



An eternal Christmas

In the little toy-makers' village of Seiffen, Christmas spirit lasts through the year, finds Malavika Bhattacharya

Christmas may roll around just once a year for all the world, but in Seiffen, Santa never goes out of style.

The discreet village sitting pretty up in Germany's Ore Mountains isn't the usual under-the-radar European hideaway — it's a village of toy makers. And toy making carries on through the year, as traditional wooden toys are carved, assembled and painted by hand, ready to be shipped around the world as Christmas arrives.

Seiffen is the stuff children's Christmas tales are made of — smoking chimneys on half-timbered houses, sloping lanes lined with colourful shop windows, the glimmer of warm yellow dissolving in the mist. Carved wooden signs point to bakeries and museums, and lifelike wooden imitations of reindeer and snowmen are not uncommon outside every doorway. The air is thick with the aroma of hot Glühwein and roasting sausages.

Solemnly peeping out of every shop window is Seiffen's mascot and most popular export — the Nutcracker. A forbidding figure of a soldier, mustachioed and uniformed, the nutcracker has been around since the 19th century.

The eight hundred year old village wasn't always known for its toys though. The original 14th century inhabitants of Seiffen were miners, when the region was rich in silver and tin deposits. History took an unusual turn three hundred years ago when the mining village gradually transformed into a toy-town.

In the 18th century, as the ores started to dwindle, the mining families needed an alternative means of livelihood. Well-practiced in the art of wood-turning, they turned to making wooden figurines that depicted their lifestyle. Their wares were sold at the large Christmas markets of Nuremberg and Dresden, and since then, the market for traditional Seiffen toys has grown. The craft was passed on through generations, and Seiffen is among the few places in the world today to preserve the tradition of hand-crafted wooden toys.

Curious rotund figures and intricately carved wooden trees jostle for space in every store's display shelf. These toys are closely connected

with Seiffen's history: while the nutcracker represents a grim figure of authority, the rotund Räuchermann, or 'smoking man', depicts an easy-going working-class person, maybe a miner or peasant, smoking a pipe.

A local technical college offers an intensive three-year course to train students in the art of wooden toy making. With around 130 toy manufacturers in the village, work is always to be found. Schauwerkstatt, or demonstration workshops, are common, allowing visitors to watch the entire toy making process. The Seiffener Volkskunst eG is one such — from 1959, the factory has made wooden toys and Christmas decorations.

Craftsmen clad in bright yellow uniforms sit surrounded by the tools of their trade — rows of nutcracker hats and buckets of little wooden pipes — carefully assembling toys from start to finish. Each individual piece is a master creation — the nutcracker consists of 21 individual parts and is assembled in a 150-step process. Visitors can try their hand at assembling a toy of their choice — a skateboarding snowman for me, thank you very much. Sven Reichl, who works in manufacturing, says, "We started out with two employees, now we are forty. We ship all over the world, mostly to German families who like to have traditional items around Christmas. If you have a toy with a 'Seiffener Volkskunst eG' sticker on it, you're assured of the best quality." A true testament to the importance of toy making in these parts is the Erzgebirgisches Toy Museum — three storeys packed with traditional toys, recreations of old workstations, and a pictorial history of Seiffen's toy making.

Rows of solemn sentinels and miniature angels crammed into display cases surround a towering carousel — the museum's pièce de résistance. It depicts traditional Christmas scenes, slowly twirling in the centre of the museum as wide-eyed little children gape at it.

Year round, the carousel spins, the miniature figurines of Christmas carollers sit in their display shelves, and the toy makers carve their wooden figurines. In the magical village of Seiffen, the Yuletide spirit is always in the Haus.

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FACT FILE

Getting There: Seiffen is 2 hours from Dresden, an ideal day trip. Fly Emirates to Munich or Frankfurt, from where Dresden is a 4-hour road journey

Shop: Buy traditional wooden toys and Christmas decoration at Wendt & Kohn or Beim Räuchermann

