In the Holiday Spirit

German-inspired Christmas markets are popping up across the U.S.

By Susan Lanier-Graham

Glittering lights reflecting off the snow. The smell of hot spiced wine and gingerbread. The sound of Christmas carols and the jingle of bells. German-inspired Christmas markets are popular throughout the U.S. and are the perfect way to usher in the holiday season and get into the Christmas spirit.

Christkindlesmarkt
History
The original Christkindlesmarkt dates to the mid-1500s in Nuremburg, Germany. Originally a way for folks to stock up on food and supplies for the long, cold winter months, the markets soon became part of the gift-giving tradition surrounding Christmas.

In Germany, Austria and parts of Eastern Europe, the traditional gift-bearer is the Christkind (Christ child), a golden-haired angel dressed in white and gold and usually depicted as a female. The German Christkindlesmarkt opens each year with the appearance of the Christkind, who reads a prologue and welcomes guests to the holiday season.

While markets traditionally ran only during Advent, most now begin Thanksgiving weekend (or sooner) and run until Christmas Eve.

Not-to-miss Fun
Christmas markets are an ideal place to get into the Christmas spirit. There are usually an assortment of handcrafted gifts—from toys, ornaments and pottery to baked goods and clothing—ideal for finding something a little bit eclectic for those tough customers on your shopping list.

Be sure, however, to treat yourself. A Christmas market is the perfect place to nibble on lebkuchen (gingerbread cookies), sip glühwein (hot spiced wine) and take home a stollen.
(German Christmas bread). Other favorites often include marzipan, bratwurst, pretzels, baked apples and roasted chestnuts. Those lovely aromas wafting through the market almost scream holiday spirit.

Markets usually offer great entertainment, from Christmas carols or German folksongs to local favorites. Many of the markets also have ice rinks where you can strap on a pair of skates and do figure eights on a crisp December night.

21st Annual Christkindlmarket Chicago
The Christkindlmarket in Chicago is directly inspired by the Nuremberg market. First held on Pioneer Court in 1996, and now downtown in Daley Plaza, this is a Chicago tradition.

The holiday village in Chicago embodies Christmas. Visitors can find handmade ornaments of chiseled wood or blown glass. There are classic German gifts from cuckoo clocks to nutcrackers. Don’t worry if you’re not after a German-themed gift, local vendors offer jewelry, clothing and home decor.

Guests can sample candies—including delectable German chocolates and flakey pastries—along with savory treats and drinks. The glühwein even comes in a souvenir cup. Be sure to catch the craftsmen who demonstrate their skills. The wood carver is always a favorite.

The Christkind will be part of the Grand Opening Ceremony and at the market every Wednesday and Saturday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. for photos. The market is open Nov. 18 through Dec. 24.

12th Annual Downtown Holiday Market, Washington
The 2016 Downtown Holiday Market in Washington takes place in front the Smithsonian American Art Museum & National Portrait Gallery. The festival village brings the work of more than 180 regional artisans, crafters and businesses to holiday shoppers. Each day, about 60 exhibitors rotate their wares. Many of the shops offer fair-trade imports and gifts from sustainable resources.

Shoppers wandering through the pop-up shops, should be sure to grab a cup of hot cocoa and a sweet treat. Find the booth for Alexa’s Empanadas and try one of the cinnamon churros dipped in chocolate sauce, putting the smells and tastes of Christmas all into one delicious bite.

Guests can also stroll along and listen to a variety of entertainment each day, from rock, jazz and bluegrass to gospel, folk and holiday favorites. The event is open from noon to 8 p.m. daily from Nov. 25 through Dec. 23.
16th Annual Denver Christkindl Market
The 16th Annual Denver Christkindl Market runs Nov. 18 through December 23 at Skyline Park in downtown Denver. Organized by the German American Chamber of Commerce and the German Cultural Foundation, the Denver market is all about Old World charm and festivities. It really is a slice of Germany all dressed up for the Colorado holidays.

The Grand Opening Ceremony is Nov. 22 and the Christkind will make her appearance for the event. Guests can keep an eye out for the golden gift-giver throughout the festival; she may put in an appearance at any time.

Visitors can stroll through the traditional Christmas village, sampling authentic food and drink while enjoying both traditional holiday songs and classic German music. Pick up warm roasted nuts, Bavarian salted pretzels, kringles (Scandinavian pastries), strudels and more. There are toys from Austria, paper stars from Germany, pottery from Poland, organic oils from the Colorado mountains, Alpaca clothing from Canada and more.

There are a variety of special events at the Denver Christkindl Market. The little ones will enjoy story time in the holiday tent every Tuesday and Thursday at 2 p.m. To celebrate St. Nikolaus Day, the Christkind and St. Nikolaus will visit the festival from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Dec. 5 and 6.

Planning Your Trip
21st Annual Christkindlmarket, Chicago
Run through Dec 24. Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Eve. Admission is free. Daley Plaza, 50 W. Washington Street, Chicago. christkindlmarket.com

12th Annual Downtown Holiday Market, Washington
Runs through Dec 23. Hours: noon to 8 p.m. daily. Admission is free. On F Street in front of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery between 7th and 9th streets, across from the Verizon Center. downtownholidaymarket.com

16th Annual Denver Christkindl Market
Run Nov. 18 through Dec. 23. Hours: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thanksgiving Day. This year, the market is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. for the final five days, Dec. 19–23. Admission is free. On the 16th Street Mall at Arapahoe Street in Skyline Park, Denver. denverchristkindlmarket.com
For vacation-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

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