

Oktoberfest: Celebrating Bavarian Style

By Kathy Sorensen

No coverage of festivals would be complete without the mention of Oktoberfest. Reportedly the largest festival in the world, Oktoberfest draws an average of 6 million visitors in 16 days each year to the city of Munich, Bavaria, in the southeastern part of Germany. Imagine a special event in your life that people kept celebrating each year for almost 200 years! That's just what happened when King Ludwig (who was then Crown Prince) married Princess Theresa in October of 1810. That first year, the celebration even included a big horse race. Things have changed through the years, and sometimes Oktoberfest was canceled because of war or epidemics, but essentially, it has remained a festive, joyful celebration of Bavarian life.

Since 1835, Oktoberfest has begun with a big parade of thousands of Bavarian men, women, and children in traditional costumes. It is led by one youth representing the festival mascot called the "Munich child," the symbol that appears on the Munich coat-of-arms. After King Ludwig's time, Oktoberfest was moved earlier into September to take advantage of the better weather. But in keeping with the name, organizers make sure it goes into the first week of October, ending no earlier than German Unity Day on October 3. (German Unity Day commemorates the anniversary of German reunification in 1990.)

At a typical Oktoberfest, you will see girls dressed in dirndls (full skirts made of colorful patterned material), boys in lederhosen (leather knickers or shorts and suspenders with an embroidered crosspiece), oompah bands, folk-dancing, carnival booths selling German goods, and lots of German food and drinks served in various tents. There are activities and dancing for families, youth and children, and everywhere is the sound of folk music played by accordion or oompah bands.

An oompah band is most particular to Bavaria and the Oktoberfest. The four-piece band consists of a tuba, trombone, clarinet and accordion. The tuba sounds the distinctive "oom" on the strong beats, playing the roots of the chords. The clarinet often plays these notes in a higher octave on the off-beats, creating the "pah." The accordion provides full chords, and all instruments weave their parts to bring about the distinctive oompah sound. The accordion typically has a small keyboard like a piano for one hand, and buttons to play chords with the other hand. The player uses his arm to open and close the bellows to pump air through reeds inside the instrument. The clarinet, trombone and tuba are the same as instruments found in an orchestra, but are played in a folk style.

Over the last 200 years, many people have emigrated from Bavaria and have started Oktoberfest celebrations in many cities of the world. If you're lucky, you may even find an Oktoberfest in your city or state.



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