

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

A Singaporean in Deutschland



Neues Rathaus (New Town Hall).

First, I regret to say that I am *not* a soccer fan. The only famous players I can name quite readily are Maradona, Pelé, Beckham, Owen, Ronaldo and that ugly German goalkeeper dude. However, I took a healthier interest in this

year's World Cup, though mostly for selfish reasons. Through some unexpected twist of fate, I found out a few weeks before a planned holiday in Europe that I would be in Munich on the day of the finals.



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Although the climactic match was actually held in Berlin, many who learned of my “good fortune” were confident the mood would be no less exuberant in the Bavarian state capital. Barring Germany’s sad defeat in the semi-finals, I too remained optimistic that I would witness nothing short of a major spectacle when I arrived.

A quick check with Wikipedia yielded the following fun facts: Munich is Germany’s third largest city with a population of 1.3 million. It was founded in 1158 by Welf Henry the

We arrived in the mid-afternoon heat wave, greeted by hordes of tourists and locals swarming the city centre, mostly eating and boozing amid animated chatter. An earlier drive through the more peripheral areas revealed an undeniable beauty, both grand and romantic, as university students cycled along special paths on the pavements or strolled holding hands just outside the institution’s high, sun-drenched walls. Residences feature quaint Tudor styles and geranium-coated balconies, and historical monuments abound.

A short walk to the city centre – the



Altes Rathaus (Old Town Hall)



Marienplatz, Heart of the City of Munich



Olympiaturm and Olympiapark
(Site of the 1972 Summer Olympics)

Lion, Duke of Saxony and Bavaria, next to a settlement of Benedictine monks, called *Munichen*. The city’s motto was “*Die Weltstadt mit Herz*” (The world city with a heart) for a long time but was recently replaced by “*München mag dich*” (Munich likes you).

Thanks to Steven Spielberg, many are no doubt aware that Munich was also the site of the 1972 Summer Olympics, during which Israeli athletes were taken hostage and later assassinated by terrorist gunmen from the Palestinian Black September group.

On a less morbid note, several games of the 1974 World Cup were also held in the city, including the German triumph against the Netherlands in a legendary final. The current Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) was ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising on 29 June 1951. Ratzinger later served as Archbishop of Munich from 1977 to 1982.

Marienplatz – caused me to stop for a quick photo snap as I spotted the first sign of World Cup fever – a string of large banners swaying from an impressively bulky building along a busy street. Many more banners and posters followed, as well as stores displaying a wide range of World Cup souvenirs. But alas, they were all closed. Unlike shops in Singapore, those in Europe rarely open on Sundays. Darn it!

They do, however, feature very colourful lion figures – one outside every other store – specially painted in bright hues. Our guide explained that these were used to attract the locals back to the city centre instead of shopping in the suburban districts. Turns out the kids love it the most, so the ploy seems to have worked. I passed one such figure painted with a doctor’s white coat and slinging a stethoscope. If only I had the time to take a photo.

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If you ever visit Munich, there are three things you should never miss. One is the Oktoberfest – duh. Another is the Rathaus-Glockenspiel, located in the Marienplatz's Town Hall tower. This gorgeous clock features life-sized moving figures that show scenes from a royal wedding parade, complete with a medieval jousting tournament, as well as a performance of the famous Schäfflertanz (roughly translated into "barrel-makers' dance"). Its once-daily routine occurs at 5 pm sharp, and never fails to enjoy large audiences.

The third must-not-miss experience, of course, is a visit to a beer garden. There are hundreds of them in Munich alone but perhaps the most famous is the Hofbräuhaus am Platzl. Originally built in 1589 by the Bavarian duke William V, it was almost completely destroyed during World War II and then restored in 1958. In addition to a restaurant which serves traditional Bavarian dishes, it also houses a ballroom, an inn and the all-important beer garden, which serves only the best from the Staatliches Hofbräuhaus brewery.

The place was buzzing with activity when we dropped in after dinner, but believe it or not, many of its patrons were indoors (no televisions anywhere, argh!) with an equal number parked outside in an actual garden, watching the match on a tiny screen at the other end. I hate to say this, but I was pretty disappointed, having witnessed the football fever back home at places like Robertson Quay and Orchard Road (heck, even my emergency room – patients well enough to watch the World Cup automatically get zero medical leave, hah!).

My tour group, which comprised mostly middle-aged and elderly Americans, Australians and Canadians, chose to sit indoors, leaving me to scuttle in and out as I attempted to catch the score, watch its 'live' band (whose members also kept mysteriously disappearing, for similar reasons I suspect), and gulp down mouthfuls of my beer, which arrived in a massive one litre tankard and cost only 6.5 Euros (S\$13). I ordered the lightest brew they had but started flushing after a few sips. Suffice to say, I decided against finishing

the concoction, but I must admit that taste-wise, it is really quite out of this world.

To cut a long story short, Italy beat France through penalty shots, and I managed to catch the finale in my hotel room, of all places. We had to beat a hasty retreat due to an early morning call the next day, after which we headed to Innsbruck, Salzburg, Vienna, St Moritz and Lucerne. A random poll of Europeans we spoke to during the course of our travels indicated overwhelming support for Italy (one guy thinks Argentina has the best team on the planet), and I proudly wore a Deutschland World Cup polo shirt (purchased in Munich) in Salzburg (but repacked it after a local guide told me it is "risky", since "only Germans love Germany").



Musical performers at Hofbräuhaus am Platzl.



Outdoor patrons of Hofbräuhaus am Platzl watching World Cup 2006.

In summary, Singapore easily beats Munich hands down where World Cup mania is concerned. But then, things may have been very different if Germany had made it to the finals. Still, I have no regrets about visiting Munich and strongly encourage others to do the same.

Wish I had been in Rome this year instead of last, though. Now that would have been something to remember! ■