Chapter Nine – Beer festival – 27 years old

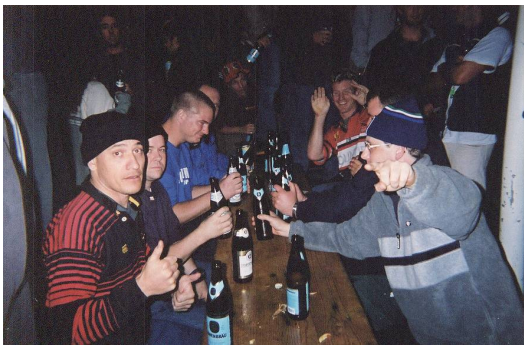
The Munich beer festival in Southern Germany has a reputation for being the best of its kind. It's known as the Oktoberfest but actually starts in September to avoid the notorious early winters in the region. The beer halls are enormous and always bustling with activity.

The opportunity arose one year to pay a visit with Greg Horton and Justin Wiki. Their friends from back home were planning to attend the first few days. They had already arranged to stay at Thalkirchen Camping Ground just to the North of the festival. We decided the three of us would be more comfortable sharing a hotel room and meet them later for drinks. Booking a hotel however proved very difficult due to the timing of the festival and short notice. There were no definite bookings available so we had to go on a standby list.

If we were unsuccessful we would have to join the great unwashed in a field under canvass. Fortunately Greg received a phone call a couple of weeks before and the accommodation was booked. I left the organising to Greg, as he volunteered. Unfortunately the kiwis do like a bargain, he booked the cheapest flight which meant we had to change in Holland.

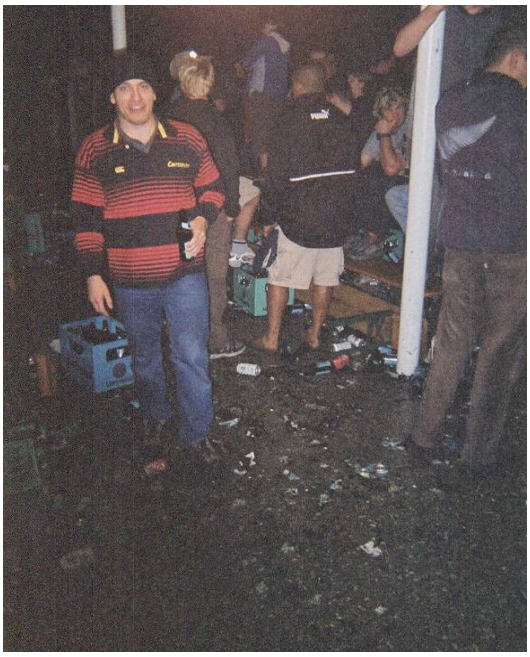
We arrived the night before the opening ceremony and discovered our hotel could not have been better sited. It was located in-between the main train station and the camp site / festival. I am not sure if this was intentional on Gregs' part but it certainly made up for the flight. That night we stopped off at a supermarket and bought a case of beer and made our way to the camp site. It was cold and wet and we had to wrap up.

The Kiwis, Aussies and South Africans seem to stick together wherever they travel. They form a kind of society detached from the rest of the world, which I think is probably for the best. In England they have the walkabout pubs showing sports events from back home. It might be because their antics are not tolerated by the general public, they do take getting drunk to a different level. In my twenties I fitted in quite well, I'm not sure if I would put up with it now.



We didn't find the friends we were supposed to meet up with. The drinking area was small enough to see everyone who was there so they must have arrived early the next day. People gathered around to watch us play a few drinking games. This involved singing and moving a bottle of beer around the group in a certain pattern. In another area there was broken glass everywhere but no one took any notice. A few people had cut arms when they fell over on top of the glass.

This is typical of the Southern hemisphere approach to a night out, complete mayhem and we will sort it out tomorrow. I may be coming across a little negatively, generally my nights out with Kiwis and Aussies were good fun.



I suppose they treat their time in Europe like a working holiday and make the most of their time before they have to go back home. There were a number of facilities at the camp but I am glad we didn't stay as even then I liked a little more comfort.

- About 11 acres of fenced in grounds
- 300 sites for tents, 150 for caravans
- Water, drainage and electricity
- Washing rooms, showers, toilets
- Electric outlets
- Laundry with washing machines
- Cooking equipment
- Self-service shop
- Snack bar with roofed over terrace
- Lounge with TV, billiard table
- Caravan and tent rental on inquiry

Justin and Greg agreed that we made the right choice and we left just before it closed.

The next morning we attended the beer festivals' opening ceremony. We joined the crowd lining the streets at around 10:00 and waited for the parade to begin. Some people were able to watch from their hotel balconies. The parade consisted of men and women marching in formation dressed in traditional attire. There were banners and flags as well as music playing from brass bands. The event is held every year so all the participants are well drilled.

