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Celebrating Old-World traditions

— By Susan Waymire, CTC —

Tradition — by definition a custom or belief passed down from generation to generation. Looking at our Christmas traditions, many of them stem from our European heritage... whether that be Dutch, English, Scandinavian, or for myself, German. Being close to my German grandmother during my childhood, I embraced our background, and in college made it part of my major studying the language, history, and culture.

The pinnacle experience for me was to be invited on a marketing internship for a high-tech firm in Germany after I graduated from college. I lived in a small town, Burghausen, a border town on the Salzach River between Germany and Austria, right in the heart of Bavaria.

One of my favorite memories while living there was to experience the “Old-World” Christmas traditions — many originating in Germany and Austria. Being the only American in Burghausen, I became somewhat of a celebrity, embraced by the locals and taken under their wing to experience first-hand their Christmas customs.

To understand some of these beliefs, you need to get a grasp of their version of the characters involved. It’s a little different from our Santa Claus. Saint Nicholas comes on December 6, the Christkindl on December 24. Many of the differences stem back to the Reformation and the division between the Protestants and Catholics during that time.

St. Nicholas is the Catholic patron saint of children, and on Saint Nikolas Day children put their shoes out hoping for them to be filled with sweets and gifts — similar to Santa delivering the stockings. He also travels with Krampus (in other areas of Europe, he goes by different names) the creepy, evil figure who delivers the naughty kids the dreaded lump of coal.

Martin Luther and the Protestants decided they would take Christmas a different direction and introduced Christkindl (an angel-like Christ Child) who later would become Father Christmas or Kris Kringle. Christkindl brings the toys underneath the Christmas tree.

In Bavaria, kids look forward to both days in December — unless they are naughty.

One of my favorite memories was that of the Christkindlmarkets, or Christmas markets

as we know them. Now that we know the key characters, we can now understand the origin of the Christkindlmarkets. The markets were started throughout Germany during the Middle Ages after the Reformation, not only to bring people together for warmth and camaraderie during those dark years, but to also celebrate the Christkindl.

Munich was the first large town in Bavaria to hold their market in the mid-14th century. What better way than food, drink, choirs, and crafts for all of the peasants to come together and celebrate the Advent season. As you enter the marketplace in modern times, you can understand the source of the warmth and light they must have felt centuries ago.

Attending these markets truly awakens the senses...the smell, taste, sights and sounds all come alive. The twinkling lights lacing the booths create the festive look to each of the stalls. Gingerbread men iced perfectly, laid in straw and wrapped in cellophane with hand-embroidered ribbon are just a small example of what to find. Additionally, we find massive numbers of nutcrackers, spiced lebkuchen (ginger-spiced decorated cookies) in hand-stamped tins, handcrafted wooden ornaments and toys, and embroidered clothing and kitchenware set among rows of booths, each displayed with European perfectionism.

The Germans are masters of packaging; all of these items are impeccably wrapped making them irresistible purchases. They could wrap an old shoe and it would be snatched up because of the packaging alone.

Then, there is the food — lots of it, and forget about dieting. Yes, this is the time to sample all of the local favorite dishes. The smell of the vast variety of savory sausages, spaetzle, schnitzel, soft baked pretzels, and crispy potato pancakes, waft throughout the market. Vendors offer either their version of Gluhwein (a hot spiced wine) or the more alcoholic Feuerzangenbowle. This lively libation has a rum-soaked sugar loaf set on fire over a spiced wine and when combined with shopping is lethal to the wallet. Everything looks wonderful after Gluhwein.

Then, for dessert, one may find the crepes,

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The Travel Store - Susan Waymire

‘Tis the season... to plan that 2019 vacation! With the holidays upon us comes a little downtime with the family. It’s an ideal time to start that discussion of “where do we travel next year.” Many cruise, tour and land operators offer great specials during this time of year if your trip is booked by January 31 — discounted or free airfare, shipboard credits, and in some cases free shore excursions.

I can offer advice on when to go, what to pack, which operator to use and how to get there...at little or no extra cost to you! With so many options on the internet, why take a chance on your travel becoming a nightmare when you can have your vacation be seamlessly easy. As a worldwide travel consultant, I have experienced river cruises, expedition cruises, land packages to tropical destinations, and European customized itineraries.

