

Going Places

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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE

In Munich, beer for all seasons

Southern German city anchors area of mountains, castles, pristine villages

BY JOHN BORDSEN
Travel Editor

John Wetstone, 54, operates John's Bavarian Tours (www.johns-bavarian-tours.com) in Munich, Germany, where he has lived since 1978. He grew up in Atlanta.

Q. What's late spring weather like there?

Today was beautiful. We were over in Austria, and there was still snow in the mountains. We have cooler periods that come and go, and I always tell customers to dress like onions — bring a fleece jacket with some kind of shell over it. This is because it can be real warm during the day but cool quickly when the sun goes down. The weather changes.

Q. What's the trick to getting a handle on Munich?

If they come to me, we usually do a city tour — drive around the entire area by car. Another way, which is really inexpensive, is to do a tour on a big, double-decker bus. What I offer costs more, but some people like having a private driver.

Either way, use that tour to get an idea of what you want to see. If you're on a tight budget, do a walking tour. If you need someone to take care of your comfort and translating, get a guide. English isn't a problem in Munich, but once you're out of town, you could run into language difficulties.

Munich to this part of Germany is like Paris is to France. Munich is the only big city; outside Munich, you'll find villages.

It's possible to drive most anywhere, but you'll need to wear walking shoes — not city shoes — if you want to go out into the Bavarian Alps, which surround Munich.

You'll go out of town to see King Ludwig's castle of Neuschwanstein. Some want to see the concentration camp in Dachau, which is about 18 miles from Munich.

There are a lot of small villages within an hour or two by car. They're not well-known and aren't tourist areas, but they will blow you away. These are impressive places that date to between 900 and 1200.

Q. Can you name a couple cool villages?

Landshut. Landberg. If you go over the border to Austria, which isn't far, there are a lot of tiny, tiny villages. One place, Ratzenburg, is very impressive.

These medieval towns are a little off the beaten path and still have a romantic flair. People come to Europe to "visit the old country," and you can do it in these villages.

I've had really impressive experiences at places in the middle of nowhere — especially at churches. You can see music students playing songs that are 700 years old, or people reading aloud from books printed in the 1500s.

Q. What about must-sees in Mu-



ANN SCHOLZ — KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

The Nyphenburg Castle is an example of the magnificent architecture you can see in Munich.

nich?

The main place is the Hofbrauhaus — the famous beer hall. It's very popular with tourists, but no Munich person would probably go there.

Beer gardens are popular. A lot of people want to go to the Olympic Tower: You can see the whole city from up there.

The center of Munich is filled with impressive churches, mostly rococo and very decorative. You can go in them for no cost, and they have impressive artwork. Plus, they're all within walking distance.

If I'm not working, I just don't drive. I find I can ride a bicycle around central Munich and get where I'm going just as fast. You can rent bicycles for a very reasonable fee. Just get a good map of the city and take off on two wheels. There are bike paths everywhere.

Q. Does Neuschwanstein — Bavarian King Ludwig II's fairy-tale castle — live up to its billing?

The castle itself is very, very impressive, but you have to be fit to go there because you'll climb stairs and walk hills. You shouldn't go if you have a hard time walking.

The most impressive way to visit is to first go to the castle of his parents — Hohenschwangau, which was bought and restored by Ludwig's father, Maximilian II. This is where Ludwig grew up and spent most of his life. From there, he looked out through a telescope and watched his castle of Neuschwanstein being built.

You can get tickets for both places at the Hohenschwangau ticket office. You'll have to coordinate your time a little bit — there's about a two-hour gap between tours. And keep in mind that during the summer season, it can get very busy.

Q. What's the minimum length of stay needed to really get a flavor of the Munich area?

Allow at least one or two days for the city, and realize that Monday is the day that most museums are closed in Germany. If you really want to enjoy your visit and aren't in a hurry, allow a

week to 10 days. Most guests are with me three or four days. In four days, you can cover a lot, but you'll need to do it with a car. Traffic can be a nightmare if you rent a car. Get tips on avoiding rush hour jams when you get your car.

Q. Where do Munichers go for vacation?

Most go to Italy because it's so close. Italian food is popular, and so is good red wine. Tuscany is one of the most expensive areas in Italy, and it's the most-visited by people from the Munich area. I'm there once or twice a year to buy wine.

Q. Are there beer seasons?

Right now, it's time for mai-bock — a relatively light golden beer. It's extremely strong. Many say they get bad headaches from it.

In summer, they drink weissbier — "wheat beer" — in tall glasses. In fall, you have Oktoberfest.

In winter, there's a dark beer called doppelbock — "double bock." It's heavy, syrupy and a killer beer. Drink too much, and you'll pass out. They'll carry you away.

Q. Is the food seasonal, too?

Not really. But real Bavarian food is quite heavy, and if the weather is hot, it's not a good idea to eat a lot of pork and those big dumplings. If the food's too heavy for the heat, many here eat Greek or Italian food.

DROP US A LINE

Know someone who lives in an interesting city or country who would like to give us the inside line on visiting there? E-mail, in English, jbordsen@charlotteobserver.com.