

Knights day out



A KNIGHT'S TALE Actors take part in a jousting display.

Photograph: Getty

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A family-friendly medieval festival near Munich opens a door to another world for one month each summer, writes **Derek Scally**

THE PARADE winds its way around the Bavarian wood, a rattle-taggle brigade of shining knights and blushing maidens, jesters, witches and a tanned strongman with a smile as steely as his pectorals.

Watching children hop up and down on their fathers' shoulders in delight as three grey camels glide by, followed by two burly oxen.

A bright bugle call opens the day at the Kaltenberg Ritterturnier (Knight's Tournament), the largest medieval festival of its kind in Europe.

Over 100,000 visitors pass through the medieval gate leading to Kaltenberg Castle near Munich which, for one month each summer, is the door to another world.

From humble beginnings as a local event 30 years ago, it has grown into a world-class spectacle that has managed to retain its original charm.

Arriving at the castle gate, new arrivals are struck with the satisfying smell of open wood fires and fresh bread, the sound of musicians on lutes and lyres and the sight of wooden huts filled with unique crafts from all over Europe.

It's not just the usual collection of bric-à-brac – the festival has a stringent selection process to ensure a variety of unique stands, from wooden puppets to handmade clothing, gold and silver jewellery to everything the budding knight could wish for in the form of chainmail, axes, swords and shields. And to keep a mix of traders, the rents of the better-selling traders subsidise the rents of those with a lower turnover.

Kaltenberg is far more than just commerce: in one hut, a storyteller has a captivated audience

enraptured with the Irish tale of The Magic Shoes. One stall down, a melancholy O'Carolan melody echoes from the stall of Austrian harp-builder Norbert Maier.

He has been coming to Kaltenberg for the last decade to display his self-built harps: plain European models and exquisite Irish instruments.

"People come to Kaltenberg searching for something: for a better time from the past and a taste of Celtic culture eradicated here in Europe by the conquering Romans and Teutons," says Maier, head of his own company Elvenkings Harps. "There are many medieval festivals around Europe, but Kaltenberg is special because keeping a close eye on quality and atmosphere is the prince."

THE PRINCE IN question is Prince Luitpold von Bayern, great grandson of the last Bavarian king, Ludwig III.

Founder and patron of the festival, he and his family work hard to keep the festival authentic, while offering returning visitors something new.

Now in its third decade, the family is still very hands-on, something that has helped the fair avoid lapsing into plastic Disneyland commercialism or fake Celtic mysticism.

"People come here for a few hours, sometimes with a very narrow idea of what to expect," says Prince Luitpold, a modest, middle-aged man with grey hair and glasses. "It's a real pleasure to be able to offer them the chance to let their fantasy go."

With an incredible eye for organisation, coupled with a loving attention to detail, the family has created a genuinely fun family day out that, beyond the entrance price, costs just as much or as little as visitors are prepared to spend.

There is no shortage of free activities: stages with jesters, puppets and bands; ironmongers and goldsmiths showing onlookers their craft. In a far-flung corner, a man in stocks is being tarred and feathered for "peeing in the beer".

Organisers have also given special thought to children, with a huge selection of stalls, activities and even a medieval carousel for the smaller visitors.

Beyond the spectacle, a visit to Kaltenberg is a masterclass in invisible crowd management and stringent quality control.

The organisation of parking and transport to and from the castle would leave Irish outdoor concert promoters red-faced.

Then there's the online booking system that keeps entry queues to a minimum, and immaculate pathways around the castle that make it easy to get around without ending knee-deep in mud.

Although nearly 12,000 people pass through the gates each day, the grounds never feel unpleasantly crowded.

The attention to detail around the grounds is demanding without being fussy. The wooden stalls serve beer in porcelain krugs – the only way to enjoy cold beer – while food comes in dishes with wooden cutlery. Plastic does not exist in Kaltenberg. Nor do neon hoardings, screaming sponsor posters or overpriced, brand-name products.

Considering there is nowhere else to eat for miles around, food prices are fair. There's everything from fish and oven-fresh flat loaves with tasty toppings to delicious platters of guinea fowl and duck.

Washing it all down is one of Germany's best beers: Prince Luitpold's own König Ludwig brand.

"The organising family take the festival really seriously and they never give less than 100 per cent," says Cork-born Karl Sassenberg, visiting with some friends from Ireland.

The highlight of any visit to Kaltenberg is the knights' tournament, a spectacle of horsemanship and show business without equal in Europe. With horseback battles and equestrian acrobatics, it's like the Horse Show meets Hollywood via American wrestling.

"I travel to many tournaments around Europe, but the quality of the horsemanship here is without equal," says Cornelia Scheäch, in the stands.

OVER 200 COSTUMED actors play their parts in the flowing narrative that changes each year but sticks to a classic good-v-evil formula. Every year the dastardly "Black Knight" returns to Kaltenberg, to enthusiastic boos from crowd.

In the course of the performance, the knights go through various stages of challenges, from tests of skill involving fire arrows, right up to nail-biting jousting tournaments where lances splinter in a clash of ash and the unlucky rider topples to the sand below.

The quality of the spectacle is no coincidence: the knights of Kaltenberg are Europe's best. They spend the rest of the year performing action scenes for Troy and other big screen spectacles. And yet, even though it is all just for show, the real-life spectacle is gripping. Children cheer and cry, fully engrossed in the action. Their parents, too, seem touched by the display of skill and the ideas of bravery and honour being celebrated.

When Prince Luitpold rides into the arena to greet his guests, there is a huge wave of affection for the Bavarian prince. Two hours later, after good has triumphed over evil once more, visitors stream from the arena with glowing eyes and broad grins.

Enjoying one last beer, the conversations return again to the magical atmosphere and the sheer sense of fun in being transported back in time.

"Compared to the religious wars and the 30 years' war that followed it, people in Germany think of the medieval times as the good old days," says one employee, Matthias, as he packs up his stall. "That feeling has remained to this day."

As the sun goes down over Kaltenberg, the happy visitors savour the last moments of the peasant life before heading down the hill to reality. This isn't a festival for Lord of the Rings anoraks, but for the German and international visitors looking for a one-day holiday from the stress of modern life.

** Kaltenberg Castle is 60km from Munich. By public transport, take the S-8 or regional express train to Geltendorf, from where shuttle buses operate to Kaltenberg

** Tickets from €17, child/family discounts available. Grounds fully accessible, free admission to visitors in wheelchairs. The 31st festival takes place on weekends from July 9th-25th. ritterturnier.de

** Accommodation available in nearby Landsberg am Lech at ammerseelech.de.

Get there

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com) both fly to Munich from Dublin

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