

Chicago's Christkindlmarket— (Away From) Home for the Holidays

Even though most are far away from home during the holidays, the vendors at Chicago's Christkindlmarket share their unique holiday spirit with two million visitors annually. BY DAVE SCHWAN

The grand opening in 2007 of Chicago's Christkindlmarket in Daley Plaza. Downtown Chicago. Courtesy of the Mayor's Office, City of Chicago and Christkindlmarket, Chicago.



City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style/In the air, there's a feeling of Christmas. Those opening lines from the classic Christmas song "Silver Bells" can sum up the spirit of most any city this time of year. However, they wonderfully describe the busy city sidewalks leading to Chicago's Daley Plaza, which is dressed in German holiday style. Every Christmas since 1997, the Plaza, in the heart of Downtown Chicago, becomes a little piece of Germany with the city's immensely popular Christkindlmarket. Surrounding the Plaza's famous fifty-foot sculpture by Pablo Picasso, more than fifty vendors sell everything from food, music, ornaments, and jewelry to glassware, toys, crafts, and Christmas treats. Their places of business, wooden booths topped with red-and-white striped awnings, are modeled after those at the Christmas market in Nuremberg, Germany, which dates from 1545. The glow that permeates the plaza, mixed with the aroma of bratwurst, schnitzel, strudel, and Glühwein along with music for the season provides irresistible holiday cheer, warming any cold day in December. And the fact that over two-thirds of the vendors come from Germany gives this market real authenticity.

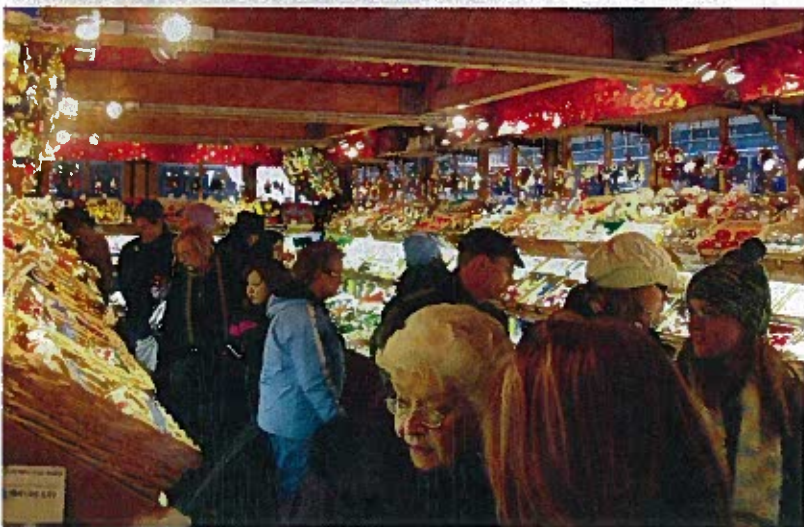
"It's fantastic every year!" says Volkmar Andrä with BTM Musikproduktion of Berlin, which sells compact discs and other music-related items for the season. They specialize in Christmas and children's music and have

been at the market since 1996. "The mixture of German and American visitors (gives us) a chance to spread typical German cultural traditions at Christmas time," says Andrä.

The idea for the market began in 1995 when the German American Chamber of Commerce of the Midwest (GACCoM) wanted to augment trade between the United States and Germany. The following year, the Chamber's then-Vice President, Peter Flatzek, and Commercial Services Manager Ray Lotter (now Vice President and Managing Director) had both German and local companies ready to participate. The first market was held on Pioneer Court, outside the Chamber's offices at the south end of Chicago's "Magnificent Mile" on North Michigan Avenue. Over three hundred thousand people attended and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley was so enthused, he invited the Chamber to move the market to Daley Plaza (named for Richard J. Daley, the current mayor's father). The Chamber estimates that over a million people now visit annually, with customers coming from as far away as Florida, Texas, California, Hawaii, even Canada, Europe, and Asia.

