

# Brewery Heaven in Bamberg

**T**his smells like smoked ham. In fact, it's a bit like a ham sandwich in a glass." My wife takes another sip from 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, bread and sausage."

We agree: the *Bratwurst* and bread are excellent, but the beer is a revelation. Smoky, chewy and dangerously addictive, *Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier*, genuine Schlenkerla smoke 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-beamed 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 the malting process: instead of drying barley in a kiln, the grain is spread out on netting over a beechwood fire. The resulting malt retains a smokiness that flavours the beer itself.

North of Nuremberg, Bamberg is 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 brewpubs. "Half our visitors start at the cathedral, then go to the Schlenkerla Tavern. The other half start at the Schlenkerla - and never make it to the cathedral," our drinking companion tells us. "In Franconia, we are passionate about beer. There are 80 breweries within 15 miles of here."

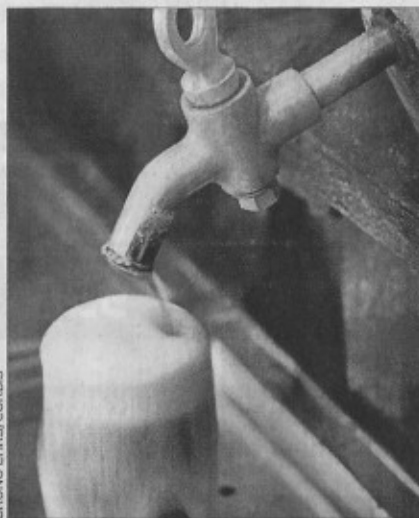
In Bamberg alone, we could try 50 different beers: hoppy, fruity, malty. Some are bottle-fermented, others are served straight from the barrel. For those who worship at the altar of real ale, Franconia is heaven.

But even if you don't like beer, Bamberg

demands a visit. Suffering minimal damage during the Second World War, the city's heritage survives, with more than 2,400 listed buildings. Indeed, the whole community is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Wherever we go, signs recall the past. Next door to Schlenkerla, the *Bäckerei Seel* has baked bread and croissant-like *Hörnle* since 1427. On *Karolinenstrasse*, the *Hofapotheke* (chemist) has been filling prescriptions since 1453. Even older, on an island in the middle of the river, is the half-timbered, 14th-century Old Town Hall, leaning against its ornate rococo annexe.

Elaborate decoration is everywhere,



Bamberg's famous 'smoke beer'

from grinning doorknobs and statues of the Madonna at street corners to the 578 flowers and herbs painted on the chapel ceiling at St Michael's Monastery. Aping pilgrims from the past, I stoop to go through the tiny arch beneath Bishop Otto's tomb. As I straighten up, an elderly lady assures me: "Done daily, it cures back pain."

Bambergers claim similar miraculous properties for their beer. "We certainly recommend a *Seidla* (half litre) as an isotonic drink after sports activities; it's full of minerals and vitamins," says Stephan Michel, head brewer at the 300-year-old *Mahr's-Bräu-Keller*.

In any conversation about German beer,

one word always crops up: *Reinheitsgebot*. "This is the Bavarian purity law introduced in 1516," Michel explains. "We still abide by it, using only four ingredients: water, malt, yeast and hops. All ours are sourced within 100 miles."

Mahr's is the most atmospheric *Wirtshaus* (pub) in town, serving food as well as beer at the communal wooden tables. We smile, point at spare 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.

Since everyone speaks English, advice is plentiful. To wet our whistles, we must try *Mahr's Ungespundet-hefetrüb*, a cloudy, unfiltered lager. Thankfully, to order it, all we have to do is say: "U!" ("Ooh!"). 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 live with the sugar water generation. Beers are sweeter and maltier today," he admits. "I use classic techniques, with new strains of hops, such as ones with citrus notes: more modern, more thirst-quenching."

Just as Londoners head for riverside pubs in summer, Bambergers make for the city's beer cellars. But, instead of going underground, they drink "*auf dem Keller*", on top of the cool cellars that are dug into the hillsides.

While the beer ferments below, locals sit in gardens under the chestnut trees and polish off a *Krug* (earthenware mug) or three. What they order depends on the season: nourishing *Fastenbier* only during Lent, *Maibock* in spring, *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 beer. We head for Aufsess, recognised by *Guinness World Records* for the highest density of breweries 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. "Let's just have one for the road," suggests my hiking companion...

PW

## Bamberg basics

### Getting there

● **Air Berlin** (00 49 0871 500 0737; [www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com)) flies from Stansted to Nuremberg. From £48 return.

### Getting around

● **Deutsche Bahn** (087 18 80 80 66, charges apply; [www.bahn.com](http://www.bahn.com)) operates train services from Nuremberg to Bamberg; the price comparison website [www.carrentals.co.uk](http://www.carrentals.co.uk) offers a week's car hire from Nuremberg Airport from £137 in August.

### Staying there

● **Romantik-Hotel Messerschmitt** (095 1 297800; [www.hotel-messerschmitt.de](http://www.hotel-messerschmitt.de)): central, 180-year-old hotel with 18 elegant rooms, 50 new rooms, from £125 for two, with breakfast. **Hotel Residenzschloss** (095 1 60910, [www.welcome-hotels.com](http://www.welcome-hotels.com)): housed in a converted 1787 hospital; from £105 for two.

### Drinking there

● **Schlenkerla Tavern** (6 Dominikanerstrasse, [www.smokebeer.com](http://www.smokebeer.com)); Mahr's-Bräu-Keller (36 Oberer Stephansberg, [www.mahrs-braeu.de](http://www.mahrs-braeu.de)).  
● **The Tourist Office** (5

Geyerswörthstrasse) offers a self-guided *BierSchmecker* tour, with pamphlet about Bamberg's nine breweries, a glass mug, a souvenir backpack and coupons valid for five beers (£20). There is also a **Brewery Hiking Trail** - collect free map and hiker's pass from *Brauereigasthof Rothenbach*, Aufsess (091 9892 920).

● **The Beer Festival** (August 18-24; [www.sandkerwa.de](http://www.sandkerwa.de)), on Sandstrasse, in the Little Venice part of town. This year marks the 60th annual Sandkerwa Festival. Centred on the river, the seven days of entertainment include plastic duck races and *Fischerstechen* (jousting on punts), oompah bands and live rock. The Schlenkerla brewery sets up a beer garden in the nearby *Dominikanerhof*, the courtyard of a former monastery.

### Further information

● **Franconia**: [www.frankentourismus.de](http://www.frankentourismus.de);  
**Bamberg**: [www.bamberg.info](http://www.bamberg.info);  
**beer guide in English**: [www.franconiabeerguide.com](http://www.franconiabeerguide.com).