

The beer tourists

By Mike Swift
Mercury News

Posted: 05/28/2009 12:55:03 PM PDT

Updated: 05/28/2009 12:55:18 PM PDT

For a Carmel Valley couple, traveling the world in search of the next great glass of beer has its moments.

There was the gut-wrenching three-hour grind they made up an Italian mountain road, clogged with bicycles and with so many curves that they were numbered — only to discover the little village brewery was closed that afternoon.

But there were also the innumerable friends made in visits to more than 475 breweries with names spanning the alphabet from Airbrau through Zwolf Apostels.

Chris Nelson and Merideth Nelson-Canham aren't just beer drinkers; they are beer travelers.

Because beer has always been local in Europe, and thanks to the craft brewing revolution of the past two decades in the United States, it's possible again to think of beer not just as a drink but as a place — with people and history and experiences — and a method for tapping into a side of a country you might miss in your Lonely Planet- or Frommer's-guided trip.

That is the philosophy behind the sudsy ramblings of Nelson, a web designer and self-described "beer geek," and his wife of nearly 20 years, a psychiatric social worker who favors T-shirts that read, "Girls are Beer Geeks, Too."

Back in the early 1990s when they lived in the Bay Area, the beer-loving couple started visiting breweries when they traveled. As the years went by, their priorities changed: Now they travel to visit breweries. From Bad Staffelstein to Boonville, from Westmalle to Westwood, from Rhyd Ddu to Las Vegas, they have become not just beer drinkers but beer explorers.

There are only two qualifying rules to notch a new brewery on their life list: "The beer must be brewed on the premise," and "the beer must be drank."

The couple declared 2008 as "The Year In Beer," embarking on a \$30,000 expedition that took them each month to major beer capitals and beer events in North America and Europe, including Oktoberfest in Munich, the Oregon Brewers Festival in Portland, the Great Alaska Beer and Barley Wine Festival in Anchorage, and the Kerstbierfestival in Belgium. Their dachshunds, Porter and Stout, regrettably had to stay at home.

Canham-Nelson is writing a book about the year, not just talking about the breweries and the brews, but about what the couple learned about their marriage and the world during the more than 80,000 miles they flew on trips to 90 breweries in seven countries and eight states.

"We always say that beer makes the world smaller," Merideth said, talking about the many friends and connections to places they've made through nearly two decades of beer travel.

The couple does not try to be encyclopedic travel guides on the beer travel website they launched in 2005, www.thebeergeek.com, nor are they beer reviewers. In other words, don't expect foodie jargon about the "hint of Fuji apple" in a particular brew, or Simon Cowell-style zingers about breweries that don't measure up. In those rare cases where the

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.




Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

beer is poor, the couple omits the brewery.

As the couple says on their Facebook page (yes, they have a Twitter feed, too), they aim to reach not just the craft-beer connoisseur, "but also the average person looking to add some adventure to their travels."

In other words, anyone planning a trip to Bavaria, Ireland, Belgium or Boston could use www.thebeergeek.com to figure out an interesting brewery to visit as a side trip. But don't expect exhaustive directions about where to go, what to drink or how to feel about it.

"The whole point is we want to encourage people to find their own adventures, because we've had some really great experiences meeting people through beer and going off the beaten path to find a brewery," Canham-Nelson said.

Nor do they claim to be the Martin Scorsese of beer travel, although their website now features "beergeekTV" — a sort of YouTube of beer where they share a fun sense of themselves as they travel the world to quaff the planet's suds.

"Ah, my life is complete," Chris sighs beautifully in one video from their Year in Beer tour, downing a glass at the renowned Westvleteren brewery in Belgium, a beer mecca where Trappist monks began brewing the rare St. Sixtus beer in 1839. "I've been here."

While their website includes both beer-related and travel advertising, it doesn't pay the bills yet — but the couple hopes one day to make beer travel a full-time vocation. They originally conceived the Year in Beer as a globe-trotting cable TV travel serial, one that featured breweries instead of beaches or bizarre foods.

"It was one of the those light-bulb moments," Chris said. "You're watching the Travel Channel, and you think, 'I can do this.'"

The couple was unable to get anyone in the television industry to buy into that idea. But driving on a brewery tour of Washington state in 2007, they picked up another couple hitchhiking in Olympic National Park. That couple, it turned out, had written a guidebook to waterfalls.

"Why don't you do a book?" they said, inspiring Chris and Merideth to pnce ahead with their Year in Beer plan.

Over lunch in a Salinas brewpub, it's hard to see the husky and tattooed Chris, 43, or Merideth, 39, with her fashionable ear piercings, as "geeks" — at least not of the scrawny, pocket-protector variety.

Enthusiastic hikers, they climbed to the summit of Mt. Snowdon on a visit to Wales, and their rambles in the Alps have even turned into serendipitous beer travel — to their delight, they discovered that many high Alpine huts serve beer!

Beer travel, the couple says, can't always follow a plan — especially when they try to reach smaller, more remote European breweries that don't have websites or get regular visitors.

The time in Italy when they drove three hours to the mountain brewery only to find it closed was not a pleasing experience at the time, but now it's a misadventure the couple shares — and laughs about.

But then there was the tiny brewery — actually it was a farm — in Normandy where the couple, by pure luck, just happened to show up within minutes of the start of the single weekly tour. Of course, it was in French, so they could hardly understand a word.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.




Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

"The guy would be talking in French, and all the other people would laugh and then look at us," Chris said.

But he took the couple on a tour of his farm, showing off where he grew his own hops and distilled hard alcohol. It was one of those magical days.

In areas like Bavaria in southern Germany, where the number of breweries is huge, a beer traveler can find himself in places where tourists seldom venture.

"You do end up in the small towns. It's great when you walk in, and there are maybe only five or six people there," Chris said. "It's just the old locals, having their beer and sitting around and talking, so when you walk in, you're obviously not from around those parts."

And that's when the magic of beer travel unfolds, like the hops in an English bitter ale, or the sweetness of a double-fermented Belgian brew.

"We want to encourage people," Chris said, "to step outside of their tourist box."

Contact Mike Swift at 408-271-3648 or mswift@mercurynews.com.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™