

Holiday traditions vary across Europe



Rick Steves

Like a German child's fantasy, Nurnberg's fairy-godmother-like teenage angel stretched out her arms and said, "If you're very, very gentle ... you can touch my wings." I stayed seated while little Bavarian preschoolers delicately mobbed the stage to touch their Christkind.

Bavaria and Tirol — two traditional regions of Germany and Austria — are rich in Christmas traditions. While most travelers visit for the Christmas markets, that's just the start of the holiday charm here. Germany's grandest Christmas market, in Nurnberg, comes complete with an angelic Christkind dressed in gold, and played by a real-life teenage girl.

How does a female Christkind fit in the Christmas story? Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther — the church reformer who hailed from these parts — wanted to shift the focus from St. Nicholas back to the Christ child. But as Germans had a hard time getting their mind around baby Jesus giving gifts, the Christmas gift-giver gradually morphed into a sweet girl who was still called the Christ child (or Christkind).

I was once in Nurnberg, producing a TV program about traditional European Christmas celebrations and had arranged an interview with the Christkind. Chosen every other year in a contest, she's like a rock star, complete with bodyguard, publicist and entourage. We had been filming a montage of mistletoe kisses in action, and her bodyguard explained she could kiss the cheek of others — but they couldn't kiss hers.

Each culture has a mythic gift-giver that parents use to encourage



Each culture has a mythic gift-giver that parents use to encourage kids to be good. In Switzerland, it is the duo of Samichlaus and Schmutzli. **RICK STEVES**

kids to be not naughty, but nice. In Switzerland, children enjoy an annual visit from a dynamic Christmas duo: Samichlaus — Swiss-German for "St. Nick" — and the black-clad henchman Schmutzli, his sidekick. We filmed Swiss children promising they were nice and not naughty, singing Samichlaus a carol, and, only then, eagerly digging into his big burlap bag to get their goodies.

While much of Europe is down on the commercialism of the holiday season (I've even found some towns proclaiming "Santa-free" zones), much of Europe is also so secular that you hardly see any Christmas festivities. Austria, however, celebrates with sacred and traditional gusto. On that same trip, I visited a Tiro-

lean farming family and enjoyed dashing through the fields in a two-horse open sleigh. Then, at the door of their gingerbread-cute-yet-massive home, the entire clan greeted us with an angelic Christmas yodel.

Inside their time-warp house, grandma made cookies, an old Habsburg grandpa played the zither (like a miniature harp laid flat), and mom lit the advent wreath while teaching her child the significance of each candle. Dad blessed the house from the attic to the barn by spreading incense smoke and sprinkling holy water. The parents decorated the tree in secret, placed the gifts, and lit real candles. They rang a bell, and the kids tumbled into the room filled with joy.

My time in Austria

had its musical ups and downs. In Salzburg, my film crew and I hiked to the abbey where Maria of "The Sound of Music" caused her fellow sisters to sing, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" The sisters had agreed to let us be present at their holy Mass.

Our sound man carefully set up the microphone stand to the side of the altar, facing the choir of nuns (as I sat in the back happily humming "Climb Ev'ry Mountain"). Suddenly, the old but very spry Mother Superior dashed across the altar, evicting the sound man, who had to drag all his gear out of that holy zone. We heard the music ... but couldn't record it.

Thankfully, the next morning — Christmas morning — we were given a

royal perch in the Salzburg cathedral. As the cameras rolled, a huge orchestra and choir filled the place with a glorious, powerful "Pastoral Mass" by Anton Diabelli.

Austria is the home of "Silent Night." In Oberndorf — the town just outside of Salzburg, where the song originated — I hoped to catch a performance of "Stille Nacht" for viewers. On Christmas Eve, we scrambled to record at several spots where events were to take place. But it was basically a muddy, touristy mess, with underwhelming music and not a hint of the magic we had naively hoped for. Instead, we managed to persuade a couple of musicians to perform a private little concert in the town's church for us ... and oh,

what a moment. After a day of frustration, we filmed "Silent Night" as it was first played — with two guitars and two singers.

Today, this heavenly song can be heard from small-town street corners in America to magnificent cathedrals in Europe. With all the fear and misunderstanding in our world today, its message of peace deserves repeating. However and wherever you celebrate this year, I hope you too have a peaceful holiday — as the song says — both calm and bright.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Star goes back to Ireland to golf more

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
Tribune Content Agency

Brian d'Arcy James said when he was a young actor, he couldn't have imagined landing prominent roles in three major projects in one year.

"You never really aim to try to orchestrate these kinds of things," said James, who this year is in a film ("The Family McMullen"), a series ("The Copenhagen Test") and an off-Broadway show ("Anna Christie"). "Generally speaking, actors fall into the beggars-can't-be-choosers category and so you just keep your head down swinging, trying to move forward with any kind of opportunities that come along. But a year with projects across the board in these categories is exciting."

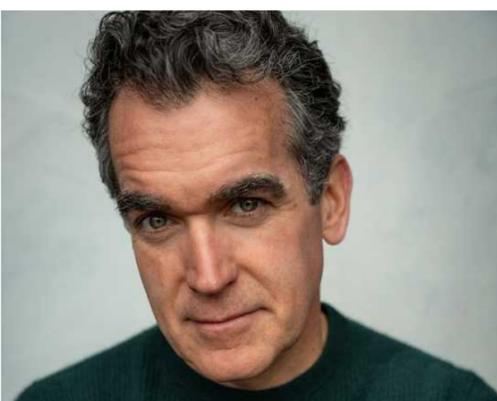
This interview with James has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Where did you film "The Family McMullen" and "The Copenhagen Test"?

