

The German Alps -- Romance, Religion, And Really Great Beer

Only a tiny portion of Germany's largest state, [Bavaria](#), can lay claim to having part of Europe's Alps. Although the mighty 2963m (9721-foot) [Zugspitze](#) is included in Bavaria's Alpine share, most of what's known as the German Alps is really the smaller Swabian Bavarian Prealps (German: *Schwäbisch-Bayerische Voralpen*).

About an hour south of [Munich](#), these foothills extend from [Swabia's Allgäu](#) districts in southwest Bavaria to Berchtesgaden National Park in the southeast. Along the way, they encompass dozens of lakes, plunging valleys, and more palaces, castles, monasteries and breweries than one could visit in ten vacations!

The German Alps are all that is romantic about Germany. These foothills are alive with romance (just ask Julie Andrews, whose classic love story, *The Sound of Music*, was filmed here!) Here, Germany's Mad King Ludwig II built two unparalleled monuments to romance, [Hohenschwangau](#) and [Neuschwanstein](#).

Ludwig's third dream home, the [Linderhof Palace](#), is much smaller, but compensates for its lack of size with plenty of ostentation, including a Hall of Mirrors with an ostrich-plume carpet!

King Ludwig's best castle-building efforts, however, fell far short of medieval [Burghausen Castle](#), in the German Alps' eastern foothills. On a ridge above the town of [Burghausen](#), overlooking the [Salzach River](#), this castle is an astonishing 1043 meters or 322 feet in length, making it the longest in Europe. The river takes its name from Bavaria's medieval salt trade, and cruises aboard salt barges are still available.

No vacation in the German Alps would be complete without time spent at one of their lakes. There are so many of them, in fact, that you'll have to work to avoid them. [Lake Tergensee](#), [Ammersee](#), [Königssee](#), [Lake Starnberg](#), and [Chiemsee](#) are among the best known.

The Tergensee Valley, with the sunniest climate in Germany, has air so pure that most of its towns have been designated official spas. The lake's water is clean enough to drink, if you can tear yourself away from the locally-brewed beers... ;-)

Ammersee (the Peasant's Lake) received its name because wealthy Munich residents considered it too distant and wild to merit their attention. They spent their lake holidays on the shores of Starnbergersee (the Prince's Lake). Even today Ammersee draws fewer tourists than its larger competitor, but that means more room for you — heck, for us!

Board a ferry at Herrsching to cruise the lake, or simply enjoy the Herrsching promenade with its

Ludwig II-like villa, the 19th-century home of artist Ludwig Scheuermann. One of the finest churches in the German Alps is the Fischer rococo Church of St. Mary in Diessen, on Amersee's southwestern corner.

Königssee, in Berchtesgaden National Park, resounds with echoes when the captains of the lake's cruise boats blast their horns. The Painter's Corner at Königssee's southern edge offers jaw-dropping views. On its western shore, small St. Bartholomä chapel is almost lost against the sheer backdrop of the Watzmann.

[Berchtesgaden](#) itself is encircled with mountain peaks, but you can also head underground to tour the *Salzbergwerk*. This is the salt mining complex on which the town's early wealth was built. Berchtesgaden, of course, is also where you'll find what remains of Hitler's Eagle's Nest retreat.

The people of the German Alps have always been deeply religious. You'll find proof of their faith in [Altötting](#), where the Chapel of Mercy has for more than five centuries drawn countless pilgrims hopeful of experiencing miracles at the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

The best-known symbol of their religious fervor, however, is the Oberammergau Passion Play. Held (in [Oberammergau](#)) once each decade for the past 360 years, it's the town's offering of repentance after a 1632 plague outbreak.

Beer has been brewed in the western German Alpine foothills since the 1100s. This is the place to be during late summer and autumn, when beer festivals abound. Although the king of the festivals is Munich's Oktoberfest, wherever you are in the region you'll find chefs who not only use different beer in their festival recipes, like wine connoisseurs, they recommend specific beers to accompany specific meals.

It's not all about *Weisswurst* and *Marzipan*! ;-)

Whether your tastes run to miraculously clean lakes and air, miraculous statues, or miraculously good beer, I'm sure you'll find what you want in the German Alps!