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THE MAN'S MAN GUIDE TO GERMANY

BAMBERG

Bamberg Tourism+Congress

Geyerswörthstrasse, 3
011-49-951-29-76-200

www.bamberg.info

Brauerei Klosterbräu

(Brewery)

Obere Mühlbrücke, 1-3
011-49-951-52265

www.klosterbraeu.de

Brauerei Spezial

(Restaurant/Brewery/Guesthouse)

Obere Königstrasse, 10
011-49-951-24304

www.brauerei-spezial.de

Doubles from \$53

Brauereiausschank Schlenkerla

(Restaurant/Brewery)

Dominikanerstrasse, 6
011-49-951-56060

www.schlenkerla.de

Dieter Morcinek (Tour Guide)

Guntherstrasse, 8
011-49-951-53329

Beer tours from \$27 (includes beer mug, backpack, and five beers)

Spezial Keller (Brewery)

Sternwartstrasse
011-49-951-54887

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TRAVEL FEATURE

A GENTLEMAN'S GERMANY

by KEVIN RAUB

 PRINT THIS PAGE

On a man's man trip to Germany, our writer drinks his way through a few local firewaters.

Most anyone will agree there are certain occasions in life where a cold beer goes a long way. But it's probably more of a guy thing to go a long way for a cold beer. That's precisely why I find myself in one of the most remarkable watering holes I have ever had the privilege of drinking in — the Spezial Keller in Bamberg, Germany — gawking at the views of the single greatest beer-producing city in the world. ¶ Bamberg is for beer lovers. There are 10 historic taverns in this small town (population 70,000), many dating back to the 16th century, and 300-plus breweries in the surrounding countryside (the highest concentration per capita in the world). Many of the beers for which this region is famous are rarely found outside its boundaries. It hardly needs pointing out that Bamberg beer is unparalleled, and brew fans don't think twice about traversing oceans to get hold of some. So grab a buddy (you'll need each other to navigate the cobblestones at night's end) and get acquainted with the holy grail of pub-crawls.

Fly into Frankfurt (we'll get to that later) and Bamberg is a two-and-a-half-hour train ride west into northern Bavaria, but don't tell anyone from Bamberg that. The city sits deep in the staunchly ethnocentric region of Franconia — no Bavarians here — an area that prides itself on, among other things, its beer (insert testosterone-fueled bellow of joy here). As if God were playing some sort of joke on your local swill house, Bamberg is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, having emerged from the bombings of World War II virtually unscathed. As you bar hop through the city's perfectly preserved Old Town (many buildings date back to the Middle Ages), you'll literally drink in the history.

Bamberg's beer culture is as old as the city itself. Yearly consumption in 1450 was said to be 116 gallons per person — that's 1,237 longnecks, folks — none too shabby considering modern soccer wouldn't be invented



Apfelwein Keller
(Restaurant/Apple Winery)
Bergerstrasse, 260
011-49-69-45-21-71

Apfelwein Wagner
(Restaurant/Apple Winery)
Schweizer Strasse, 71
011-49-69-61-25-65
www.apfelwein-wagner.com

Im Blauen Bock
(Restaurant/Apple Winery)
Saalburgstrasse, 36
011-49-69-45-35-36

for another 400 years. These days, Bambergers head in droves every summer to their favorite Keller (German for “cellar”), which can be a tad confusing to visitors. Bamberg Kellers are actually outdoor beer gardens located above the cellars underground, where beer was traditionally stored to keep it cool year-round. Several of Bamberg’s traditional pubs operate Kellers, usually in separate locations from the main brew pub. The Spezial Keller, located high above town on Sternwartstrasse, should be your first stop.

Spezial is one of two taverns in Bamberg that still brew the city’s most famous local beer, Rauchbier (“smoke beer”), a dark, subtly burned-tasting beer whose unique flavor is the result of malt dried over an open beechwood fire. On tap, it is surprisingly light and crisp — an explosion of charred richness rarely seen in American brews. It is a perfect accompaniment to the vistas of Bamberg’s seven hills (the town is often referred to as the Franconian Rome) and its centerpiece, the four-spired Der Bamberger Dom cathedral, a towering mix of Gothic and Roman styles built in 1237. Views like this never tasted so good.

First-time visitors to Bamberg should elicit the services of local beer enthusiast and historian Dieter Morcinek, who considers it a bona fide profession to tour the town’s historical brew pubs with visiting beer hounds (no, really). In all fairness, nobody knows Bamberg brews better than Morcinek, who is an official guide (or Gästefühere) with a specialty in beer for the Bamberg Tourism+Congress. We meet up at Brauereiausschank Schlenkerla, a staple since 1678.

