



In good cheer

Say hello to Franconia,
Germany's rebellious region,
writes Tamara Hinson

TOP TIP

Ryanair has lead-in fares from Stansted to Nuremberg from £20 each way
ryanair.com

It's a Monday night, but that hasn't lightened the load for our waitress, who's dispatching huge steins of ale to the thirsty masses.

The setting is Nuremberg's Biergarten KulturGarten, an enormous city-centre beer garden in the shadow of the immaculately preserved city walls. I'm here for a performance by the NC Brown Blues Band. The musicians – all nine of them – are locals.

Jazz is huge in this city: head to one of Nuremberg's many leafy beer gardens and you're more likely to come across a blues band than a dirndl-wearing

alpenhorn player. But given Franconia's history, this is hardly surprising.

GOING IT ALONE

When asked by a local if it's my first time in the region, I tell him I'm familiar with other bits of Bavaria, but not this particular part. His stern response – “You're in Franconia, not Bavaria” – sums up this region's independent streak. Franconia is a Wales-sized chunk of southern Germany. Although in geographical terms it's part of Bavaria, residents consider themselves Franconians rather than Bavarians. This stems back to 1803, when

Napoleon dissolved the German Empire's territorial structures and Franconia, previously independent, became part of Bavaria.

Perhaps Napoleon should have thought twice before messing with this part of the world. The French general may well have rewritten the map, but today Franconians retain their own dialect and traditions.

This toughness is a common theme. Nuremberg, Franconia's largest city, took a beating during the Second World War (one historian told me 93% was destroyed; Dresden apparently came in at 92%). Not that I'd

have known. After the war, the city was painstakingly rebuilt, using old maps and drawings as guides. The attention to detail was so precise that old mines were reopened so buildings could be rebuilt using the same stone as the originals.

Today, cobbled streets wind past neat rows of gabled houses and under sections of the ancient city wall, which is one of the best preserved in Europe. But it's also a place that has always been one step ahead. The Adler, for example, was the first rail locomotive used to transport passengers in Germany. Its first journey departed from





LEFT: Levi Strauss Museum

RIGHT: Nuremberg

BELOW: Bamberg



PICTURE: GNT/ANDREW COWIN

➔ Nuremberg in 1835, and the city became the birthplace of German rail.

Nuremberg's status as an industrial and creative hub originates in the 14th century, when authorities imposed regulations that meant the region's finest craftsmen couldn't take their skills elsewhere.

▶ BOTTOMS UP

Although Nuremberg may feel less traditional than other Bavarian cities, beer is still king here. In the 14th century, the 30,000 residents had 40 breweries to choose from. Regulations stated that each brewery should have its own cellar for storage and fermentation, and luckily, the soft sandstone was easy to excavate. And cellar space was certainly in demand.



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Poor water quality meant that until the 17th century beer was the drink of choice, consumed even by children. The water improved but the love of beer remained, as did the cellars.

Decades later, beer came to the rescue again. In Nuremberg, the extensive network of cellars doubled as bomb shelters, and are the reason other German cities suffered a higher loss of life during the Second World War.

Priceless treasures from all over the region were also stored here. On a tour of the chilly tunnels, I listen to a recording of Goebbels' speech at the Nuremberg Rally in 1933 and marvel at the black-and-white images depicting enormous statues and stained-glass panels crammed into the tunnels. The items pictured were stored exactly where the photos now stand, and it's amazing to see these huge treasures stashed in the narrow passageways. Equally shocking are the photos showing entire neighbourhoods before and after the war.

▶ NORTHERN DELIGHTS

All too often, visitors to this area stop in Nuremberg, or head south to areas like Füssen and the castle-lined Romantic Road. I head north, deeper into

Franconia. A 20-minute train journey takes me to Bamberg, a medieval town and Unesco World Heritage Site.

Notable buildings include the beautiful Bamberger Dom – this towering cathedral dates back to 1004 – and the Neue Residenz, a 17th-century palace with an enormous rose garden high above the city. Bamberg is a place rich in history but it also feels vibrant and young, perhaps due to the presence of one of Bavaria's biggest universities.

The Levi Strauss Museum, with its denim-blue gables and shutters, is in the nearby village of Buttenheim. The denim tycoon lived in this building until he emigrated to America aged 18. The museum's jeans-obsessed director, Dr Tanja Roppelt, works closely with Levi's HQ in San Francisco, and the museum's ➔



PICTURE: BAMBERG TOURISMUS UND KONGRESS SERVICE