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Munich emerges as Monocle's most liveable city

By William Boston

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After much tire-kicking, data-sifting and deliberation, Munich emerged as Monocle's most liveable city in the world. A winning combination of investment in infrastructure, high-quality housing, low crime, liberal politics, strong media and general feeling of Gemütlichkeit make it a city that should inspire others.

Leaning back in a wicker chair sipping caffe latte overlooking Leopoldstrasse as cars zip past under the watchful eyes of the lion-drawn quadriga atop the Victory Gate, you begin to understand Munich's contradictions. There is hardly a more German city or one more proud of its clichés - from Lederhosen-clad locals downing liter-mugs of beer in leafy parks to the clinical appearance of white-frocted scientists at the Max Planck research institute. But beneath the city's boundless ambition, Munich is surprisingly laid-back.

"There's a certain Italian ambience here," says Uschi Schnitzer, a 35-year-old event manager, putting down her book on a sunny afternoon in a café in Schwabing, one of the city's liveliest areas. "In winter you've got the mountains and in summer the cafés, beer gardens and lakes. What else do you need?"

Work-life balance seems to be the city's mantra. Make no mistake, people in this city work hard. With some of the highest apartment rents in Europe and all the shiny BMWs on the streets, they have to. But with high prices comes high quality, so it's no surprise that Munich has one of the fastest-growing economies and lowest unemployment and violent crime rates in Germany. The city works hard to promote innovation. "This city got biotech going in Germany," says Professor Axel Ullrich, 63, a leading international anti-cancer researcher and director of molecular biology at the Max Planck Institute of Biochemistry in Martinsried. The city is also home to corporate giants such as BMW, Siemens, Allianz, Microsoft, and is the center of the German film industry.

"Greater Munich is the most successful economic region in the country," says Lord Mayor Christian Ude, but he adds that commerce isn't everything. The most important urban development, he says, was opening the new Jewish Center with a synagogue and community center in central Munich. "Not only does the Jewish community regain its place in the heart of Munich, the Jewish Center is also an important contribution to the development of the city."

After work, Munich's masses enjoy the city's chill factor. The options are many, whether it's drinking beer in the English Garden or in the shade of the tall trees at Viktualienmarkt, sunbathing on the banks of the Isar river, attending the theatre or concerts, or hanging out in the smart bars around Gärtnerplatz or entertaining at home.

Take Christian Hundertmark, a graphic designer who goes by the name C100. A partner in c100studio.com - a design company whose clients include Oakley, Prada, Burton, Adidas and Levi's - and an avid snowboarder, he describes himself as both a workaholic and sportaholic. "I travel frequently to cities such as London or Barcelona because I know people, but I'm always glad to come back to Munich. I need the mix of big city and nature," he says.

Munich metrics

Population: 1.6 million (greater Munich).

International flights: Franz Josef Strauss International Airport is one of the best in Europe. On average there are 5,876 passenger flights a week to 224 international (42 long-haul) destinations.

Crime: murders, 13; domestic break-ins, 1,340 (2006).

State education: Munich has top-class state schools and universities such as the Ludwig Maximilian. Only 20 per cent of Munich students qualify to attend university.

Medical care: high-quality. Munich has 87 clinics, including the German Heart Centre.

Sunshine: annual average, 1,679 hours.

Temperatures: average temperatures range from -5.1C in January to 22.8C in July.

Wired: nearly 500 public Wi-Fi hotspots.

Tolerance: Munich is considered an island of liberal-mindedness in a sea of Bavarian conservatism. The Glockenbach district is popular with gay residents. The city has strong Turkish and Balkan communities.

Drinking and shopping: Many bars and clubs are open until 03.00; some don't really get going until then. The beer gardens tend to be open between 13.00 and 01.00. Shops close at 20.00.

Public transport: public transport is excellent. Buses and trams are well-lit and clean and run late.

Local media: Munich is home to Germany's largest public broadcasting network, ARD, and its largest commercial network, Pro7-Sat1 Media AG, and is also host to the Burda publishing group. The city's main newspaper, Süddeutsche Zeitung, sells around 445,000 copies a day and is read nationally, and respected for its intelligent, liberal analysis (a Sunday edition is due soonish).

International media: international newspapers and magazines available at the railway station, airport and some newsstands.

Green space: Munich residents' favorite spots are the English Garden and the banks of the Isar river.

Access to nature: one hour by car or train to great rock-climbing, hiking, alpine or cross-country skiing.

Environmental initiatives: Munich encourages the use of solar panels. And even the airport is planning to reduce CO2 emissions by converting 400 of its 1,400 apron vehicles to run on environmentally friendly canola oil. The city's power utility, Stadtwerke München, is increasing its use of renewable energy sources.

Look out for: Munich's airport is planning to build a third runway, expected to become operational in 2011. It has not received final approval. The airport and the city of Munich are also working on a plan to build a high-speed rail link, using the Transrapid train, that floats on a cushion of electric current at speeds of 300km/h or more. The Transrapid would link the airport and Munich's central train station in 10 minutes. The project is awaiting approval.