

THE GEM IN GERMANY'S SOUTH-WEST

With Easter fast approaching, **Dini Martinez** explores the city of Ulm, an off-the-beaten-track, long-weekend escape with tons of potential. Einstein's birthplace offers everything from history and culture, through nature, to authentic culinary experiences and stunning and varied surroundings, all with the unique Swabian touch.



Far left: The famous fairy-tale Neuschwanstein Castle
Below centre: The Christmas market selling mulled wine and pretzels
Right: Ulm Minster, the tallest church in the world Bottom: The old town of Ulm

On the border of the blue Danube, just across the border from Bavaria, lies a small town which, for some reason, seldom appears in history books. It was passed by Napoleon in the early 1800s, has the highest church spire in the world and more recently was the birthplace of none other than Albert Einstein – the originator of the theory of relativity. Yet, it generally stays untouched by Lonely Planet devotees and mainstream overseas tourism.

The real Swabian experience

The small town of Ulm is a place where you'll meet real Swabian people, a cultural group accounting for the majority of south-west Germany's demographics. They are not pompous and elegant like the neighbouring French, nor sophisticated and diverse like the Swiss to the south, nor are they immensely cute like the Austrians in their 'dirndl' and 'lederhosen' to the south-west. Instead, they are often portrayed as stingy, overly serious or a little prudish – like characters in one of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales. On the positive side,

the same stereotype means frugal, clever, entrepreneurial and hard-working. All of the above applies and more. Unarguably, Ulmers (the people from Ulm) are welcoming and utterly authentic in their customs and traditions.

Fastnacht

When we were in Ulm, one of those traditions had been under-way since 6 January, when scary, colourful masks first get dusted off. *Fastnacht* is the pre-Lenten carnival in Alemannic folklore. The associated, full-blown parades can be seen in Switzerland, southern Germany, Alsace and Vorarlberg until Shrove Tuesday, 46 days before Easter Day. Modern folk sometimes like to simplify things by substituting the old fanfare with a good-old simple pub crawl but wherever you get stuck, it is bound to involve unforgettable fun, traditional music and no small amount of home-brewed beer.

Ulm

This merging and adapting of traditions with modernism is typical for the former Imperial City founded in around 850AD. Stroll down the pedestrian *Hirschstrasse* (translated literally as 'Deer Street') from the train station, which links you to Munich (one hour), Paris (five hours),

Lake Constance (one-and-a-half hours), the Black Forest (four hours) and many more, the old merges with the new in a seamless flow.

Old-style Pretzel-houses effortlessly fuse with modern cafés and shops. Street artists provide plenty of entertainment, together with a constant buzz of diverse people and enticing smells such as the typical *leberkaeswecken* (a sort of round-shaped adaptation of the better known hot dog with a baked mix of corned beef, pork, bacon and onions replacing the old-style sausage), traditional *maultaschen* (the Swabian version of huge ravioli served in a soup or with caramelised onions) or, the favourite of all the kids, *spätzle* – a sort of microscopic pasta served with cheese and onions or hearty meat and gravy.

At the centre of the historic town centre stands the famous *Muensterplatz*, majestically overlooked by the Ulmer Minster known for having the tallest church steeple in the world (161.5m). Construction on the church started in 1377 and its architecture is typical Gothic, marked by pointed arches, ribbed vaults and flying buttresses. A total of 768 steps lead up to the third gallery, from where you can enjoy spectacular views over the town and, on a clear day, as far as the Swiss Alps.»





Top: Lake Constance **Left:** The famous Blautopf (blue-pot) **Above:** Fastnacht (6 January) – scary, colourful masks during the pre-Lenten carnival in Alemannic folklore

«The Bella Vista Café, near the ultra-modern *stadthaus* next door, invites you to celebrate 'above Ulm's rooftops' and serves a delicious fusion of modern and traditional cuisine – for most guests accompanied by a glass or three of Prosecco. Another lunch-stop alternative is the more traditional *Gerberhaus* by the shallow, winding river *Blau* (Blue) in the old fishing quarter, marked by crooked half-timbered houses, cobblestone streets and picturesque footbridges.

A stroll through this piece of living history will eventually lead you to the largest remaining section of the city wall, winding alongside the legendary Danube. Walking up-river, either on the wall itself or the renovated pathways and green zones next to it – with plenty of sport, picnic and playground space – you'll come across the crooked Butcher's Tower (*Metzgerurm*). The adjacent gate leads you along a steep cobblestone path to the Town Hall (*Rathaus*) which features some brilliantly coloured mid-16th century murals and an astronomical clock from 1520. Its vivid façade telling stories from the days of old is juxtaposed beautifully with the neighbouring massive glass triangle, home to the public library and open to everyone. Here you can take a copy of *Spazz* magazine to check out all the exciting evening entertainment options, from opera, over funky bars, to funky bars,

improvised theatre performances and more. With little ones in tow, check out '*Kinder in der Stadt*' to learn what's hip.

Soak in this unbeatable old-meets-new atmosphere accompanied by a deliciously steaming cappuccino or dripping gelato at one of the nearby authentically Italian ice-cream parlours. After all, it's less than a five-hour drive to Italy from here!

Museum and library

Digging a bit deeper into the psyche of this long-standing university town, pop into the Ulmer Museum on the other side of the square. The visit will take you time-travelling through architecture, the arts, culture and archaeology – all the way back to the *Loewenmensch* figurine, a 40,000-year-old lion-headed figure which is the oldest known human/animal-shaped sculpture in the world.

Further afield - forests, lakes and fortifications

While a long, well-rounded weekend can easily be filled with historic, cultural, architectural, culinary and even nature highlights without leaving town, there is also a stunning array of varied attractions awaiting you in Ulm's surroundings.

At the time they were built in the mid-1800s, to provide protection from attacks by France, Ulm's

federal fortifications were the largest fortifications in Germany and large sections still exist today.

The famous *Blautopf* (Blue-pot) has given rise to many myths and legends and is probably one of the most magnificent springs you will ever see. It lies 16 km west of Ulm on the Swabian Jura's southern edge and features a funnel-shape and peculiar blue colour due to the high density of limestone in the water.

For forest enthusiasts, the mainly rural Black Forest is a mere four-hour train-journey away and features many scattered villages, typical farmhouses, sweeping half-hipped roofs, wonderful hiking trails for all levels, Black Forest gateau, Kirschwasser and ticking cuckoo clocks.

Lake Constance to the south is not only Central Europe's third largest lake, but also has the most crystal clear unpolluted waters next to charming green and historic surroundings. From here, you might consider catching a ferry, followed by a short bus or train ride to Zurich's international airport, to fly back home from there. Personally, we flew out of Munich, spending our last day at the fairy-tale famous Neuschwanstein Castle. On our way out of Ulm we pass the 'Memorial to Deserters' near the university's botanical garden. It represents the idea "Desertion is not reprehensible, war is". Already immersed in this article, I cannot help but tweak this to: "Travelling off the beaten track is not reprehensible, *not* travelling is". 📍