

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

HAMBURGER DOM

Germany Holidays: The Hamburger DOM

Once it was where they went to get closer to heaven, but these days the Hamburger DOM is where northern Germans go to get flung up into the sky.

The name is confusing, even for Germans. *Dom* is ‘cathedral’, but the Hamburger DOM has little of the spiritual about it, unless you count the clear stuff that comes in bottles – and the fact that this festival takes place in a region of Hamburg called *Heiligengeistfeld*, or Holy Ghost Field.

The DOM is north Germany’s equivalent of Munich’s Oktoberfest, but this Hamburg festival comes in three sections, spring, summer and winter, each a month long, which together attract nine million visitors. Unlike the Oktoberfest, where a large proportion of the celebrants are from overseas, the Hamburger DOM is essentially a German affair, a magnet for German families and teenagers, the latter particularly keen to do stuff they wouldn’t normally do.

The story behind the name is interesting. The festival was first recorded in 1329 as a Christmas Market in the marketplace around the Cathedral, where it was a mix of traders, artisans, jugglers and showmen who waylaid the populace en route to prayer. It proved very popular, reconvening for new seasons in spring, summer and autumn. When the weather turned foul the traders got into the habit of seeking refuge in the cathedral itself, a move that prompted the Archbishop to try to ban such sacrilege. He was met with a storm of protest from his congregation, and was forced to expressly allow the traders to remain in the Dom during *Hamburger Schietwetter* (shit weather).

The DOM is north Germany’s equivalent of Oktoberfest

Eventually the Cathedral had decayed so much it had to be torn down, and the festival was relocated, but it kept its name. Today the market element has been rather eclipsed by the growth of roller coasters and big dippers, brass bands and beer tents, although there is still local produce on sale. Seasonal highlights include a medieval fort and a witches’ village during the spring DOM, cowboy action in a Wild West town during the summer DOM, and Advent magic in medieval costumes during the winter DOM.

The DOM isn’t the only big funfair in northern Germany. In Bremen, the Bremer Freimarkt brightens up dull days towards the end of October, attracting more than four million visitors over 17 days, and is famous for its smoked eel and *Schmalzkuchen* (small, freshly fried doughnuts). Meanwhile at the end of June Hanover stages a marksmen’s funfair called the Schützenfest, where more than 5,000 contestants compete based on their rifle shooting abilities. The festival parade, with more than 10,000 participants and 100 bands is 12 kilometres long, the longest parade in the world.