

Special Feature

Christmas Traditions in Bavaria

My daughter Vanessa is married and lives in a small village in South Germany, close to the Austrian border in the east Allgäu area of Bavaria. We have spent time with them during the Christmas markets in Advent and over the Christmas and New Year and it has been fascinating to note some of the different ways that these events are marked. Never say that we are like our European cousins!



encounter with these brushes. After this house visit, the guy dressed as the bishop Nicholas can be found, probably out in the garage, with the other men of the area drinking copious amounts

of beer and schnapps - well away from the eyes of the children of course!

So You had Better be Good

The season really begins on the 6th December with the festival of St Nicholas; he was a bishop and is the patron saint of children. He is revered by them and it is he who brings sackfuls of toys on this date. Sometimes he comes, dressed up of course, to someone's private house to see the children. When he arrives he is given a list of the children's good and bad points throughout the year. This list will be discussed by St Nicholas with the children. They then decide that they must amend their ways in order to receive gifts, if indeed they deserve any at all. Nicholas is accompanied by a 'Grampus', a man creature from the forest, who is disguised in a long fur-like outfit, holding long brushes made of large twigs. So if the children are deemed to have been really naughty, their bottoms will have a (gentle) close

Big, Hairy Beasts go Wild

Different villages have different traditions on December 6th. The strangest that I have seen is in the small village of Aitrang, where my daughter lived for a couple of years. The whole village congregates after dark, at around 6pm, in the main street for what is known as 'Klausentreiben', which literally means the driving out of the 'forest beasts'. Vast amounts of Glühwein and sausages are sold at what is one of the highlights of the village social calendar. First, the Holy Nicholas makes an appearance to talk to all the children and to bring them gifts, normally a chocolate and a tangerine. Suddenly three explosive bangs are let off and the evening really commences. Twenty five of the young men of the village appear dressed as big, hairy beasts of the forest with grotesque animal heads and generally looking very scary. They run through the village carrying sticks, with huge cowbells attached to their backsides and making a lot of noise. Older men that they recognise are beaten on their legs with the sticks. Younger

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children are made to kneel down and recite the Lord's Prayer. Many of the boisterous youngsters taunt the 'Klausen' until they have no option but to show them who is in charge! The partying, bell clanging and beating continues through to the early hours of the morning. We, as English people, watched the whole proceedings with disbelief and decided that they would never get away with it over here - it would certainly be banned! It is not typical of the whole area of Allgäu though, peculiar only to this village. In this predominately catholic area the main celebrations are on the Heilige Abend, Christmas Eve. The children are kept out of the main family room until the evening when the doors are thrown open and for the first time they can see the Christmas tree, decorated by the Christ Child, who also brings the gifts for the children. After that they all have a large family meal and, in the case of my German son-in-law's family, this will be venison. After opening their presents they all go to Midnight Mass.

But the British are Crackers!

Christmas Day is celebrated similarly to our Boxing Day. Many families will meet up with relatives for a big meal. If the weather is suitable many locals will head to the slopes to go skiing or sledging and many will just enjoy the peace. Being a catholic area, all the shops remain most firmly closed and there is no such thing as the Boxing Day Sale rush! My daughter had to search around to find

her turkey and her German guests were amazed at all the trimmings that went with it and of course they were intrigued by the crackers, which they do not have at all. They did consider that there was an awful lot of paper to recycle, something they take very seriously, the jokes were definitely losing something in the translation (I don't think she liked to tell them that they probably weren't that funny to begin with) and they weren't sure whether they really wanted to sit around wearing seriously 'uncool' hats.

The Coming of the Three Kings

When it comes to New Year, or Sylvester as it is called, we were amazed to see that every supermarket was selling fireworks off the shelf to anyone of any age, definitely not under lock and key like here. At midnight the whole sky was alight with rockets and the noise was deafening. There must have been more than one troubled cat or dog around that night.

January 6th is Epiphany, the Coming of the Three Kings. Children dress up as the kings and go around the village visiting different houses. When a house has received a visit the initials of the kings and the date are written on the door and left there throughout the year as a symbol of good luck.

We find it very interesting to see how the traditions vary from ours and while Vanessa embraces it all she does miss home.

Rose Hartley

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