"The Chicago Christkindlmarket is very authentic compared to a lot of German markets," says Bernd Fehrenbach, who runs Fehrenbach Black Forest Clocks. Fehrenbach, like other vendors, finds Chicagoans interested in where and how products like his are made. "Our customers ask how long it takes to carve a Black Forest cuckoo clock and what tools and materials are involved in the manufacturing process. They can see a wood carving demonstration right inside our booth all day long." Fehrenbach, who first came to the market in 2003, says their customers' interest in their product often coincides with a curiosity as to where he and his fellow vendors live. "Most visitors like to share their own story about their past visits to Germany. This very often leads to an interesting conversation," says Fehrenbach.

Helga Pönnighaus, whose Kerzen Studio sells seasonal gifts and candles, first came to the market five years ago and also finds people curious about her home. "Chicago has great people and the Christkindlmarket has great customers. We have a lot of nice talks at the booth, if there is the time! Many customers are interested in certain regions in Germany



Top: The city's Christmas tree, Picasso sculpture, and some market booths light up Daley Plaza. Courtesy Christkindlmarket, Chicago/ Josh VanderBerg.
Left: Some of the many honey-based and wax products sold by the Bienes Honighaus from Augsburg, Bavaria. Courtesy Christkindlmarket, Chicago.
Below: Ornaments and glassware enhance the warm glow inside the Ornament House. Courtesy Christkindlmarket, Chicago.

IF YOU GO...

Location: Daley Plaza, three blocks west of Michigan Avenue, bordered by Dearborn, Clark, Washington, and the Daley Center. Macy's (formerly Marshall Field's) famous State Street Store, with its windows decorated for Christmas is one block east.

Hours: 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., Friday and Saturday. On the first and last days, (November 26th and December 24th) the market will be open from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Admission: Free.

Parking: Street parking (\$2.00 per hour) near the Plaza is available, but can be tough to find. The nearby Grant Park and Monroe Street Garages offer underground parking. There are also garages a block north of the market at Dearborn and Lake Streets. (Parking rates vary.) Public transportation has stops nearby with both train and bus service.

Website: www.christkindlmarket.com

City Information: www.explorechicago.org



Above: The Glen Sorgatz Band, a favorite at the market, adds to the atmosphere with festive holiday music. Courtesy Christkindlmarket, Chicago. **Right:** Santa Claus on hand for the festivities. **Below:** Colorful beer steins, among the many types of glassware and ceramic products sold by Frank's Bavarian Gift Shop from Aschau-Sachrang. Courtesy Christkindlmarket, Chicago.



because their family roots are there. In general, customers are interested in where the products come from. But it's more important for them to have the feeling that they can't get it anywhere else and that it has a German background."

After Chicago's market began, word of its success got back to Germany and sparked the interest of merchants like Sabine Korger, who owns the Bienes Honighaus in Augsburg. "During a German Christkindlmarket, I heard about the wonderful market in Chicago and I couldn't stop thinking about it. In December 2007, I first visited Chicago's market and checked out the requirements. The (German American Chamber) gave us a chance and a dream has come true. I particularly like the visitors in Chicago, because they are curious about other countries." The honey-based body care products and beeswax candles that they sell have been popular items. "Visitors especially find the very rare lavender honey from the south of France, the dark forest honey or the creamed honey made in Germany the most interesting," Korger says.

While the Bienes Honighaus is a relative new-comer to the market (2008), others have been mainstays since the beginning, like Frank Rauscher, proprietor of "Frank's Bavarian Gift Shop" from Aschau-Sachrang. Because working here means being away from home, many vendors rent apartments or hotel rooms during their stay. In Bernd Fehrenbach's case, his family will sometimes join him. "The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is where the most business is conducted, so nobody wants to miss this opportunity," he says. For Fehrenbach and his colleagues, that opportunity means more than just commerce. It means a marvelous interaction between people, customs, and culture in surroundings linked to a centuries-old tradition, set in the middle of a great American city. Helga Pönnighaus says it very well: "Chicago is a world city. We were always invited from the beginning. We enjoy the cultural exchange and have won lots of friends over the years. For us, this is like coming home." **GL**

Dave Schwan is a writer and broadcaster living and working in Chicago. He would like to thank Maren Biesler and Ray Lotter of the German American Chamber of Commerce of the Midwest for their invaluable help with this story. www.dschwan.com