

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Germany

In This Chapter

- ▶ Experiencing the greatest cities
 - ▶ Exploring romantic landscapes
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 - ▶ Visiting smaller towns and cities
 - ▶ Enjoying world-class classical music, opera, and ballet
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Germany holds a special fascination for travelers. This land of contrasting cities, landscapes, and moods appeals to visitors for many different reasons. Perhaps you, like millions of others, have German ancestors, and you want to explore their home turf. Or perhaps you have an image of Germany in your mind — a castle on a hilltop, a palace in a landscaped garden, or a giant beer hall with an oom-pah-pah band — and you want to check it out for yourself. Then there's the culture: Every midsize-to-large German city has at least one art museum, a symphony orchestra, and an opera house, making a visit to Germany a feast for those who enjoy world-class art and music. (See Chapter 23 for my list of the ten best German museums.) Clubbers, too, will find that the club/bar/disco scene in Germany is hot, not only in large cities like Berlin and Munich but also in smaller university towns like Cologne, Leipzig, and Heidelberg. Some visitors come for the chance to drink full-bodied German beer; others come to enjoy a cosmopolitan cafe culture where coffee and cake are afternoon staples. And don't forget the retail: Great shopping opportunities abound year-round in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and Cologne. During the Christmas season, the main squares in Germany's smaller cities glitter and glow with the lights, food, and gift stalls of Christmas markets, a tradition that dates back hundreds of years. You'll find as many different reasons to visit Germany as there are tourists who arrive daily, by the thousands, at the airports in Frankfurt, Munich, or Berlin.



This chapter is designed as an at-a-glance reference to the absolute best — the Best of the Best — that Germany has to offer. In the categories that I outline, you'll find some of the things that make traveling in Germany such a fascinating experience. I discuss each of these places

and experiences in detail later in this book; you can find them in their indicated chapters, marked with — what else? — a “Best of the Best” icon.

Discovering the Best Big German Cities

Germany’s top cities offer a wealth of diversions, as simple or as sophisticated as you want. You’ll find world-class museums, music, cuisine of all kinds, great shopping, and plenty of nightlife. You’ll also find elegant boulevards, riverside promenades, enormous parks and green spaces, bustling pedestrian-only quarters, fascinating architecture, and plenty of picturesque corners just waiting to be discovered. And thanks to Germany’s excellent public transportation systems, you can easily reach it all by subway, streetcar, or bus.

- ✔ With its endlessly dramatic history and cache of cultural and artistic riches, **Berlin** (Chapters 11 and 12) always has a major-league buzz. But since 1989, when the Wall separating East Germany and West Germany came down, Germany’s largest city and new capital has become an international superstar. The pulse of Berlin is felt throughout Europe, and when you’re walking down Berlin’s two most famous avenues, the Kurfürstendamm and Unter den Linden, you’ll feel it, too.
- ✔ **Munich** (Chapter 15) is a southern German city where the urban pleasures are as soft and sweet as *Schlagsahne* (whipped cream) on a rich slab of cake or as exuberant as an oom-pah-pah band in a giant beer hall during Oktoberfest. The capital of Bavaria is sensuous, sophisticated, and fun-loving, with countless cultural diversions and a kind of urban magic that snares the hearts of millions of visitors each year.
- ✔ **Hamburg** (Chapter 13), Germany’s third-largest city after Berlin and Munich, has the liveliness and lustiness of a big port. The “Queen of the North” presides over a beautiful setting on the Alster Lake but is notorious for her erotically charged entertainment district called the Reeperbahn.
- ✔ **Dresden** (Chapter 14) reigns as the treasure house of eastern Germany. The old capital of Saxony is where you find the world-famous Zwinger palace/museum complex, the riches of the Green Vaults, and the reconstructed Frauenkirche, Germany’s most amazing architectural reconstruction effort.
- ✔ **Cologne** (Chapter 19), with its soaring cathedral, first-rate museums, and Rhine-side setting, is one of the most attractive and intriguing cities in western Germany. Cologne’s carnival is the biggest and brashest in the country, and its vibrant contemporary arts scene gives it a hefty dose of sophistication.
- ✔ **Frankfurt** (Chapter 20), with its bevy of designer skyscrapers, yields plenty of pleasant surprises, including a fine lineup of museums and great shopping on Germany’s busiest shopping street, the Zeil.

Witnessing the Most Romantic Landscapes

Landscapes of fabled beauty and scenic splendor are found throughout Germany, and views of them are accessible by train, boat, and car. From the majesty of the Bavarian Alps in the south to the sandy beaches of the Baltic Sea in the north and from the winegrowing Rhine Valley in the west to the high, rocky cliffs along the Elbe in the east, Germany offers a wealth of sightseeing possibilities.

