

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Walking down any street, abutting or facing the Inner Alster Lake (the small, artificial lake in the centre of downtown Hamburg), one could not help but be struck with the obvious expressions of joy of the people who, clearly, were imbued with the Christmas spirit.

Children could be seen, eating toffee apples, corn-on-the-cob, German sausages, cakes, crêpes, filled with chocolate and powdered sugar, nuts, and, you name it, the kids just tuck in and eat ... and eat ... and eat.

Adults were joining in the fun with their playful children, wearing Santa Claus coats complete with caps, some of red and some of blue, but regardless of the colour of the Santa Claus clothing, it was the spirit of Christmas that permeated the entire city of Hamburg.

Ambling through the streets of this old town, one could not help but be infected with the spirit of this joyous time of year.

At the Weihnachts Markt (Christmas Fair), one was struck with the amount of German sausages that were being consumed, mainly by very rotund gentlemen and ladies, who lined up, very politely, and, for a few euros, stuffed near foot-long sausages into their mouths: Down the sausages went; down their gullets; the sausages disappearing within minutes.



**At The Weihanachts Markt:
*'Lick ! Lick ! Lick ! Es Ist Gute !'***

Others were stuffing themselves with freshly roasted Black Forest Ham, served on freshly baked bread rolls.

This ham is among the best in the world, according to many opinions of the residents of Hamburg.

This was washed down with Glühwein (mulled wine) and, for many, a cigarette to follow.

Then, it was off to the bakery pavilion of the Weihnachts Markt where all kinds of Christmas cakes and pastries were there for the taking – and all for the price of a few euros, each.

But it was the atmosphere of this venue that enraptured any and all who entered the Christmas Fair where the yelps of happy children, their little faces, besmeared with toffee or chocolate or the residue of sautéed mushrooms, the tastes, mixed together as children are wont to do, greeted one upon entry.



This was **TARGET**'s second day in Hamburg, a city in North-Central Germany on the Elbe and Alster Rivers, near the North Sea.

Hamburg's full name is The Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

It is the second, busiest seaport in Europe and a major commercial, industrial, and cultural centre with a population of just under 2 million people.

This medium was staying at Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten, said to be among the best hotels in Germany.

The hotel has 160 rooms, the cost of accommodation, ranging between €250 and €4,000 per night, depending on the type of accommodation desired.

TARGET stayed at the Maria Callas Suite, which comprised a large bedroom, an even larger sitting room, a walk-in closet, a separate make-up room for the lady of one's life, and a huge bathroom, toilet attached.

Totally, the floor area of this suite is about 900 square feet.

The cost of Maria Callas Suite was €850 per night, breakfast included.

The average occupancy level of this wonderful old hotel is about 75 percent, dipping to about 65 percent, during the summer months, **TARGET** discovered.

The ratio of staff to guests is about 2:One.

This ratio of hotel staff to guests is considerably higher than The Peninsula Hotel of the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) or of any other HKSAR hotel, for that matter.

The breakfast, served at Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten, is, in a word, fantastic, and comprises, among other delicacies:

Freshly made breads of all kinds;
Smoked eel;
Slices of German sausages and pâtés;
Smoked mackerel;
Cold cuts of many kinds, including, of course, smoked salmon and gravlax;
French cheeses;
Fresh fruits;
Home-made jams and compotes;
Cereals;
Eggs dishes of all kinds; and,
Pancakes.

And, if that is not enough, just ask the waiter/waitress what one desires – and it arrives in minutes.

TARGET, traditionally, eats a large plate of salad with fresh fruit, every morning, as the first course.

This dish had never been seen at Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten in the past, but, by the second day of this medium's stay, it appeared as a matter of course.

Finally, a word about the pastry chef of this hotel.

He is Mr Volker Jahn, who makes everything from scratch and demands of his assistants that they do the same.

There are, in total, 6 people, working at the hotel's bakery, and one has to try the morning pancakes, made to order, to fully appreciate how a real pancake should taste.

No ready-made pancake mixes, bought at the local supermarket, here.

On Wednesday, December 24, 2008, it is a very special day at this Hamburg hotel, Café Condi, the '*coffee shop*' of Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten – actually, it is much more than the average coffee shop of any 5-star hotel in the HKSAR due to (a) the quality of service and (b) the wide variety of foods on offer – because it is packed to capacity.

But the guests are all known to maitre d'hôtel, Mr Alex Donate.

He explained to **TARGET**:

'Last year, this little girl (and he nodded in the direction of a little girl of the age of about 3 years, sitting with her family at a table) was in a pram. Tomorrow, she will be paying the bill for the breakfast, served to her parents.'

'Everybody in this room knows each other because they have been coming together at this time of year in order to enjoy breakfast at this restaurant.'

'For luncheon, we are packed. There are more than 110 guests, booked for luncheon, and each guest sits at the same table that he or she has had for many years, with the children, being handed down the rights of their parents' table.'

'It is a joyous time of the year and all of our guests look forward to eating together and exchanging the latest news and gossip.'

'This only happens in Hamburg and at this hotel.'

As Mr Alex Donate walked back to his station at the door of the restaurant, it was as though this was his little fiefdom within the hotel, one of which he was immensely proud.
Wonderful things such as this still exist in this mad world of ours.

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