

Jim Ross  
The Cultural Influence of Beer in Central Europe

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**Special Instructions for contacting you on Saturday Morning**  
Speak extra loudly

### Comments

### Photo artwork / miscellaneous



***Proof that I worked for Anheuser-Busch:***

Picture of me at a Taste Panel in St. Louis

*(Can you guess which one I am?)*

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## **The Cultural Influence of Beer in Central Europe**

Beer, it has been argued, is the source of civilization, giving early peoples reason to work together to grow the crops necessary to create the intoxicating brew. Beer may have changed over the estimated eight thousand years since its discovery, but its impact on civilization remains strong. This cultural influence is nowhere more visible than in Central Europe, where breweries can be found in just about every town that dots the landscape. In fact, the diversity one will find in the beers as he traverses this region is an indication of the wide variety of cultures that are also present. Understanding the differences in the creation and taste of the beer throughout the area is a first step towards grasping the complexity of the personalities of these regions.

While I may not be great at fully grasping culture from the outset, I am pretty good at understanding beer. I worked as a brewing engineering intern in St. Louis for Anheuser-Busch for eight months, and in the process learned in detail the large-scale brewing process for American Lager. I've also spent the last semester microbrewing ales with my roommates to varying success. Throw in many hours of 'research' at the Flying Saucer downtown, and my prerequisite knowledge can be assumed sufficient. All of these experiences have given me a great desire to experience beer as culture and learn about all the types of beer and how they are produced.

To achieve this goal, I figured going to the source would be the best bet, so I have set my eyes on the Czech Republic, Germany, and Belgium. My trip would begin in the Czech Republic, the nation with the highest per capita consumption of beer in the world. The first stop is the Urquell Brewery in Pilsen. Passing through the iconic double arches is a must for any respectable beer-lover who finds himself in this country. A brief layover in Prague is necessary afterwards to fully experience the Czech drinking culture. However, the brewing aspect will continue shortly thereafter with a trip to České Budějovice to see the Budvar (aka Czechvar) Brewery. This city is steeped in the brewing tradition—since the 13<sup>th</sup> century the city has been an active brewing center, and even contained the brewery for the Holy Roman Empire for a time. The visit would also allow me to experience a different viewpoint on the Budweiser Trademark dispute that has continued between Budvar and my former employers since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After experiencing a wide variety of classic Czech-style lagers, my palate should be ready for the darker fare of southern Germany.

Germany is the nation most often associated with beer, whether due to the many styles of complicated ales and dark lagers that originate from the nation or because of notions of the great September tradition, Oktoberfest. Regardless of the basis of its reputation, Germany is flush with opportunities for beer enthusiasts to learn about and enjoy old favorites. The requisite stop to get a sense of German beer culture is Munich. Touring the Ayinger Brewery is the first task. While this brewery only exports ten percent of its production, it has consistently won awards for its beer at the World Beer Championships, including an unprecedented 3 gold medals in 2007. After scratching this site off my list, I

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have my choice from the ‘Six,’ a half dozen world-renowned breweries in the city that are often discussed as a group. I will be able to tour these breweries as time and constitution allow for, but I will be sure to go by the Paulaner and Spaten-Franziskaner-Bräu breweries, as the Optimator and Oktoberfest brews respectively produced by these companies are two of my favorites. Finally, no trip to Munich would be complete without eating at the Hofbräuhaus am Platzl, one of the most well-known beer houses in the world.

My personal travels will continue in Germany, with a focus on the more traditional sites of German culture to allow me to take in some of my own personal heritage; however this extension will allow me to stop into the small historic town of Bamberg. This town of 70,000 is alive with brewing culture, which owes to the nine traditional breweries that exist within the city walls. Many of these breweries use traditional brewing techniques that have been replaced in other, larger breweries found in other cities. Bamberg is well known for its unique Rauchbier, which is most famously produced by the Brauerei Heller-Trum and is served fresh daily at the Schlenkerla tavern. By experiencing a range of beers in both a sleepy beer-guzzling village and one of Germany’s major metropolitan areas, I should be able to obtain a good understanding of the spectrum of beer here and its impact on culture in Bavaria as well as the rest of the nation.

The final destination should be clear for any beer connoisseur, as the range, diversity, and distinctiveness of Belgian beers can be found in no other single country in the world. One can find the first indication of these traits at the Brasserie d’Achoffe, located in a small town outside of Bastogne. This brewery is relatively new for Belgian standards, but it has expanded at an exponential rate due to the quality of its brew. Its main brand, La Chouffe, was even named “Beer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” by a consumer panel in Holland in 1999. No visit is complete without stopping at the restaurant adjacent to the brewery to sample from its renowned dishes, all of which are cooked in beer. The next locale is the city of Namur to the northwest, wherein one can find the Abbaye de Floreffe. Although there is no beer made on the premises of this 900-year-old former monk brewery, the abbey serves as an intricate guide through the history of brewing in Belgium. The city is also flush with pubs that will help further acquaint me with the ales of the Walloon region before driving to the more well-known Flemish area to the north.

From Namur it is a quick train ride to the capital city of Brussels. This cosmopolitan city is home to the Cantillon Brewery, which is famous for its lambic beers. These beers have fascinated me greatly since my time at the Anheuser-Busch brewery because they are fermented by spontaneous fermentation—wild yeast in the air is the actual agent of change. This method is in such stark contrast to the strict procedures and regulations involving recipes and yeast in St. Louis that I am very interested in the whole lambic process. Fortunately, the brewery also runs the Gueuze Museum next door which goes through the process in detail. The final stop of the journey will be a return to modern brewing

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practices at the Stella Artois Brewery in Leuven, right outside of Brussels. There are many other potential stops in Flemish Belgium, but with time and transportation issues taken into account it is best to not be overzealous with plans for this region.

In conclusion, I wanted to thank all members of the Goliard Board of Governors for giving me further reason to research all of the wonderful opportunities waiting in Central Europe. To clarify, I will be studying abroad for the first six weeks of the summer in Copenhagen with an unrelated program, and I plan to use the rest of the summer to travel around the continent. I would really enjoy being able to examine the culture of the aforementioned countries through a study of the brewing and drinking of beer, and I hope you are all intrigued by the idea as well. Thank you again for offering this scholarship to Rice students, and I hope to meet with you soon.

**\* *finis* \***

***Be sure to include this as you last page***