- ✔ From Dresden you can easily explore a scenic region called **Saxon Switzerland** (Chapter 14), where rocky cliffs rise dramatically above the Elbe River.
- ✔ The **Romantic Road** (Chapter 16) is the most romantic byway of all, offering a remarkable medley of small medieval towns set within a gorgeous Bavarian landscape of river valley and mountain meadow.
- ✔ Perhaps the most dramatic of all German landscapes is the Bavarian Alps. The country's highest mountain, the Zugspitze, towers above the alpine resort town of **Garmisch-Partenkirchen** (Chapter 16).
- ✔ Sophisticated health spas and recreational activities abound in the forest-clad mountains of the **Black Forest** (Chapter 17), where you can find lakes, hiking trails, and scenic lookouts.
- ✔ The **Bodensee** (Chapter 17), an enormous lake near Germany's sunny southwestern border, is like a bit of the Mediterranean, with semitropical gardens and an almost Italian languor.
- ✔ Cruises down the mighty **River Rhine** (Chapter 19) take you past castle-crowned crags and legendary sights, such as Lorelei rock.
- ✔ The **Mosel Valley** (Chapter 19), between Trier and Koblenz, is a scenic winegrowing region encompassing thousands of acres of vineyards, Roman ruins, medieval castles, and riverside towns with cobbled streets and half-timbered houses.
- ✔ With its fruit trees and vineyards growing on sunny, sheltered slopes, the **Rhine Valley** (Chapter 19) from Koblenz south to Alsace is like a northern extension of Italy.
- ✔ The **Rheingau wine district** (Chapter 19), found along a lovely 45km (27-mile) stretch of the Rhine, west of Mainz and Wiesbaden, has been a wine-producing region for upward of 2,000 years.

Marveling over the Best Castles and Palaces

At one time, Germany was a conglomeration of regional kingdoms, duchies, and vast estates, ruled over by an assortment of kings, dukes, princes, and prince-bishops. As a result, Germany is loaded with a fascinating collection of castles and palaces, both great and small, many of them full of art treasures, and all of them open to the public.

- ✔ **Charlottenburg Palace** in Berlin (Chapter 12) is home to several museums and staterooms that can be visited on guided tours.
- ✔ **Sanssouci** (Chapter 12), Frederick the Great's 18th-century rococo palace in Potsdam, is remarkable, in part, because it suffered almost no damage during World War II (WWII). Sanssouci and its beautiful grounds can be easily visited on a day trip from Berlin.
- ✔ Carefully reconstructed after WWII, the amazing **Zwinger** palace in Dresden (Chapter 14) is now an unparalleled showcase for Old Master paintings and porcelain treasures.
- ✔ **Nymphenburg Palace** on the outskirts of Munich is another king-size showplace and so is the gigantic **Residenz**, right in the heart of the city (see both in Chapter 15). With their precious paintings, porcelains, and furniture, these stately homes reveal aspects of German life and the monarchy that lasted up until 1918.
- ✔ For sheer, over-the-top opulence, nothing can compare to the fairy-tale castles built in the 19th century by Ludwig II of Bavaria. **Neuschwanstein** and **Linderhof** (see both in Chapter 16) are preserved almost exactly as they were during Ludwig's lifetime.
- ✔ Used by the powerful prince-bishops until 1806, the **Residenz** in Wümrzburg (Chapter 16) is famed for its superb ceiling frescos by Tiepolo.
- ✔ A palace that doubled as a fortress, the Marienburg crowns the vineyard-covered slopes above Wümrzburg and today houses the **Mainfränkisches Museum** (Chapter 16), featuring brilliant Renaissance-era woodcarvings by Tilman Riemenschneider.
- ✔ Perched on its crag high above Heidelberg, **Heidelberg Castle** (Chapter 18) suffered from war and fire, but it remains an impressive sight even in its semiruin state.
- ✔ For many visitors, the quintessential image associated with Germany is a castle on a hilltop. You do indeed find castles scattered throughout the country. Ruined castles dot the landscape of the **Rhine** (Chapter 19) and enhance its romantic appeal.

Exploring the Best Small Towns and Cities

Germany is remarkable for its attractive smaller towns and cities, scattered like gemstones around the country. In these historic hamlets, many of them located less than an hour's train ride from a major metropolis, you'll find a very different Germany. Brimming with the flavors of the past, they can easily be savored as day trips.

