

The Beer Geeks: Enlightenment through beer

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Special to The Herald

Article Last Updated: 06/04/2008 01:48:23 AM PDT

People seem to enjoy hearing stories about our travels and, of course, Chris and I love to tell them. But people have a hard time understanding "beer travel."

May's Year in Beer trip to the second largest beer festival in Germany, the Bergkirchweih, should help. Despite the name, beer travel for us is not all about beer. It is a big part, but it's more about meeting people and experiencing other cultures. I can think of no better place than a German beer garden to do just that.

We first learned about the Berg, as locals call it, from an article in The Herald in April 2006. We went in 2007 and had such a great time that we decided to go again this year. In case it ever comes up in a trivia contest, Bergkirchweih means "the dedication of the mountain church." Like Oktoberfest, there are plenty of people drinking huge beers while dancing on the tables. However, the Berg is actually quite a family affair, with families and friends gathering with picnics complete with tablecloths.

The weather was beautiful, so the crowds were big and lively. Table space was a commodity and, if there is one thing we've learned about drinking beer in Germany, it's that you can't be shy. Having said that, I have a confession: Chris and I are, in fact, a bit shy. So our trick was to sit at an empty table and wait.

First came the "scouts," usually a couple asking if they could join us at the table. Sure, no problem, there's plenty of room and we scooted down a bit. Then came a few of their friends. We scooted down some more. This continued until we were at the end of the table, with butt cheeks barely hanging on. It made for a few chuckles. We'd "prost!" and all carried on.

But then, people heard us speaking English and asked where we were from. We received the same response every time we said "California." "Ohhhh," they said, eyebrows rising, a smile emerging, and a head nodding with approval. After that, it didn't matter the level of their English, people were interested in talking with us. We met a teenage girl picnicking with her family. She looked too young to drink, even for Germany — sure enough she was 14 years old. Her English was limited, but she spoke with confidence. We did manage to find out that she loved "The Simpsons." Excellent!

The next day, Chris and I were playing Scrabble when it happened again. But this time, the group included a toddler. Soon, the boy was nearly on my lap and I thought he was going to grab one of the tiles at any moment. Scrabble tiles are, after all, the perfect bite size. He didn't, but Chris was amused and I lost the game. I think the next time a child comes near, I'll cut my losses and forfeit. At one point, the boy's father said with a very heavy accent, "Your peace is gone." The reality was, our peace wasn't gone. Drinking German lager in the sun squeezed to the end of a long crowded table; that, my friends, is what beer travel is all about. Prost!

Merideth Canham-Nelson and her husband Chris Nelson have a beer travel Web site, thebeergeek.com.

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