

Hamburg's Festive Cheer

It's chilly, dark winter night a few days before Christmas and my shopping bags, brimming with gift-wrapped presents for family and friends, are nestled comfortably at my weary feet.

Contentedly worn out from hours of hectic traipsing in and out of stores, and jostling with fellow shoppers in their bulky winter wears, I can finally rest and soak up the cheer of Hamburg's *Rathaus*, or townhall, Christmas market.

Just as importantly, I can also soak up a couple of mugs of hot, rich *glühwein* (mulled wine, literally translates as "glowing wine") from one of the market's many cosy stalls, further buoying my sense of cheer and goodwill to man.

Running every year for the duration of advent - the four weeks or so leading up to Christmas, Germany's Christmas markets are a centuries old tradition, and hark back to the times of regular seasonal farmers' markets. These modern manifestations of traditional winter markets have become so popular that two and a half thousand of them spring up in cities, towns, and villages across the country every year.

The beautiful, hanseatic city of Hamburg boasts its fair share of *Weihnachtsmärkte*, temporarily pitched up in squares across the city, and its largest and most popular is undoubtedly the *Hamburger Weihnachtsmarkt*, located in front of its imposing gothic townhall.

Traditionally only local tradespeople were permitted to ply their wares at these markets, but nowadays Hamburg's main Christmas market attracts merchants, selling their ornate yuletide decorations, handicrafts, woodcarvings, pottery, and jewellery, as well as food and beverages, from across Germany and Austria.

With its bright and sparkling fairy lights, hanging in the stalls and small boutiques, creating a winter wonderland feeling along the narrow and busy lanes, the market's a great place to come and pick up some extra stocking fillers or a handcrafted decoration, or two, to hang on the tree.

It's also an ideal place to come to celebrate the silly season with friends, family, and workmates.

Smells of cinnamon and spices, of hearty winter foods baking and roasting, linger deliciously in the air, and everywhere you look there are stalls offering the festive crowds sustenance. This being Germany, the sustenance is frequently delivered in some pretty meaty forms; all manner of sausages, thick slabs of roasted pork in wholemeal buns, and plump, juicy meatballs abound.

That's not to say that there's nothing for vegetarians, but the market certainly isn't designed with the health conscious in mind. Rows of toffee apples, sweets, pastries, doughnuts and exquisite handmade pralines beg to be liberated from their glass cases and devoured, or, if you're strong-willed, taken home as gifts.

But, possibly, the main attraction of the market remains the hot, seasonal, and predominantly alcoholic drinks that swell the festive feeling and warm the cockles of the heart. Drinks such as *glühwein*, *eisbrecher* ("icebreaker" – *glühwein*, but with a double shot of rum), or a big

mug of hot chocolate, with or without a shot of amaretto, to sooth away the tiredness of a day's shopping or work.

Hundreds of years ago, weary villagers and peasants, looking to add a bit of light and cheer to the long winter nights, were drawn to the Christmas markets. Centuries on, with a cup of mulled wine warming both my hands and insides, I can see why.