

## TRAVEL

# Feel the buzz in a German city teeming with rather naughty (and nice) seasonal markets

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**N**OT a fan of cheesy Christmas markets selling over-priced wooden toys, stale gingerbread decorations and weak gluhwein that even teetotalers could happily drink? Nor am I. All that said, nobody does Christmas markets like the Germans and Austrians and if you hit a good one it could make even Ebenezer break into a Yule log.

Germany's second city has some of the world's best "Weihnachtsmärkte" and as it's an easy hop on easyJet from Edinburgh I took myself off to Hamburg last weekend for a dose of Teutonic Gemütlichkeit.

OK, I fess up, the first of the city's 30 Christmas markets to catch my attention was the Erotic Christmas Market – what a laugh! Suspicious buzzing under the Christmas tree this year? That might make Granny smile after a few sherries.

Mind you, I didn't fare so well on other Christmas markets as most of them weren't running. They will be by this first weekend of December, but November 26 this year was Toten Sonntag when the Germans honour their dead relatives so no revelry on that day. (Shame the Hamburg Tourist Board omitted to tell me.)

Come to that don't expect much open on any Sunday as the Germans respect the Sabbath as much as any Wee Free so no shops open at all. If you're going specifically for the city's Christmas markets, research dates and times as they vary hugely. Hamburg is widely known as Sin City. The plethora of clubs and sex workers around the infamous Reeperbahn still do a good trade, and interestingly, the self-styled "naughtiest Christmas market in Germany" is generally busier than the others. It's right in the middle of the St Pauli red-light district, in Spielbudenplatz and is the obvious go-to to pick up Christmas essentials such as glass willies for the tree and chocolate boobs for the coffee course (beats After Eights).

Sounds super-tacky, but actually, I found it all rather funny; silly, but overall pretty harmless fun. And it has to be said, the "Willy Tree" was a thing of rare ceramic beauty. This market (unsurprisingly) runs late into the night and has a show stage with nightly live music programme and an open-air art gallery.

The largest of the city's 30 Christmas markets is the Winterwald which resembles a forest and is located around the Mönckebergbrunnen and on the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Platz.

The White Magic Market on the Jungfernstieg, on the promenade at the Binnenalster – the large artificial lake which encloses the city – is also definitely worth a visit.



Then there's the Fleet Christmas Market, which is surrounded by canals on Fleet island. On that subject, when in Hamburg, do take advantage of the water. Still a major European port, the city is also criss-crossed with canals and the centre is surrounded by rivers and artificial lakes.

Hamburg, of course, was a seminal location for the development of The Beatles so it felt only right for me to pay homage on a Beatles Tour. It's no exaggeration to say that it was in Hamburg that the Beatles really got their act together and learnt how to play as a band – "It was our apprenticeship," as George Harrison said.

It's where they made their first recording and it was here that John, Paul and George first played together with Ringo Starr.

That performance, 60 years ago, was at the Indra Club – a dingy little dive that doubled as a strip joint on the fringes of Hamburg's infamous Reeperbahn red-light

**Hamburg has 30 Christmas markets including an 'erotic' version selling tacky-sounding wares that make for silly but harmless fun**

PHOTOGRAPH: JORG MODROW

district. You'll see all of this on the tour.

While Hamburg isn't chocolate-box like Munich or heaving with history like Berlin, it has a charm all of its own.

It's gritty, wealthy, has impressive architecture, wide green expanses and beautiful canals, lakes and rivers.

Surprisingly, Hamburg has more bridges than London, Amsterdam and Venice put together and the centrepiece of the city is the Alster lake. The Hafencity is an extraordinary district – a huge urban development on a 21st-Century scale, where the maritime-inspired Elbphilharmonie concert hall dominates the skyline.

The busy harbour is part of the character of this city, so a tour of it is part and parcel of getting to grips with Hamburg. Every year, about 13,000 seagoing vessels from all over the world enter the second-biggest European port.

Back in the city centre, the area around

the Rathaus, or town hall, is best enjoyed on foot. This neo-Renaissance edifice was built in the 19th century and is the seat of the senate and city parliament.

The Fontenay Hotel was my chosen base. It has an attractive setting beside Alster Lake, giving a tranquil out-of-town feel, yet you're only a 10 minute walk to the very centre of Hamburg. Add in comfortable, spacious bedrooms, excellent Michelin-starred dining and a fabulous spa with an infinity pool and you really don't need to look anywhere else for a great base. It is in the well-heeled district of Rothenbaum and the Neuer Wall, with the Kunsthalle and Bucerius Kunstforum museums only minutes away. Walk five minutes more to the Museum für Völkerkunde and if you want to use the city's brilliant public transport system you're a 10-minute walk to Dammtor station and Stephansplatz U-Bahn.

