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OKTOBERFEST, KITCHENER-WATERLOO

MORE THAN JUST BEER AND BRATWURST

The days are getting shorter, the air brisker, and mittens and jackets are finding their way out of storage. What better way to make the transition from summer patio to fireside romance than to indulge in a hearty pint or two and a juicy bratwurst laden with sauerkraut? Willkommen to Oktoberfest! If you can't afford the flight or time to get to Munich, Germany, the traditional Oktoberfest headquarters, you can enjoy the second largest of the world's Bavarian festivals right in your own backyard!

Kitchener-Waterloo, located in the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario, is only an hour's drive from Toronto and proudly welcomes festival goers and beer-swillers from across North America. For nine days every year, K-W is transformed into southern Ontario's party central as visitors gather to get their fill of lederhosen-bedecked men and rosy-cheeked German girls in low-cut dirndls. And, of course, there is also the bier!

Beer is an integral part of Oktoberfest, and many a stein will be clinked across the long tables of Kitchener's fifteen "festhallen" (halls) amid toasts of "Prost!" Those prone to over-imbibing are nicknamed the "Bierleichen", (beer corpses), though these leichen are also among the first to get down when the polka players strike up a rousing round of the festival's favourite chorus, the "Vogeltanz", or Chicken Dance.

The festival was not always the brewery-sponsored event it is today. The party originally got started back in 1810 when Bavarian King Ludwig I married Princess Therese of Saxony-Hildburghausen. As only a royal family can do, the Ludwigs invited all of Munich to a grand fete that celebrated the wedding with a horse race and state agricultural fair. Growing out of the Ludwigs' nuptials, Oktoberfest came to celebrate the spirit of Gemuetlichkeit—loosely translated as a cosy and welcoming "community." Although biergartens abound as part of today's festival, Kitchener's Oktoberfest offers much more in the way of Gemuetlichkeit than just beer thanks to great music, food, and family friendly activities.

The "Willkommen Platz", a virtual Bavarian village in downtown Kitchener, is the heart of the Fest and the perfect place for starting your German journey. Closed off to all but pedestrian traffic, the Platz is open daily throughout the festival to offer all the basics of the Oktoberfest experience. Check out free live entertainment, or bring your kids to the midway to meet local mascot, Onkel Hans, a jolly orange man complete with a handlebar moustache and rotund belly. Visit the nearby Hans Haus for kitschy feathered felt hats and *I heart Oktoberfest* gear, or pick up an authentic stein to liven up your domestic brew.

Next, head out to one of the many cultural events taking place around the city. Hubertushaus, run by the German-Canadian Hunting & Fishing Club, is where archers compete in the long-running Bogenschuetzenfest, where the aim is to use a bow and arrow to knock off either a feral boar or an eagle mounted upon a 35 foot pole. Animal lovers need not fear as both targets are Styrofoam replicas. At the Josef Schneider Haus, a “living” Mennonite homestead museum, families can partake in the pioneer harvest during Erntefest. Finally, spend an afternoon watching the Barrel races on King Street where teams roll barrels for fun and prizes.

After all the excitement, hit the Festhalle and make sure to fill your bellies with the best in German festival food! Although Oktoberfest reinforces the German beer and meat loving stereotype, menus do go beyond the idea of a stein in one hand and a wurst in the other. Try chowing down on pork hocks and potato dumplings, or pair a schnitzel with red cabbage and a pretzel. When the urge for a sausage can't be stifled, choose from the wide variety available—knockwurst, weisswurst, or bierwurst are just some of your options! Finish off with a German torte or strudel to satisfy your sweet tooth. Entry to the Festhallen will also get you shaking your lederhosen-ed tail feather with entertainment ranging from polka and oompah bands to folk dancing and singing. Visit Oktoberfest and make a toast, or “ein prosit”, to good food, good beer, and good Gemuetlichkeit.