A: "The Family McMullen" was filmed in the New York area. It's always very nice being able to shoot a film or TV show in your backyard. But it's also great to go to different places for work as with "The Copenhagen Test." We shot that in Toronto. It's such a great, vibrant town with a ton of production happening there. And its proximity to New York is great. If you have a little break, it doesn't take long to get home.

Q: What is your family lineage?

A: My ancestry is mostly Irish, with a little Welsh in



Actor Brian d'Arcy James got engaged in Costa Rica and calls it a "stunning country." **YELLOWBELLY**

there, too. Kelly, O'Brien and Cullaton are all family names, so I've always had a strong connection to my Irish heritage. I'm named after my uncles Brian Kelly and D'Arcy James.

Q: As a musician, you also sang the national anthem at sporting events.

A: A few NBA games, a number of MLB games and one NFL game. My favorite experience so far (was) singing the national anthem for a Monday Night Football game in Detroit for my favorite team, the Lions. I got a little nod of encouragement from coach Dan Campbell before I started and that may be my career highlight.

Q: Have you visited places for work that were so nice that you traveled back there later for a trip?

A: I just recently did this very thing. Ireland. Last summer I shot an Ed Burns movie where the bulk of the story takes place on different Irish golf courses. We played some extraordinary courses, and I'm now a crazy golf fanatic. And so when we wrapped that film, I knew I wanted to get back to these locations to experience them from a pure enjoyment factor. So coming back this summer to the west coast of Ireland and simply playing golf with no other distractions was a blast.

Q: What is your favorite

vacation destination?

A: I think I'd have to say Costa Rica. It's a stunning country and the people there are so beautiful and kind. My wife and I got engaged there, so that makes it stand out as my favorite place.

Q: Where are your favorite weekend getaways?

A: We have a little house just over an hour outside New York City. That's my No. 1 favorite weekend place — trees, some air, a bit of solitude. I've come to really desire that.

Q: What is your best or worst vacation memory?

A: There is a legendary story in our family of the worst vacation ever. It was a trip to Florida in the early '80s that my parents planned. They saw an ad promising a luxurious condominium amidst rows and rows of glorious orange trees. If I recall correctly, the condo wasn't finished being built, and I'm not sure what the deal was with the orange groves, but they essentially amounted to rows of dirt with maybe a few scrawny bushes. On top of it, someone got chicken pox and someone else sprained their ankle. We had a family meeting and determined that the vacation might be more relaxing if it was over. We all instantly agreed and headed home.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

American Airlines downgrades passenger, then refuses refund

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

I booked a business class seat for my American Airlines flight from St. Thomas to Charlotte, North Carolina. But 45 minutes before boarding, a gate agent told me that my seat was broken, and I'd have to move to the main cabin.

They promised a refund for the fare difference, plus a \$500 inconvenience fee. Another agent printed a new boarding pass but kept changing the compensation amount — first to \$200, then to \$300. I accepted, assuming that I could resolve it later.

But when I submitted a refund request online, American denied it. The airline's customer relations department also rejected my claim, and emails to corporate contacts only got me generic replies. After weeks of back-and-forth, I still hadn't received a dime.

Why won't American Airlines honor its promise?
— *Laura MacLennan, Gurnee, Illinois*

A: American Airlines should have immediately refunded the fare difference and honored its compensation offer. Under Department of Transportation rules, passengers who are downgraded from a higher class of seating to a lower class are entitled to a refund for the difference in price. But if an agent offers an additional \$500 for the inconvenience, then American should follow through.

But as good as this sounded, I'm almost certain that either the agents misspoke or you misunderstood them. The reason they kept changing the amount was that they needed to calculate the fare difference.

Airlines usually calculate these types of refunds by the book, although I've witnessed a few shenanigans in the past. For example, for an involuntary downgrade, I've seen them recalculate the price of your seat based on the day's fare. And as you probably know, the walk-up economy class fare can be almost as much as an

advance-purchased business class ticket. Airlines can deny their customers any fare adjustment based on this funny math.

At first, I suspected this was the problem — a fare recalculation that left you with nothing. And you say you did too. Technically, American could try some funny math, and it would be completely legal. But it's definitely not the right thing to do.

You might have been able to avoid this by asking the agent for a written confirmation of the refund. While verbal assurances are common, a paper trail is critical. Always document your interactions, including the names of employees and the time of your interaction. You had asked for the names of the gate agents but said, "They gave me a hard time about this, and I felt weird trying to zone in on their name tags."

I see you escalated this to the American executives I list on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. At the time you contacted me, the executives had

switched email addresses (maybe to hide from customers like you), which is why your requests were going into the void. (Don't worry, my research team has fixed this.)

The point is that the executives should have never abandoned their emails, and they should have responded to you.

If you ever get into a situation like this, it's best to look up the DOT rules and make sure that the airline is following them.

I contacted American on your behalf. The airline claimed that you had not been downgraded but instead moved to a different business class seat. You sent them a boarding pass that confirmed you sat in economy. American issued a \$300 travel credit and \$226 for the fare difference.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.