## Travel notes

Double rooms at the Fontenay hotel start from £290 in low season [thefontenay.de](http://thefontenay.de)

[hempels-musictour.com](http://hempels-musictour.com)

The hotel has some interesting architectural and interior design touches, though I felt there was too much high-tech in the rooms and wished they'd thought of those visiting from abroad who require electrical adaptors as it was impossible to fit any in, all bar one measly socket, located far away from the bed.

The real selling point for me was the huge Fontenay Spa with its impressive pool, Finnish sauna (nude only – very Teutonic), an aroma-quartzite steam room and ice fountain. The Alster makes an ideal five-mile jogging route, which you just might need if you eat the amazing seven-course degustation dinner in the excellent Lakeside Restaurant – a haven of Michelin-starred calm and outstanding cuisine. Expect nothing but the best (and amazing amuse-bouches that seem to go on and on), followed by dishes such as Japanese Wagyu beef, and an impressive range of wines available by the glass.

**L**OOKING for another fantastic restaurant while in this city of gourmards? Head for the Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten. The ultimate Christmas hotel with fabulous decorations, complete with animated reindeer to greet you at the door, it also boasts Art Deco Michelin-starred restaurant, The Grill. On the menu: oysters and caviar, whole sole or steak tartare, as well as special cuts cooked in the infrared steak grill.

The Grill's popularity means pre-booking is essential. It'll be worth it. Truly a super culinary experience with delightful staff.

Hamburg is a vibrant and fascinating city. Great for Christmas, but, actually, it's great for any time. This is modern Germany at its best and worthy of admiration at just how everything "works".

(Just remember to take plenty of 50 cent coins as every loo has a resident assistant and no coin, no pee. One other bit of local advice: Hamburg airport is an under-staffed nightmare, and expect very long queues for us no-longer EU members on entry and exit.

Also, do not waste money on the double decker red sightseeing tour. The blaring German commentary on the bus audio system will completely drown out any earplug translation you have. Apparently the blue and yellow buses have English commentary ... ach well, you live and learn.

## TRAVEL EXTRA



### COSY RETREATS FOR A WINTER ESCAPE

Snuggling up in front of a fire is the ideal way to spend a winter weekend. Fortunately, you don't have to travel far to find wilderness or a cosy place to rest; both are right here under our noses.

Photographer Holly Farrier has scoured the country and her new book, *British Cabins and Hideaways* (£22.95) is guaranteed to spark a warm glow.

#### EAGLE BRAE, STRUY, CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Contemplating a Highland fling? This handsome collection of 10 rustic log cabins is perfectly placed for an authentic rural getaway, immersed in 8,000 acres of rugged scenery close to both Inverness and Loch Ness and with traditional designs that are crafted entirely by hand – down to their chunky tree-trunk frames.

Cabins sleep two to six guests, making them as great for couples' retreats as they are family holidays or mates' escapes, but the capacious Loxia, Aquila and Buteo cabins are particularly suited to groups (boasting mezzanine log beds that are ideal for children), as well as a peaceful pond-side location. In addition to daily visits from the resident deer, guests can expect surround-sound birdsong and cinematic scenery, with bountiful on-site outdoor pursuits to choose from. The real McCoy of Highland holidays.

**How:** A seven-night stay for two from £1,518. Visit [eaglebrae.co.uk](http://eaglebrae.co.uk)

#### WATERFALL CABIN, CAMBRIAN MOUNTAINS, WALES

If it's full-on fairy tale magic you're after, head to this enchanting off-grid hideaway, whose setting is so idyllic you half expect a community of anthropomorphic mice to emerge from tiny doors in the trees.

Positioned within the 1,000-acre

Hafod Estate, this filmic stilted cabin offers everything you could possibly need for a romantic getaway, with a wood-fired outdoor hot tub, inviting hayloft bed and a suspended stargazing net where you can make like the Welsh and cwtch (that's cuddle) under a twinkling sky.

All stays last for three or four nights, giving you ample time to sample the local pottery's throwing lessons, the nearby pubs and spectacular hikes around the estate, though if you'd prefer to spend the duration enjoying a lack of obligations, phone signal and other humans ... well, it's perfect for that too.

**How:** From £160 per night (sleeps two). Visit [kiphideaways.com](http://kiphideaways.com)

#### TREES AT TUGHALL, NORTHUMBERLAND

With their wooden construction, ancient woodland location, and powerful connection with the ever-changing surroundings thanks to their huge view-framing windows, it's not hard to see why the owners of this handsome trio of cabins named them after trees. All identical – though with diverse views – and all following Tughall's guiding principle of distraction-free luxury, these two-person retreats offer everything you could need from a country escape and absolutely nothing you don't, being gloriously free from clutter both inside and out.

Magnificently remote, located on a working farm an hour north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and on the edge of the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the cabins Ash, Hawthorn and Willow each offer a superb base from which to explore England's northernmost county with its dramatic coastlines and magnificent fortresses.

**How:** From £310 per night (sleeps two). Visit [treesattughall.com](http://treesattughall.com)

SARAH MARSHALL