

## Beer-fest rooted in tradition

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Dirndl-clad waitresses weave through the crowd with huge mugs, more beer finding its way to the floor than to drinkers' lips, and even the tables seem to be moving as people sway to folk tunes played by a band.

Yes, this is Bavaria. And the only way this beer festival could be more stereotypically Bavarian would be if it was played out against snowy Alpine peaks.

"Everybody gets together. All boundaries and borders merge into one," said Hans-Christian Brockerhoff, known as Brocki, as we chat over a seemingly endless liter of beer that has been specially brewed for the annual festival called Bergkirchweih.

For 12 days every spring, the inhabitants of Erlangen, a university town near Nuremberg, forget their daily routines and devote themselves to the serious business of drinking beer - and lots of it.

The Berg, as it is commonly called, has been held every year since 1755 and is Germany's second-largest beer-fest after Oktoberfest, its more famous Munich counterpart.

Although the Berg typically attracts more than one million visitors, far fewer foreign tourists come to the Erlangen festival than to the Munich event, which means there is much more here in the way of local ambiance. This year's Berg starts on Thursday and runs until June 12. When the festival finishes, the beer cellars and rides remain open all summer.

Bergkirchweih roughly translates as "the dedication of the mountain church," referring to a church on the outskirts of Erlangen.

Sturdy Bavarian 18th-century folk might find it hard to recognize the modern-day town, but it's not hard to imagine them knocking back the local Kitzmann brew in its leafy beer gardens.

"You can't go to the Berg without any beer," said Brocki, 29, who has attended the festival every year of the 15 he has lived in Erlangen.

"You don't think, you drink," agreed Brocki's girlfriend Tanja Liebig. "You have to drink in the evenings."

If you can't face the thought of a liter, there is an easier option. A liter of shandy (beer mixed with fizzy lemonade) may not contain quite as much alcohol, but the drinker is still confronted with the same volume of frothy liquid.

"You can drink a beer, but you don't have to be drunk to enjoy it," Brocki stressed.

It's still pretty hard to push your way through the crowds to check out the full selection of fairground rides and stands offering hearty German fast food like sausages or roast chicken.

"I've never seen so many people packed into one hillside before," said Gianni Brancazio, who visited last year's festival from London. "I'm finding it hard to lift up the mug, let alone drink what's in it."

It may come as a surprise, but the countryside surrounding Erlangen - known as Franconia - is actually a wine-producing region.

"The rest of the year I drink wine," said Axel Horndasch, who comes from the nearby town of Ansbach, during a break from the table-top dancing at the 2005 event.

It's not all about drinking, many will be glad to hear. During the days between beery evenings, Erlangen makes a handy base for trips to any number of nearby gems such as Bamberg, which offers a nearly complete historical guide to styles of architecture, or the quaint old town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

Nuremberg, with its old center rebuilt almost from scratch after heavy wartime bombing, is almost part of the same metropolitan area as Erlangen. On the city's outskirts is the infamous location for Nazi party rallies of the 1930s, an eerie place set in incongruous surroundings beside a peaceful lake.

Slightly farther afield, Munich and the Alps are also accessible, meaning that a trip to the festival can easily be combined with a wider visit to southern Germany, Austria or even the Czech Republic.

Even away from the Berg, it's difficult to escape the beer. Across Bavaria, the smallest of places often has its own brewery, sometimes producing its own distinctive brews.

"It's essential," said Horndasch. "Beer is bread."

For more information, visit the Websites for German tourism ([www.germany-tourism.de](http://www.germany-tourism.de)), and the guides to German beer ([www.germanbeerguide.com](http://www.germanbeerguide.com)) and ([www.bambergbeerguide.com](http://www.bambergbeerguide.com)). The Bergkirchweih festival Website ([www.der-berg-ruft.de](http://www.der-berg-ruft.de)) is in German only.

