



## WOODCRAFTERS PARADISE

### Holiday spirit on display all the time in German community

#### ROADS TRAVELED

MARY BERGIN



**I**n the Erzgebirge Mountains of eastern Germany, one hill away from the Czech Republic border, the charm and promise of Christmas prevail all year.

In Seiffen, population 2,500, about 100 shops sell finely crafted nutcrackers, candle arches, rotating pyramids, tree ornaments, smokers (which burn incense) and other figurines that mark the season. Angels, snowmen, pot-bellied Santas and delicate music boxes earn the village its reputation as the nation's Christmas craft capital.

Even Hotel Erbgericht Buntes Haus sells these works of wood, and on the outside of each room is a nutcracker or other wooden statue, perched below a soft hallway light.

"In almost every home is a workshop," says my guide, Sylva Sternkopf, whose first name means "wood" in Latin. She is the daughter of a woodcraft factory founder.

A regional association for woodcrafters ensures a high standard of quality, a design school introduces young generations to the craft in modern

ways and peer pressure — so far — drives out opportunists who try to sell cheap knock-offs of items that historically require years-long apprenticeships and many hours to produce.

Seiffen and neighboring towns are known as Ore Mountain communities because mining was the livelihood for most families until deposits of silver, tin and other minerals were exhausted by the mid 1800s.

Work with local timbers — ash, beech, birch, maple, linden wood — began as toy making, until the growing popularity of plastic (because of cost and safety) made it too tough to compete.

"A whole world would be built out of them," says Sternkopf, referring to the detailed, hand-crafted household scenes or two-by-two arks of animals that would sell for much less than \$1 in the early 1900s.

Now the woods become smooth and intricate decorative arts products.

Old-time and modern woodcrafters use a lathe much more often than carving knife. This is woodturning: The wood moves but not the lathe that is used to create shapes and cuts.

Flade Werkstätten, Olbernhau, specializes in thumb-sized figurines, especially angels that always hold something much smaller. Owner

Kerstin Flade-Drechsel also designs tiny dolls and scenes for all seasons. Some scenes top music boxes whose interior is made in Switzerland.

"First the scene, then the melody," she says. "It must reinforce what you see."

The music is always classical. The product sells for close to \$700. It's roughly \$35 for a single angel, usually made from maple.

In Seiffen, Ringo Mueller is a fourth-generation woodcrafter whose fans include Martha Stewart. He seeks "a healthy mix between tradition and modern technology" to position his products beyond Christmas.

Music boxes with exchangeable platforms activate different musical selections, and each changing scene depicts a story that has its own book.

"We always have to look for new ideas," Ringo says. "We started with toys and dollhouse furniture. Now it's all about decorative items," some made with exotic woods sustainably harvested from forests around the world.

Throughout the Ore Mountains, candle arches are yuletide decorating for average homes, one per window. It is not coincidental that the same shape appears on roadsides or hangs above businesses.

The arch resembles



the opening of a mine, and the holding of lights “was so important to the people who could not see it during their work,” Sternkopf notes.

At Seiffen's Volkskunst Schauwerkstatt (Folk Art Workshop), a cooperative with about 50 owners, workers painstakingly construct nutcrackers and other wooden items, one piece at a time, while visitors watch.

On average, it is an 80-step process for each figure, from woodturning and assembly to painting and polishing.

“In the United States, your average home has maybe one nutcracker,” Sylva says. “For us, it may be 100 per household” because of the history and heritage that the stern sentinels symbolize.

## Closer to home

A Door County artist, Karsten Topelmann of the Hanseatic Art Gallery in Ephraim, created cover art for the Mueller product catalog in Seiffen. He and wife Ellen Sprogoe-Topelmann collaborated on a painting used in the Mueller company's Christmas cards.

The couple met Ringo Mueller while living in Rothenburg, Germany, many years ago.

Mueller's handcrafted wooden items, produced since 1899, are sold at The Frame Workshop, Appleton, [theframeworkshop.com](http://theframeworkshop.com), (920) 731-2913; Tannenbaum Holiday Shop, Sister Bay, [tannenbaumholidayshop.com](http://tannenbaumholidayshop.com), (920) 854-5004; and Ferg's Bavarian Village, Manawa, [fergsbavarianvillage.com](http://fergsbavarianvillage.com), (920) 596-2946.

For a more complete look at the artisan's product line, go to [mueller.com](http://mueller.com).

## More to see

Lovers of toys and toy history are a good match for these Ore Mountain museums and attractions:

» At the three-story Toy Museum of Seiffen, thousands of pieces of folk art – chandeliers for the home to matchbox-sized miniatures – are made of wood. Exhibits trace the life and work of a typical toymaker. [spielzeugmuseum-seiffen.de](http://spielzeugmuseum-seiffen.de)

» Upstairs at Wendt and Kuehn, which has sold woodcrafts in Seiffen since 1915, is a small and free museum that

explains the company's transition from simple to international business.

The work began with traveling salesman suitcases filled with samples for reproduction and sale. [wendt-kuehn.de](http://wendt-kuehn.de)

» The Factory of Dreams, Annaberg-Buchholz, shares the once-private toy and folk art collection of a longtime chemist, biologist and arts patron. The often-whimsical and animated items also are lessons in history. [manufaktur-der-traeume.de](http://manufaktur-der-traeume.de)

» The Nutcracker Museum, Neuhausen, bills itself as the largest of its kind in Europe. The estimated 5,000 items on exhibit come from 30 countries. [nussknacker-museum-neuhausen.de](http://nussknacker-museum-neuhausen.de)

## Germany

For more about travel in Germany: [germany.travel](http://germany.travel), (773) 539-6303. For more about Ore Mountain attractions: [erzgebirge-tourismus.de/en](http://erzgebirge-tourismus.de/en). For more about Seiffen: [seiffen.de](http://seiffen.de).

*These articles began in 2002 and are the result of anonymous travel, independent travel, press trips and travel journalism conferences.*

# THE REPORTER

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One by one, hair is added to nutcrackers at Seiffen's Volkskunst Schauwerkstatt. MARY BERGIN PHOTO



Sylva Sternkopf, the daughter of a woodcraft factory founder, has designed a line of contemporary-looking angels, each selling for about \$200. MARY BERGIN PHOTO



**Kerstin Flade-Drechsel's specialty is angels at Flade Werkstätten, Olbernhau, but the inventory contains at least 300 types of figurines.** MARY BERGIN PHOTO



**Candle arches, such as this one at Muller in Seiffen, sometimes sell for thousands of dollars.** MARY BERGIN PHOTO



**The Nutcracker Museum in Neuhausen is billed as a world's largest.** MARY BERGIN PHOTO