

Munich's beer gardens a must for travelers

By Ginger Kuenzel
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If you are planning a trip to Munich, you won't want to miss a visit to one of the many beer gardens. Although other cities have tried to copy this form of restaurant, none have been able to duplicate the atmosphere of Munich's "real thing."

What makes those in Munich unique? For one thing, at most of the larger beer gardens here, you can bring your own picnic. For a budget-conscious traveler, this provides an ideal alternative to often expensive dining out. Most of the beer gardens are large graveled areas under the shade of huge old chestnut trees in a park-like atmosphere where you can soak up a feeling of Munich life as the Munich residents know and love it, away from the tourist attractions.

There are two ways to have a meal in a beer garden. Either you can shop in a grocery store for picnic items and bring them along, or you can choose from the assorted delicacies offered at the stands in the beer gardens. These include grilled items such as chicken, mackerel on a skewer, sausages, pork roast or spareribs in addition to cheese, radishes and tremendous pretzels.

All of the food offerings in the beer gardens are loaded with salt, which may be bad for your health but assures that you'll need plenty of beer to quench your thirst. Since the Bavarians contend that those who don't drink enough beer get kidney stones, I guess the salt isn't such a bad idea.

Next, find yourself a table. The ones with tablecloths are reserved for people who want to order a meal and have it served. But the real "beer gardeners" would never sit there. If you can't find an empty table, it's acceptable (and much more interesting) to sit at one that already is occupied.

A waitress probably will come by soon carrying a dozen or more liter mugs of beer. A raise of your finger will indicate to her that you will relieve her of part of her load. She'll want you to pay as you go, and although the tip is included in the price of the food in Germany, it is the custom to round the price up to the nearest Deutschmark.

Don't be surprised if she sounds like she's using words of which your high-school German teacher would not have approved. My husband used to tell me that the waitresses always only sound like they're in a bad mood, but now that I can understand

Bavarian, I realize the tone fits the words. Take no offense — I've decided this nastiness is a talent honed and perfected through years of hard work. They don't really mean it, but it's part of their image. There is even a word for it here: *granteln*.

Now go to one of the many stands and buy a sampling of the delicious offerings (assuming you have not brought your own meal with you). By this time you've probably worked up a good appetite and, more important, a liter-sized thirst. It's hard to think of anything more refreshing at this point than a long gulp of that famous Bavarian beer.

Everyone has his own favorite beer garden. Mine is the Hirschgarten, located near the Nymphenburg Castle. Unlike the U.S. bars, a German establishment is supplied by only one brewery and thus serves only that brand of beer. The brand in Hirschgarten is Munich's best, Augustiner. Additionally, this beer garden is surrounded by a huge park, where you might enjoy a walk between beers to make sure you still can navigate. There are several playgrounds within the park, one of which even has lots of spouting water to cool you off on those hot afternoons. The other attraction in Hirschgarten, the Hirsch (deer), are in a fenced-in area beside the beer garden.

The beer garden at the Chinese Tower Garden also is worth a visit. Located in the English Garden, Munich's huge central park, this beer garden offers live Bavarian music on weekends. An additional attraction is a functioning antique wooden carousel.

Or take the subway line S-7 to Grosshesselohe and enjoy the music in the Waldwirtschaft Grosshesselohe. Here you can listen to world-renowned jazz groups in a woody setting. The restaurant has been licensed since the 15th century. It is said that a record was set here on Pentecost in the year 1900 when more than 3,245 gallons of beer were served on a single day.

If you want to stay downtown, the beer garden at Munich's marketplace (Viktualienmarkt) is a good place to enjoy your picnic lunch. The market is a colorful collection of stands selling, among other things, flowers, vegetables, fruit, sausages, cheese, bread and rolls — in short, everything you need for your picnic. The market is not the cheapest place in town, but the variety, the quality and the atmosphere surely make it worth a visit.

For those who want to make an excursion

out of the city, take the S-5 subway line to the end station, Herrsching. The town is located on a lovely lake, Ammersee. From here you can either hike up to "the holy mountain" or take a bus to the monastery, where the monks have been brewing and serving their beer for the past 500 years. The "Dunkle Bock" (strong dark beer) makes the pilgrimage worthwhile.

Another outing to enjoy is a trip to the Weihenstephan Brewery in Freising. This can be reached with the S-1 subway line. Here, at the world's oldest brewery, the Benedictine monks started brewing their beer in the year 1040. Today, Weihenstephan is home to Munich University's Department of Agriculture. The famous beer garden delicacy, Obatzde, was invented here and is definitely worth sampling. The spread consists of Camembert cheese, butter, onions, sweet paprika and a shot of beer.

Of course, these are just a few of the many beer gardens in and around Munich, and you may happen upon one of your own that becomes your favorite.

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