I think the parade is something that is only necessary to experience once. Despite the variety of costumes and instruments it does get a little repetative after a while. But as the festival is not officially open until it is finished, it is something to watch whilst the time passes.

The festivals' origins began in October 1810 as a party to celebrate a royal wedding. Today a lot of food and drink are consumed over the sixteen days by the six million people that attend.

- 7 million litres of beer
- 60,000 pork knuckles
- 140,000 pork sausages
- 500,000 chickens

There are also horse drawn carts adorned with colourful trappings transporting barrels of beer.

All of the breweries are represented and the parade lasts for a couple of hours. The mayor completes the procession at noon in a festive coach followed by a decorated horse-drawn brewers' cart. At the end of the parade he taps the first keg of beer and shouts, "o'zapft is!" (The keg is tapped).

The Oktoberfest is held in Theresienwiese, a large park to the South West of the Munich city centre and is accessible by U-Bahn. The weather was wet and mild when we arrived at the entrance and I was a little surprised at what I saw before me. I didn't really know what to expect but the sheer scale of the event was amazing.

A sprawling fairground lay before us, bright colours, noise, delicious smells, a wonderful combination. The food stalls were sprinkled between the halls selling lots of typical Bavarian cuisine. I spotted sauerkraut, bratwurst and pork, all good wholesome food to help soak up the beer. The fairground was situated at the end furthest from the main gate and there was a real holiday atmosphere in the air.

The beer halls had brightly coloured fronts and were lined up each side of the main street. They belied their size from the outside as they were facing with the narrow side to the street.

There are many iconic destinations that draw crowds of people to them, many with religious connotations. The Munich beer festival is an alcoholics Valhalla and I was there for three days!

The first thing to establish was a meeting place in case we got separated as we had no phones to communicate with. After a few hours of drinking in an unfamiliar environment it would be easy to lose each other. We chose a pork knuckle stall and agreed to meet there at the top of each hour to regroup if necessary. Quite a good idea I thought, it was beneficial touring with seasoned travellers / drunkards.

We met the others and now had a group that was twelve strong, the right number to fill a table. We chose a hall at random, found a table and ordered a round of drinks. For most of the group this was their third trip and they laid down some ground rules.

- Every half an hour we would shake some dice and the person with the lowest score would have to down the remainder of their drink in one go
- Never point at anyone with your finger only use your elbow
- Only drink with your 'non' drinking hand or you have to finish the drink in one go

Just a bit of fun to pass the time and although simple enough would no doubt prove more difficult as time went on! The service was remarkably quick for such a busy place. This was no doubt mainly due to German organisation and efficiency. It may also be due to the frequency of re ordering, a stein take longer to drink than a pint.

The beer was ice cold and fresh tasting, one of Gregs' friends made a comment "if they held the beerfest in England they would probably warm the f…… glasses up". I am not sure if this was just for my benefit but Greg and Justin immediately looked at me to see how I would react. They needn't have worried, I just laughed and agreed, I have a very low opinion of beer in England. The way it is kept and served is poor in general and completely price driven.

I had never drank from a glass stein before and they held 1.8 pints or a litre as our European friends say. The halls must sell a lot of beer during the twelve hours or so they are open. I saw barmaids carrying arm fulls of steins and they must be tired at the end of the day. Food was available inside but we planned to eat in-between changing venues. It would be good to get some fresh air occasionally.

Oompah bands played an assortment of Bavarian tunes adding to the atmosphere. There was a popular song in the UK charts at the time called 'hey baby'. The bands took advatage of its popularity by playing it every two hours and everyone sang along. After a couple of halls the kiwis had had their fill of lager and decided to check out the schnapps tent. I declined as I wanted to pace myself and getting completely wasted halfway through the first day wasn't a good idea. I decided to check out the fair and made my way to the rollercoaster. There were a hundred people in the queue and there was loud music playing.

I got to the very front but it was full so I had to wait. While I was waiting I turned around and got the remaining crowd singing to the song being played. I met up with the others at the pork knuckle stall and some of them looked the worst for wear. I think I made the right choice to have a break when I did. We carried on in the same vein as before and after several hours more it was time to call it a day. We said our farewells and as the others headed for their tents in Thalkirchen, we headed back to our more comfortable hotel room.

I stopped off at a local supermarket to buy us some bottles of water for the next morning. One of the best parts of having a drink in Germany, or most of Europe for that matter, is that there are no unnecessary chemicals added to the beer. This makes a vast difference to the next morning. It only takes some water and a good wholesome breakfast and you are ready to take on the next day with a clear head. The majority of chemicals are added to the beer in England to help preserve the shelf life and a hangover is standard. This is certainly the case with lagers.

The next two days were much of the same, light rain, lots of food and drink (a little slower on the third day). Overall a very enjoyable experience, one I hope to revisit one day.