

Bavaria

It has inspired everyone from Richard Wagner to Richard Strauss, as well as having had its fair share of mad monarchs. **Albert Ehrnrooth** finds plenty to do amidst the mountains and the foaming steins

Bavaria is where you go in Germany to drink in the scenery, more or less literally. The famous fairy-tale castles are real and the abbeys often double as breweries. The beer is beyond reproach and the white wine from Franconia is just superb. In addition, the House of Wittelsbach ruled Bavaria for more than 700 years (until 1918) and they have left a royal and cultural legacy worth exploring.

The wild forests, the fast flowing rivers, the glassy lakes, the Alps and the serene mountain meadows are inspirational. This spectacular scenery certainly gave the two Richards, Wagner and Strauss, their compositional impulses. On top of this Bavaria is blessed with some superb orchestras, choirs, singers, the country's finest opera house (in my humble opinion) and no less than four prestigious summer festivals that provide a perfect symbiosis of classical music, architecture and ambience.

My first destination is the spa town Bad Kissingen which lies in Franconia in the northern part of Bavaria. This region was incorporated into Bavaria by Napoleon, but it still maintains its own proud traditions. Bad Kissingen established itself as a health resort in the 16th century and after getting the Wittelsbach family's royal stamp of approval the seven natural springs started to attract the international *beau monde*. The popular Empress Elisabeth of Austria, her cousin ('mad') King Ludwig II, Tsar Alexander II and Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck were regular guests.

Bad Kissingen's Kurorchester used to provide musical entertainment from morning till evening. Despite dropping the early morning sessions they are still the busiest concert band in the world according to the Guinness Book of Records. The impressive Brunnenhalle was empty when I tested the mineral waters. The friendly Lithuanian lady serving me at the 'water bar' told me that 20 years ago the huge indoor "walking hall" was teeming with resort guests between 6 and 9am. Now the only people that really appreciate the healing propensities of the waters are young Russians.

The Kissinger Sommer festival is in its 30th year with most of the concerts taking place in the Regentenbau. Next year's line-up (June 24 to July 24) has already been announced and with conductors and soloists like Piotr Anderszewski, Hélène Grimaud, Semyon Bychkov, Grigory Sokolov and John Elliot Gardner on the bill it is clear that the organisers have no problems attracting the very best.

Stay at the Hotel Kaiserhof Victoria (though it struggles to live up to its glorious heydays), which boasts a splendid art nouveau dining hall that is also regularly in use as a concert venue. Prepare to be starstruck. One morning at breakfast Cecilia Bartoli sat herself down at the table next to me. The great mezzo-soprano is a regular at the festival and usually brings the whole family to enjoy the elixirs, thermal wells and drinking courses.



**TRAVEL INFO****Average Temperatures:**

Winter: -1°C – Summer: 18°C

Currency: Euro (AU\$1=EUR 0.68)

Best time to visit: Events take place all year round though June to August is the most likely time to enjoy one of Bavaria's numerous arts festivals.

TOURIST INFORMATION

bavaria.com

'Mad' King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein Castle

Adolph Hitler slept here...

Just outside the town of Bayreuth was where Richard and Cosima built Wahnfried. The villa was largely destroyed during the war and only reconstructed in 1976. Some of the revamped interiors now give an impression of the original wallpaper and only surviving furniture and pictures are on show. A concrete-and-glass museum has sprung up in the garden of the Wagner property. Here costumes, props, stage models and paraphernalia are on display. The real surprise is the access given to the Siegfried Haus. In the dining room nothing has been added or replaced since Hitler stayed here as a guest. Here for the first time Wagner's anti-semitic writings and the family's support for the Nazi regime is confronted head on.



The Wagners meet the Führer

Bayreuth is a fairly straightforward one and a half-hour drive from Bad Kissingen. I arrived a couple of weeks too early for the Festspiele but the normally sleepy town was readying itself for the nightly procession of celebrities and politicians that make their way up the Green Hill during the festival. There is plenty in Bayreuth to do for non-Wagnerites as well. Frederick the Great was impressed when he came to inspect what his older sister Margravine Wilhelmine (1709-58) had been up to.

Despite being married to the not so wealthy Margrave Friedrich of Brandenburg-Bayreuth, Wilhelmine spared no expense when it came to putting her extravagant baroque stamp on the Residenzstadt. Wilhelmine oversaw the construction of a new palace (Neues Schloss) with some exquisitely furnished rooms in the Rococo style. Even more delightful is the landscaped park with grottoes and fountains that she created at Eremitage, her regular summer residence, just outside the town.

Markgräfin Wilhelmine socialised with Voltaire and many of the great intellectuals of her day. She was an accomplished lutenist, she loved acting, composed one opera and wrote many librettos. It was clear she needed an opera house and an Italian theatre designer was duly summoned to the court. Giuseppe Bibiena's completely over-the-top Markgräfliches Opernhaus (1748) has a dazzling interior that has never been altered.

Up on the "Green Hill", the Franz Liszt museum next to Wagner's home Villa Wahnfried is pleasantly old fashioned, stuffed with memorabilia, pianos, the maestro's death mask and lots of pictures of the man. Do visit the rococo palace where the piano manufacturers Steingraeber & Söhne are based. Eduard Steingraeber started out maintaining Liszt's pianos, but today their most remarkable instrument is the Utzon Grand, the design of which is reminiscent of the Sydney Opera House.

My next destination, Prien and the Herrenchiemsee Festspiele, is a three-hour

drive south of Bayreuth. Most concerts are held at Herrenchiemsee built on the Herreninsel (the men's island) in Bavaria's largest lake, the Chiemsee, which on calm days acts as a giant mirror for the expanse

“THE DESIGN OF THE UTZON GRAND PIANO IS REMINISCENT OF THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE”

of the German Alps. The palace became the costliest and most opulent of all of Ludwig II of Bavaria's royal edifices and it turned out to be his downfall.

Neuschwanstein was the King's obsessive attempt to build 'the castle of the Grail' on top of a cliff ridge while at the same time conjuring up thoughts of Tannhäuser and Lohengrin. This monument to the new Sun King was given a wider façade, grander staircases and a mirror gallery longer than Versailles. The many magnificent chandeliers were to keep the night permanently out (the eccentric king slept during the day) and the 60,000 litre bath is just plain ludicrous.

The Herrenchiemsee Festspiele (July 12-24) makes great use of some of these architectural features. Most concerts take place in the spectacular Hall of Mirrors and the unfinished staircase. The opening concert of the festival is always held in the serene Benedictine convent of Frauenwörth on the Fraueninsel (the women's island) which is Herreninsel's neighbour. You reach the islands with a lake steamer from Prien and the alpine backdrop guarantees that the journey to the stunning concert venues forms part of the magic. ●



Benedictine convent of Frauenwörth