Inside, hand-carved oak beams form the low ceiling; a 19th-century green tile furnace no longer heats the room, but sits otherwise unchanged in the corner. Antlers line the walls as they have for hundreds of years, a Bamberg brew pub tradition. Locals chase traditional cuisine like Bamberger Zwiebel (onions stuffed with mincemeat) and Fränkische Bierhaxe (Franconian leg of pork in a beer sauce) with endless mugs of smoke beer (servers keep them coming until you place a coaster over your mug). The history is palpable.

“Bamberg’s breweries are all owned by families with a long brewing tradition,” explains Morcinek in the short time between gulps. “Anybody of average intelligence can be taught to make beer, but it is the expert knowledge handed down from generation to generation in these families that enables them to make not only good but excellent beer.” Of course, we drink to that.

While smoke beer gets most of the attention from the outside world, it is hardly the only thing brewing in the city. There are some 55 different varieties in town. The oldest brewery, Brauerei Klosterbräu, stakes its reputation on Braunbier (“brown beer”). The rust-colored, slightly sweet beer was first documented in 1333 and, 200 years later, was designated the official brown beer for the town’s religious bishops. Today, locals refer to it as “Bamberger Gold.” It’s so good, drinking it should be a sin.

Many of Bamberg’s brew pubs double as guesthouses, which is either cleverly cruel or a lifesaver, depending on how you look at it. Either way, stumbling to bed is that much easier. For this reason, our last stop is Spezial’s main brew pub in town, where I’m also spending the night. Here I’m introduced to the Stammtisch, a table reserved for regulars, and

“Ungespundetes” Lagerbier, another of Spezial’s brews and perhaps Bamberg’s most interesting one. To make a long story short, Ungespundetes (literally, “unbunged”) means that most of the beer’s carbon dioxide was allowed to escape during the brewing process (as in the old days, when beer was stored in wooden barrels and gas was released through a corked bung hole in order to keep the barrels from exploding under pressure). The unfiltered brew is old school, to say the least. This adherence to a 19th-century style long abandoned by the modernized beer world — wooden barrels are still used in Bamberg today — is a real treat for connoisseurs and worth the trip to Bamberg alone.

With that, I rap my knuckles on the table (the traditional Franconian gesture for calling it a night) and reluctantly wobble upstairs to bed. I ask Morcinek what advice I should take home to the American public about drinking in Bamberg. “You don’t need to know anything about Bamberg beer,” he offers. “Just take a sip. Your sensory organs will tell you that you can’t help but enjoy it.”

I’M BACK ON THE WAGON the next night in Frankfurt, where an altogether different, though equally unique, local firewater is consumed. Dating back to 799, Frankfurters have consumed their beloved Apfelwein (Äbbelwoi or Ebbelwoi in local dialect, and “apple wine” in English), a tart thirst-quencher made from fermented apples that is somewhat of an acquired taste. The good news is, when you’re in Frankfurt, it doesn’t take long to acquire it.

Traditional Äbbelwoi taverns can be found all over town. These colorful establishments echo Bamberg’s brew pubs in decor (low ceilings, antler-adorned walls) but up the ante in rowdiness. Nowhere is that more apparent than at Apfelwein Wagner, one of Frankfurt’s most lively Äbbelwoi taverns. Here, you sit wherever there’s space, which is a great way to meet locals (read: local girls). The apple wine is ordered by the Bembel (a traditional clay jug) and is mixed with lemonade or sparkling water to cut the sourness. Be a man, however, and drink it straight. The girls will be impressed.

After a few here, you’ll love apple wine, so head to Apfelwein Solzer, a considerably quieter and less spacious apple winery that has occupied the same spot on Bergerstrasse for more than 125 years (the Solzer brand itself dates back to 1679). Traditional apple wine accompaniments — like Handkäse mit Musik, a curdled quark cheese doused with vinegar, onions, and caraway seeds — are served up here amid historic German bric-a-brac and antiquated photographs. Like Bamberg, the Bembels keep coming until you scream “Onkel!”

For a happy medium between large and touristy and small and historic, check out the one-woman apple wine show at Im Blauen Bock. Here, Brigitte Weida serves up ladle after ladle of her beloved poison from a giant Bembel front and center. Locals can get raucous a few apples in, but there are considerably fewer people than at Apfelwein Wagner, so if the Bembels start flying, you’ll have more space to run. Weida scribbles your check on the back of a coaster when it’s time to go.

Not that you need an excuse, but Frankfurters actually believe apple wine is good for you. It’s said to ward off heart disease, cancer, and high cholesterol. That logic dictates that if you down enough of it, you can erase

the ill effects of your cigarette habit, your years of broccoli neglect, and your impeccable taste for filet mignon. Of course, your liver will be shot, but you have to die of something, right?

KEVIN RAUB is a San Francisco-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, *the New York Post*, and *FHM*, among others. He has sampled brews from Belgium to the Czech Republic and assures us that Bamberg beats them all.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA BAIER

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