- ✔ An easy day trip from Hamburg, lovely **Lübeck** (Chapter 13) epitomizes the maritime culture and red-brick architecture of northern Germany. So many architectural gems are located here that the entire Old Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site — a place judged

to be of exceptional cultural value, according to the United Nations agency that promotes education and the arts.

- ✔ **Weimar** (Chapter 14), in eastern Germany, was a cradle of the German Enlightenment of the late-18th and early-19th centuries. This small, unspoiled hamlet was home to Goethe and Schiller, among others, and provides a glimpse into 18th-century German life and culture.
- ✔ **Rothenburg ob der Tauber** (Chapter 16), a major highlight along the Romantic Road, is a walled medieval city loaded with picturesque charm. You can walk along the old city walls of this perfectly preserved gem and stroll down streets that haven't changed much in hundreds of years.
- ✔ A stop on the Romantic Road or an easy day trip from Munich, **Augsburg** (Chapter 16) is full of historic panache and architectural surprises, including Renaissance-era palaces and the oldest almshouse in Germany.
- ✔ Located in the Bavarian Alps near Neuschwanstein castle, **Fümussen** (Chapter 16) invites you to stroll along its cobblestone streets past stone houses and a rushing mountain river.
- ✔ **Lindau** (Chapter 17), a marvelous little island-city in the Bodensee (Lake Constance), has a sunny, flower-filled charm that's perfect for lazing away a day or two. The garden-island of Mainau is a short ferry ride away.
- ✔ One of the most sophisticated spa towns in Europe, **Baden-Baden** (Chapter 17) offers an extraordinary range of spa treatments during the day and elegant gaming rooms at night.
- ✔ **Heidelberg** (Chapter 18), an old university town on the Neckar River, enchants visitors with its romantic setting, historic streets, and enormous castle.
- ✔ **Stuttgart** (Chapter 18), a 40-minute train ride from Heidelberg, is the arts and culture capital of southwestern Germany, with major art collections, intriguing architecture, and the second-largest beer festival after Munich.
- ✔ **Nuremberg** (Chapter 18) is an important center of the German Renaissance that later became an infamous locale for huge, Nazi-era rallies. Remnants and reminders from both eras are plentiful in Nuremberg, one of the most attractive midsize German cities.

Enjoying the Best in Classical Music, Opera, and Ballet

Lovers of classical music, opera, and ballet will find that Germany is a gold mine. Tickets for musical events, including grand opera, are reasonably priced, and the quality of musical performance is extraordinarily high.

- ✔ **Berlin** (Chapter 12) is home to three major symphony orchestras, including the famed **Berlin Philharmonic**, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle, and three opera houses that share their stages with resident ballet companies.
- ✔ A visit to **Dresden** (Chapter 14) can be made even more memorable by an evening at the **Semperoper** (Semper Opera House), one of the world's great opera houses, or hearing a concert by the **Dresden Philharmonic**.
- ✔ The city of **Leipzig** (Chapter 14) is home to the world-renowned Gewandhaus Orchestra and the acclaimed **Leipziger Oper** (Leipzig Opera). Leipzig celebrates its most famous citizen — the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, who lived and worked in the city for more than 40 years — with the yearly **Bachfest**.
- ✔ Up north, **Hamburg** (Chapter 13) plays host to the **Hamburgische Staatsoper** (Hamburg State Opera), the **Hamburg Ballet**, and three highly-regarded orchestras.
- ✔ In **Munich** (Chapter 15), one of the great cultural centers of Germany, the brilliant **Bayerischen Staatsoper** (Bavarian State Opera) shares the National Theater stage with its ballet company, while the magnificent **Münchner Philharmoniker** (Munich Philharmonic Orchestra) performs in the Philharmonic Hall.
- ✔ The **Stuttgart Ballet** in **Stuttgart** (Chapter 18) hit international stardom in the 1970s when John Cranko took over the company. Cranko is gone, but the company still performs at the State Theater, and so does the **Staatsoper** (State Opera).
- ✔ For a city of its size, **Cologne** (Chapter 19) has an amazing array of musical offerings. Major artists appear at the **Kölner Philharmonie** (Cologne Opera), the Rhineland's leading opera house, and two fine orchestras — the **Gürzenich Kölner Philharmoniker** (Cologne Philharmonic) and the **Westdeutscher Rundfunk Orchestra** (West German Radio Orchestra) — perform in the **Kölner Philharmonie** (Philharmonic concert hall).
- ✔ **Opera Frankfurt/Ballet Frankfurt** give a big musical boost to **Frankfurt** (Chapter 20), and so does the **Frankfurt Philharmonic**.