

ALE IS WELL

A beer trail through Central and Western Europe allows one to sample not just the brews but also experience the continent's drinking culture

words by
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What chai is to the heart of India, beer is to the soul of Europe. For centuries, it has been intricately woven into the culture, brewed in taverns, monasteries, and perfected in breweries where traditions are handed down through the generations.

As I embarked on a beer trail through Central and Western Europe, my journey began with Edelstoff beer at **Augustiner-Keller**, a traditional Bavarian *biergarten* in Munich. Here, beer flows from wooden oak barrels, crafted with water, barley, and hops—true to the German Purity Law, a 500-year-old food regulation ensuring quality. The brew, delightfully refreshing, was perfect for a summer evening. I paired it with a pretzel sprinkled with sesame seeds and a salad of couscous, leafy greens, and lemon vinaigrette.

While Oktoberfest may position Munich as the ultimate beer mecca, I journeyed further into Germany's **Black Forest**, where I discovered Alpirsbacher beer. This light, golden lager seemed perfectly suited to the untamed beauty of the Schwarzwald region. Sipping it by Lake Titisee, I indulged in a



Savouring a cold beer in Hallstatt, a scenic town an hour away from Salzburg

comforting bowl of mac and cheese, finishing with a classic Black Forest pastry. The brewery also offers immersive tours that share its legendary history and background.

After savouring Germany's rich lagers, I travelled to Prague for Bohemian-style Pilsner brews. Seeking a unique experience, I visited the **Original Beer Spa**, where I soaked in a barrel-like tub filled with barley, hops, brewer's yeast, and hot water. For centuries, brewer's yeast has been revered for its supposed medicinal benefits,

and here, wellness intertwined seamlessly with indulgence.

Tasting **Krušovice's** light and dark lagers on tap, alongside homemade beer bread, I let the soothing warmth of the beer-infused bath revitalise me. After a 30-minute soak, I stepped into a sauna and lay on a hay bed. To preserve the benefits, I was advised to only wipe off my body, avoiding a shower after this indulgent session.

As I ventured into Austria, a country known for the world's second-highest beer

consumption per capita, I found its presence on the global beer stage to be understated. Austria boasts exceptional local hops and a brewing tradition that dates to the medieval era. My first tryst was with the Ottakringer Vienna Lager, a deep, rich brew with nutty undertones. It paired beautifully with pasta tossed in olive oil and herbs.

During a day trip to the car-free town of Hallstatt, about an hour from Salzburg, I stumbled upon another gem—**Hallstatt Das Bier**. This darker lager was perfect for leisurely swigging while strolling through the quaint and interesting streets.

Heading west to Belgium, I encountered a nation known for its



WHERE TO STAY

Ventana Hotel Prague is an Art Nouveau-style boutique hotel overlooking the Old Town and offering skyloft rooms and suites.

The Augustin Brussels is a boutique hotel and a short walk away from the historic city centre.

Sheraton Grand Salzburg is a luxury hotel situated adjacent to the Mirabell Gardens.

WHERE TO EAT

Mona Lisa, Titisee-Neustadt, for Italian food in the Black Forest region in Germany.

Agave Restaurant for modern Mexican cuisine in Prague.

Patatak in Brussels and **FritBar** in Bruges for frites (fries).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Visitors can explore the 18th-century brewing rooms at the Heineken brewery in Amsterdam; When travelling, give the local brews a try; Beer is an intrinsic part of European culture.



Brewed in Cistercian abbeys under the eyes of monks, proceeds from the sales of these beers go towards charitable causes. “Always look for the International Trappist Association mark on your bottle,” advised our tour guide in Brussels. At **Le Trappiste** in Bruges, a historic 800-year-old cellar, now serving as a bar, I indulged in the Westmalle Duo, another classic Trappist brew.

Culminating my journey, I found myself at **Heineken’s** interactive brewery in Amsterdam. The experience allowed me to see, smell, and touch the ingredients that go into the iconic brew.

As the tour concluded, I left with a strong desire to return and dive deeper into Europe’s rich beer culture and heritage.

diverse beer offerings. Belgian beers, with an average alcohol content of six per cent, exceed the global average of four per cent. Among them, Lambic-style beers like Oude Geuze—wheat beer aged in oak barrels—paired best with the local *frites*. At **Scott’s Bar & Kitchen** in Brussels, I sampled many distinctive brews, including fruit-

infused lambics. One memorable indulgence was the Cherry Chouffe, which I savoured again while seated al fresco in Bruges, paired with a veggie-loaded pizza at the Otomat pizzeria. Belgium is also known for its Trappist beers that offer a deeper connection to monastic traditions, with six of the world’s eleven Trappist breweries.

GETTING THERE

Air India flies non-stop to Amsterdam from Delhi.