn't rain all that much actually when we were there in the winter time. But you know, it can be helpful to have that in case it does rain. But definitely bring a hat, bring a scarf, gloves, bring warmer clothes you can wear underneath your clothes in case it does get cold.

Yeah, so we always pack hand warmers because we find those are really useful to have if you get cold fingers. I wear gloves anyway and have hand warmers. I think it was pretty mild. I think the coldest we had was when we were in Helsinki, that was pretty cold. But Germany wasn't too bad at all. Just kind of normal hats, scarf, gloves. They say I always have my hand warmers just in case they're great because they stay warm for 24 hours. And yeah, so we always have loads of those with us.

Now, it was surprisingly warm last year. It was just at the beginning. And we thought when we first arrived, we actually went down to Munich, and that's where it was a little bit colder, and it snowed a little bit. And, and that's where we thought, Oh, yeah, it's gonna be cold. And then it warmed up.



Yeah, that's true. I'll tell you what the one thing I think that is always most important for me is thinking about my footwear because if it does get icy, if it does get cold and get icy, then the pavements can get slippery. And that's always something I think about really carefully about making sure that I've got footwear that's got a decent grip. Even in the UK, that can be an issue as well if like the pavement just has to go below zero and then you've got that ice and it's a little bit more slippery. We do get a lot of snow actually in Finland so that was interesting in Helsinki but didn't get any snow in Germany but yeah it was a pretty mild Christmas I think because we weren't hungry for it and it was fairly mild.

Yeah that's a really good point about the shoes so I usually bring a pair of boots and often now I just bring like little ankle boots and then and then I bring a pair of Nikes that are really really comfortable and I highly recommend bringing something comfortable because you're walking so much and you're standing, you know, the Christmas markets, you're standing, you're walking, you know, you're not always sitting very often. And we've been getting Nike type shoes that are waterproof. And then we have wool socks. I really like merino wool. I have those full out, like all of my travel clothes are now merino wool. I really like it. Now some people don't, but I really love it. I wear it in the summer and the winter. You can layer it. It's great. So I have warmer socks and then I have less warm socks and I just kind of decide what to wear. But the waterproof shoes really do help.

Yeah, that's a good point. Now, are there any common mistakes visitors make at Christmas markets and how can they avoid them?

That's a good question. One of the things that I see is that people try to cram in way too many Christmas markets and they try to just consume as many markets as they can. And they'll go to 10 markets in one place in just a couple of days. I don't recommend that because that's kind of the opposite of the goal of the markets. The point of the markets is to go and slow down and enjoy and meet up with your friends



and just bask in the season and the vibe and enjoy the beauty of it and the food and to relax.

I know it's hard because you want to see all the markets. But when we've done this, because we were doing travel research, so we were going to as many markets as we could during the day. And we had to slow down a little bit and say we want to actually enjoy these. So when you're planning your trip, do some research to really decide which markets are your top priority. And if you decide that you want to go to others, do that. But don't try to cram so many in. Go and relax, enjoy, slow down at least at some of them and then you'll really get the Christmas market experience.

Yeah, really get this festive spirit as well. Do you have a favorite Christmas market memory or story that you can share from your travels, Cate?

Yeah, so, you know, one of them was what I was mentioning earlier when I was living there. I used to walk through the Christmas market to get home. When I was in university, where I was living, I would walk through the Christmas market every day. So that was really fun. But I just, I remember like, I guess such warm fuzzy memories or feelings, thinking about the memories of when I was living there and I would meet up with friends at night. And we would just stand around with our glühwein and just talking. And it was just, you know, it's just one of those moments where you're just like, this is just so awesome. You know, you're outside. You're with other people and you've got this beautiful surroundings and it just really felt like you really could feel the holidays and the holiday you just get into the holiday spirit and yeah it was really fun.

That's really magical, really magical. Now this is a really hard question but if someone could only visit one Christmas market in Germany which one would you choose for them and why?

That is so hard. Right now, I would lean towards going to Cologne because I really liked that there was a variety of markets and you can very easily see some



traditional markets, some more local markets and that Angel Market that was really pretty.

Yeah, that sounds really cool. I do like the sound of that one for sure. Now, I always end the episode with the same question. So what is your one must-know tip for somebody visiting Germany in December for the first time?

I would just reiterate what I said before, layers, layers, layers, layers. Just pack layers because you never know what it's gonna be like outside, whether it's gonna be cold or warm. And then when you go inside, it's more than likely going to be pretty warm. So you wanna be able to shed those layers when you want to and then be able to put them back on. And then also comfortable shoes because you will be walking and standing everywhere. It's not guaranteed that you'll be able to sit down at any of the markets.

There's a lot of, even if you're getting something to eat, a lot of times there are tables where you stand at those tables, you're not sitting. So wear comfortable shoes.

That's true a lot of standing for sure. And just enjoy being, having the opportunity to go and enjoy those Christmas markets because they really are beautiful. So thank you so much, Cate, for joining us for this episode. I'm gonna put, we'll put links to your planner and your podcast and website in the show notes at globaltravelplanet.com forward slash episode 80.

Also, if you've got some, if you want to get back to us, you've got some comments, you've got a favorite German Christmas market that you enjoy going to, get back to us via SpeakPipe. We always love to hear from you and we'll get back to you as well because we just love to have that chat and find out who it is that's listening to the podcast. But it's great as always to catch up, Cate. And I believe you're going to be in Germany soon. Actually, by the time this episode comes out, you'll be in Germany again.



Yes, we're going back to do another round of Christmas market research.

Wow, so exciting. Well, have a wonderful time and thanks for coming on this week.

Right. Thank you so much. It was really fun.

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