Brewery heaven in Bamberg

T"h's smells like smoked ham. In fact, it's a bit like a ham sandwich in a glass.” My wife, loving the taste of the mug of dark brown beer.

Across the table, a man tells us: “For sure, our team was disappointing at the World Cup, but what we Germans really do best is beer!”

We agree. The Bratwurst and bread are excellent, but the beer is a revelation. Smoky, chewy and deliciously addictive. For Schlenkerla’s Genuine Schlenkerla smoked beer is, unlike any brew we have ever tasted.

We are in Bamberg, sitting elbow-to-elbow with mothers and fathers, families and friends in the dark beam Schlenkerla Tavern. Around the world, this city is known for its symphony orchestra; in Germany, it is synonymous with Rauchbier, or "smoke beer."

This special brew virtually died out 300 years ago, but two local breweries still make it the old-fashioned way. The unusual taste comes from a long brewing process: instead of boiling barley in a kiln, the grain is spread out on netting over a beechwood fire. The resulting malt retains a smokiness that flavors the beer itself.

North of Bamberg, in Franconia, an attractive region of Germany little known to British visitors and home to one third of all the country’s breweries. Built on seven hills and split by the River Regnitz, the city has meandering streets, lined with both half-timbered and highly decorated baroque houses. On top of one hill stands the 1,000-year-old Imperial Cathedral of St Peter and St George, a reminder of the prince bishops who ruled for centuries. More worldly are the city’s nine beer taverns, where the city’s famous ‘smoke beer’ from grinning clockwork and statues of the Madonna at street corners to the 728 flowers and herbs painted on the chapel ceiling at St Michael’s Monastery. Aping pilgrims from the past, I stop to go through the tiny arch beneath Bishop Otto’s tomb, as the elderly lady assures me: “Done daily, it cuts back pain.”

Bambergers claim similar medicinal properties in their beer. “We certainly recommend a Vorder Thirn [Thirn] as an isonic drink after sports activities,” says Stephan Michael, head brewer at the 300-year-old Mahrs-Brau-Keller.

In any conversation about German beer, one word always crops up: Reinheitsgebot. "This is the Bavarian purity law introduced in 1516," Michel explains. "Because of that, we use only four ingredients: water, malt, yeast, and hops. All others are sourced within 100 miles." Mahrs is the most atmospheric Winzhaus (pub) in town, serving food as well as beer at the communal wooden table. We smile, point at space seats and are welcomed in. The menu partners beer with everything: salad with a wheat beer dressing, pork in a dark beer sauce, and apple slices deep-fried in beer batter.

Once everyone speaks English, advice is plentiful. To wet our whistle, we must try Mahrs’ Unserer-Hofbräu, a cloudy, unfiltered lager. Thankfully, ordered it, all we have to do is say: "U!" ("Oh!"). Like any good German beer, ours comes with a thick, creamy head that sticks to the tips of our noses.

Like Rauchbier, traditional beers are becoming rarer. Michel admits that he has to steer a tricky course between tradition and modern tastes. “We have to find the sugar-water generation. Beers are sweeter and malter today,” he admits. "Use classic techniques, with new strains of hops, such as with our hops, we can’t buy, but we can breed, Bamberg."

Just as Londerders head for riverside pubs in summer, Bambergers make for the city’s beer cellars. But, instead of going underground, they drink “auf den Keller” on top of the cool cellars that are dug into the hillsides.

While the beer ferments below, locals sit in the sun, enjoying the sun, and polishing off a Finescher (German wine glass) or two. What they order depends on the season: nosing a Finescher only during Lent, a Pils in spring, a Bock to keep out the chill in autumn.

Hiking through the nearby Franconian Switzerland hills is recommended for working off our excess of pork and beef. We head for a hike on the Gunter Toy for the highest density of brewing per capita: four for 1,500 inhabitants. At the Brauereigasthof Rothenbach, we collect a map of the eight-mile trail and a hiker’s pass that has to be stamped at each brewery to qualify for our souvenir certificate. “Just let me have one for the trail,” suggests the hiking companion...

Bamberg basics

Getting there
- Air Berlin (017) 0671 500 0737, airberlin.com
- Flixbus from Nuremberg to Bamberg, the price comparison website: www.craigtravel.co.uk offers a week’s car hire from Nuremberg Airport from £137.

Getting around
- Deutsche Bahn 0871 880 80 56, charges apply; www. dbahn.de (operates from five services from Nuremberg to Bamberg, the price comparison website: www.craigtravel.co.uk offers a week’s car hire from Nuremberg Airport from £137.

Bamberg’s famous ‘smoke beer’ from grinning clockwork and statues of the Madonna at street corners to the 728 flowers and herbs painted on the chapel ceiling at St Michael’s Monastery launches from $1.74.

Further information
- Franconia, www.franconia.de
- Bamberg, www.bamberg.de

Guide in English
- Www.franconia-beerguide.com

Geyserwirthbaversch" offers a self-guided Bier-Schmoker tour, with panettone about Bamberg’s nine breweries, a glass mug, a souvenir backpack and a coffee in the form of five beers (€20). There is also a Brewery Hitchy Trail – collect Match & Miller’s pass from the Braugasse Rothenbach, Aubess (091 9 99 9202).

© The Beer Festival (August 16-24, www. sandenwaedle), in the Little Venice part of town. This year marks the 10th annual Sandenwaedle festival. The river, the seven days of entertainment include duck races and Fischersteine (fishing on poles), campers and beer. The Schlenkerla brewery sets up a beer garden in the town nearby Danube Hof, the courtyard of a former monastery.